

Outlook Book Choice of the Month

Reviewed by Robert Cantwell

ANDREW JACKSON: THE BORDER CAPTAIN. By Marquis James. \$3.75. 461 pp. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

IN FICTION an author's performance can generally be estimated, however roughly, on the significance he succeeds in giving to the doings related in his story. But in biography the importance of the characters and their careers can be taken for granted, and the art of biography, as Mr. James suggests, involves among other things an understanding of the underlying forces of history, an ability to present a background without permitting it to swamp the central figure. In fact, Mr. James's shrewd notes on the art of biography, embodied in his comments at the end of the present volume, give us a guide for judging his own work, and something of a critical standard for works of biography in general. To simplify it, at some risk, Mr. James regards biography, not as a picturesque bi-product of history, but as "the cellular life" of history, the analysis of recorded facts that are too minute to be included in histories, the investigation of those tiny details that make up the generalizations of historians. It is a fruitful attitude. Like "The Raven," Mr. James's life of Sam Houston, "Andrew Jackson" is an admirable historical "cell," giving any imaginative reader a clear knowledge of what such developments as the Revolution, or the opening of the frontier, actually meant in the lives of individuals.

This present volume ends with Jackson's retirement to The Hermitage at the age of fifty-five. A second volume, some day, is to follow through the even more difficult Presidential years, with their even greater scandals and alarms. But these first fifty-five years of Jackson's life were so full, so crammed with the most varied kinds of activity, that a large volume devoted to them is no more than enough. The Revolution, the settling of Tennessee, the War of 1812, Burr's conspiracy, quarrels with Spain—Jackson was involved in

all of these momentous affairs, and, with the exception of the Revolution, he was aware of their far-reaching significance. His military career began when he was thirteen, in the Waxhaw Valley of South Carolina, where the war was largely a matter of successive raids by Tories, revolutionists, and English regulars. Jackson himself was captured and brutally wounded by an English officer. His brothers and kinsfolk were killed, and his mother died in the plague that followed the invasion.

It is here that Mr. James's concept of biography as a little living cell of history reveals itself to the greatest advantage. The descriptions of this generally neglected phase of the Revolution, of the small inconclusive skirmishes, the disorder and the futile waste, combine to throw more light on Jackson's career than the most illuminating personal adventure. The boy who lived through an invasion, in other words, and who saw this invasion in its particularly savage aspects, grew up to be the most vigilant defender against foreign invasions. All his life he saw the European monarchies, cracking under their antagonisms and internal struggles, threatening what he defended as "the *only* republic in the world." He was unrelenting in his resistance to the rich New Englanders who disparaged this danger. He used all his influence to mobilize and strengthen the frontiers. Sometimes, it seems, his alarm was in the nature of an obsession, and he plunged into action at the sight of mere clouds on the horizon, but in those days the threat was real enough to justify an excess of watchfulness.

Mr. James nowhere says in so many words that Jackson's early experiences formed these views, but his arrangement of the known facts about Jackson's life clearly establishes a connection. After the Revolution, Jackson went West where the demobilized and disappointed soldiers were clearing the cheap land. His anxiety gave him



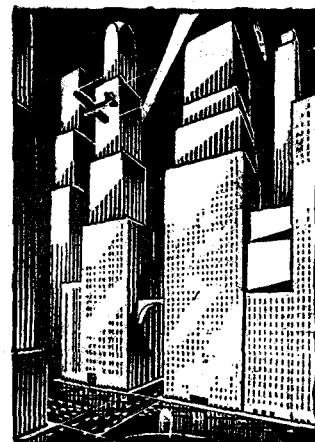
a clear insight into the maneuvers of the foreign powers. He saw—correctly—French and Spanish and English intrigues behind the frequent Indian raids. He supported Burr as long as he believed that Burr intended only to colonize, and perhaps embarrass Spain in Mexico. With his acute ability to see the *causes* of vacillation in leaders, he suspected General Wilkinson, the commander at New Orleans, long before it became known that Wilkinson was Spy Number 13 on the Spanish payrolls. All of this gives a deeper meaning to the final, and amazing triumph at New Orleans, and partially explains Jackson's harsh treatment of the wavering land-owners who were half-prepared to welcome the invasion rather than risk the battle. Under his leadership the small defense forces, made up of Louisiana aristocrats, pirates under Lafitte, Kentucky and Tennessee militia, destroyed the vastly greater army of British regulars, suffering seventy casualties to more than two thousand of the enemy. Incidentally, Mr. James describes the complicated battle at New Orleans with vigor and clarity. Battles in books are usually about as confusing to the reader as they must have been to the soldiers involved, but by a patient description of the landscape, and a careful analysis of the strategy of the opposing generals, Mr. James makes this one fully coherent.

To summarize the book in this way is to emphasize the dominant impulses in Jackson's life at the expense of other influences which Mr. James records. The frontier life was perhaps next in importance, and Mr. James explains the dominance of the frontier in the national development in this concise way: "By

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Talk of the Nation



Yo—He-Be!

OUR OFFICE is beginning to look like a warren, or hutch, so industrious and prolific (and communicative) are the nation's white-rabbit producers. Many are the happy hours we have spent, bathed in the soft flow of persuasive prose, fired by rhapsodic indignation, or even wafted aloft on the wings of effulgent fancy, as we read solution after proposed solution of this country's rumored depression by depressed citizens.

Of particular charm is the proposal of the president and eponym of The Wallace G. Imhoff Company, Consultants in Zinc Coating (Hot Galvanizing), Vineland, N. J. It is the visionary goal of Mr. Imhoff to make honesty popular. "With the return of honesty," writes Mr. Imhoff, "I believe that confidence will return and that will mean the free flow of credit again which is so necessary to get business going again."

The means to the end are "buttons, fobs or trinkets of many different kinds, known as 'YO—HE-BE' buttons. These buttons would have a cartoon of some giant object stuck and men with crowbars lifting it out. The crowbars would be labeled HONESTY, the load or object to be moved, *no matter what it is*, would be labeled DISHONESTY. The picture would show them all pulling together and straining their last effort. The boss (President Roosevelt) would be saying, 'YO—HE-BE!'"

The only fear in our mind is that maybe the mystic slogan will find disfavor with the anti-semitic elements. But anyway, the moral is clear: Dishonesty is in a rut, and only the crowbar of Honesty will set it moving again.

"The buttons could sell at five cents a piece, or more, and the money donated to help the unemployed."

Would they be zinc-coated, hotly galvanized?

P.S. Mr. Imhoff also enclosed a prospectus of the Imhoff Consulting Service. They will consult with you on anything from "pole-line hardware pickling" to "dross." On the back of the sheet it says:

REMEMBER!
HEALTH PAYS
THE BIGGEST DIVIDENDS OF ALL.

GET LOTS OF SLEEP,
PLENTY OF EXERCISE
AND LEAD A CLEAN
MORAL LIFE.

OUR CONSULTING SERVICE
IS NEXT.

De Mortuis . . .

NOW THAT the lame duck is safely extinct it is only fair to give him a small meed of recognition. Dilatory he was admitted to be, and slow on his feet; punch-drunk from traveling-expense-allowances: not at all like his fast-moving younger brother who is at present so popular with the press, public and President. But once in a while, gritting his teeth, he got things done.

We refer specifically to one bit of business performed by the 72nd Congress, sitting at Washington, on February 25, 1933.

The official title of the bill was H. R. 9877; more informally it was known as A Bill for the Repeal of Obsolete Sections of the Revised Statutes. It may be that Congress had let the bill languish for a while in Committee, but when it came to debate it went through the legislative body like shot through a duck. By its provisions one thousand (count them) laws pass into limbo.

If the country needed anything, it needed one thousand fewer laws. A grateful nation must not, and shall not forget.

The Handy Calculator

FROM THE well-trimmed pampas of Pasadena come tidings of great joy for harassed mathematicians. The Congruence Machine has been perfected!

More than five years ago, Derrick Henry Lehmer, National Research Fellow in Mathematics and son of a University of California mathematics professor, distressed by the extreme difficulty of determining whether large numbers are prime or not, set about inventing a device that would perform Herculean calculations mechanically.

It appears that for the last 22 centuries mathematicians have been compiling lists of primes; in 1914 the Carnegie Institution scored a beat by publishing a list of numbers, each divisible only by itself and one, among the first ten million. It seemed impossible to advance much farther than that: you just get to a point where even an ace divider would have to spend his whole life looking into a single number.

A machine seemed to be the only way out of this sad situation, and Mr. Lehmer had a bright idea. With bicycle sprocket-wheels mounted on a rotating shaft, chains of different lengths which ran over them, and pins fastened at various points on the chains to break an electrical contact, he was able to perform interesting operations such as the breaking up of 9,999,000,099,990,001 into the factors 1,676,321 and 5,964,848,081.

Much encouraged, the young inventor at once set about improving his "Congruence Machine." Interlocking gears took the place of the glorified bicycle, and an electric eye, looking through holes in the gears, provided the control exercised by the pins in the first machine. All very