

## Round about Parnassus

By WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

MANY have read much of the poetry of John Masefield with enthusiasm from those first days that gave us, unexpectedly and bewilderingly, "The Everlasting Mercy," through the great sea-poem of "Dauber," the stirring dramas of "Pompey the Great" and "The Faithful," the gallant, swift triumph of "Reynard the Fox," with its Chaucerian descriptions of the hunt-meeting, the integrity and nobility of the sonnets, and the weird magic of "The Hounds of Hell." Masefield remains one of the most remarkable poets of our time, one of the most honest workmen, one of the truest spiritual forces.

The tendency has now begun to speak of his falling-off. Platitudinous things were lately said about him in a certain literary journal with a gesture of most professional dismissal, and more recently the book reviewer of a clever metropolitan weekly described his latest work, "The Wanderer of Liverpool," as something that could not possibly attract intelligent attention had not its author suddenly become Poet Laureate of England—which was of course a hasty and ignorant remark by a person doubtless submerged in many books to which he or she could not in the nature of things, pay the proper heed. Also, when poems from *The Wanderer* appeared, heavily advertised by the publisher, in two issues of a highly prosperous monthly magazine, noted for its "big names," there was some indication of scorn among the "artists."

All this is, of course, nonsensical. To anyone who has followed closely the work of John Masefield there have been matters in all his latest books, even in those of least importance, that have proved of additional interest in a study of the man. Even in much of his best work, so far as mere technique goes, there have heretofore been some blemishes and lapses. Like most geniuses, he is rarely a "perfect poet." He has not been without his occasional sentimentalities, he has not always bestowed upon us full proof. His greatest poetic energy has now, perhaps, declined—which is natural enough, in all conscience, when one considers the length of time he has been writing and the splendid pace he kept for some

while, with all the little copyist decriers yapping far behind his heels.

His retelling of the Helen story was of considerable actual interest and stimulus, even in the prose tale which titled a thin volume of fugitive pieces published about six years ago. His "Midsummer Night," a retelling of some of the Arthurian legends, in 1928, came after the great and deserved success of Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Tristram" and found comparatively few readers. Yet, from an entirely different temperament and in an entirely different manner, and also because it seems to take us back to sources almost as old as the Welsh Nennius, far pre-dating Malory, these narratives recreate, in a far more archaic way, quite as fascinating figures. We have said "archaic," yet strangely enough Masefield has the prime quality of taking Paris the lover of Helen, or Uther Pendragon, the rescuer of Ygraine, or Lancelot, the lover of Guinevere, and endowing them with life and breath against a background that seems described by an eye-witness. One almost feels upon one's neck the heat of that July when Arthur set fire to King Loki the Norseman's ships before the battle of Badon Hill, and little Morgause, watching among the grass the "Drake-Ship on the roller-balks," before her capture, prints a memorable picture on the mind. Visual imagination Masefield has in superb degree, and no one in this age has surpassed him, of course, in the extremely accurate and at the same time strikingly vivid description of all the aspects of the sea known to a ship, whether laboring mightily or running clear. As for action,—the hand has not failed of its cunning that can describe sudden death as Masefield does in Lancelot's fight on the wall:

*Agravaine cried to those behind him:  
"Stand back, friends: give us room."  
He felt a sudden lightning blind him,  
He felt Death's doom;*

*Knew not how Lancelot had stricken,  
But felt the blow destroy.  
The gifts that made his hearers quicken  
From calm to joy.*

*Stumbling, he saw bright waters gleaming  
With star-gleams spark on spark,  
Then he struck stone, then all was seeming,  
Then all was dark.*

But our purpose was to say a few things about "The Wanderer of Liverpool." In Masefield's preface to his "Collected Poems" of ten years ago he remarks:

Early in 1913, I wrote the poem, *The Wanderer*, about a very beautiful but unlucky ship which I had seen years before in the Mersey. *The Wanderer* stays in my mind as one of the loveliest things ever made by men. She is still freshly remembered in Liverpool, and many men who sailed in her must be still alive. She was run down and sunk (I believe in daylight) in the Elbe near Hamburg about 1897.

He refers of course to his original poem on *The Wanderer*, not to the poems in the present book. The latter part of that original poem contains some of his quietest but most beautiful writing, nor can one forget how he recorded his impression of first seeing her come up the river after her first disaster and thinking that her spars were white with frost when they were actually "white with rags of tattered sail." Nor that impression of Christmas morning in a Southern port, after a night of high wind:

*And soon men looked upon a glittering  
earth,  
Intensely sparkling like a world new-born;  
Only to look was spiritual birth,  
So bright the raindrops ran along the thorn.*

Then his final sight of her from the upland above the bay where the ships were at anchor:

*Come as of old a queen, untouched by Time,  
Resting the beauty that no seas could tire,  
Sparkling, as though the midnight's rain  
were rime,  
Like a man's thought transfigured into fire.*

In the last line of this poem he says, "The meaning shows in the defeated thing."

Some one particular representation and symbol of beauty haunts many a man's life to the end: it may be the face of one woman, it may be the remembrance of one particular country or city scene, on one day out of all the days, it may be the remembrance of some heroic or highly chivalrous deed. But with many men there is one particular thing that holds more thrilling mystery for them than other remembrances, and has upon them more strange power. It seems to be so with Masefield and *The Wanderer*. After seventeen years since his first poem about her, and after a much longer time from his first sight of her, he gathers together every atom of information about her that he can secure from the four quarters of the globe. He was wrong, of course (as he shows us), in setting that earlier date for her sinking. It was ten years later. She was launched in August, 1891, and her Setting Forth was in October of that same year. She met a tempest that nearly finished her and did actually kill her captain. She was finally got into Kingstown and towed thence back to Liverpool. Masefield first saw her on Sunday morning, October 25th, as she came in to dock:

The rags of her sails fluttering from her yards gleamed in the sun. I have seen much beauty, but she was the most beautiful thing. She was so splendid, and so distressed: she was also moving as though she were alive. She docked in the Queen's Dock, a heart-rending sight to all, from the broken glory aloft and the blood of her dead and wounded below.

She was refitted, however, and was on her tenth voyage when she was run into and sunk while anchored in the Altenbruch Road of the Elbe at 2 A. M. on the 14th of April, 1907. The German steamer *Gertrud Woermann* was responsible. As to her being an unlucky ship, Masefield says this in part:

The disaster of her first setting forth caused many legends of her unluckiness to go about the world. I myself, writing on the strength of these legends, may have helped to give her this name. I have now made this story of her so that the facts may be known, as far as I can learn them from imperfect records, the memories of men scattered all over the world, and notes in old newspapers.

The book contains all he can find out about her, as well as diagrams of her, a list of all the models, drawings, and paintings of her that exist, and a complete technical history of her build and rig on which we open the book. All the paintings of her are photographically reproduced in the book, with the exception of the frontispiece, which is a reproduction in color. The diagrams and plans and structural details are for the sailor. For the poet are "The Setting Forth,"

(Continued on page 400)



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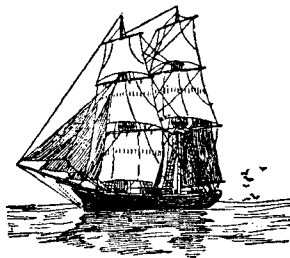
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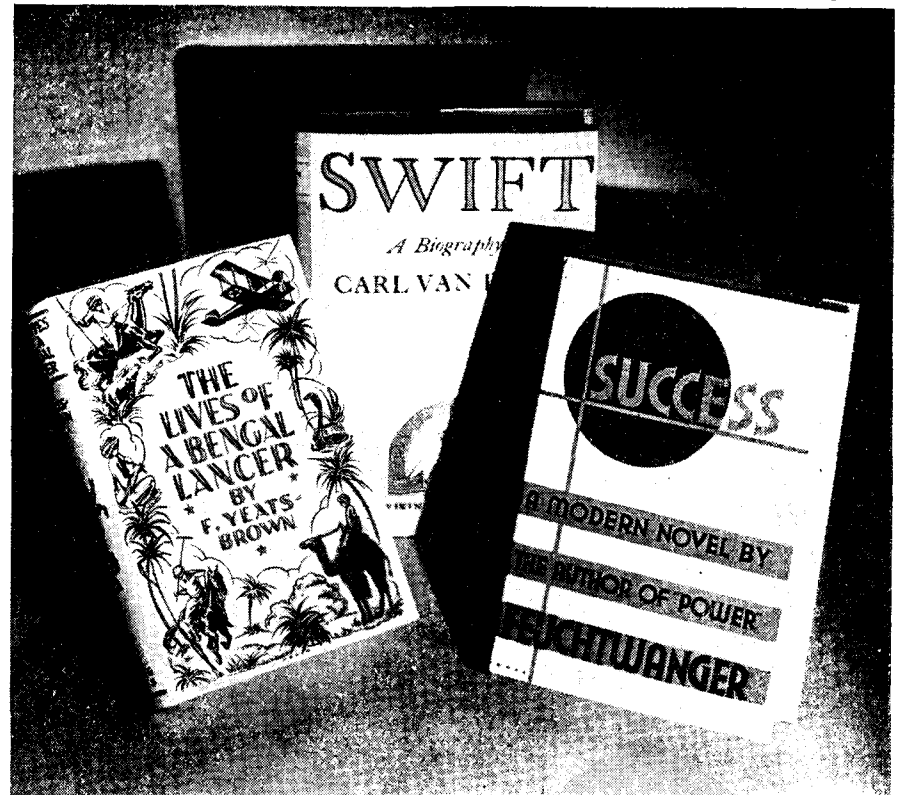
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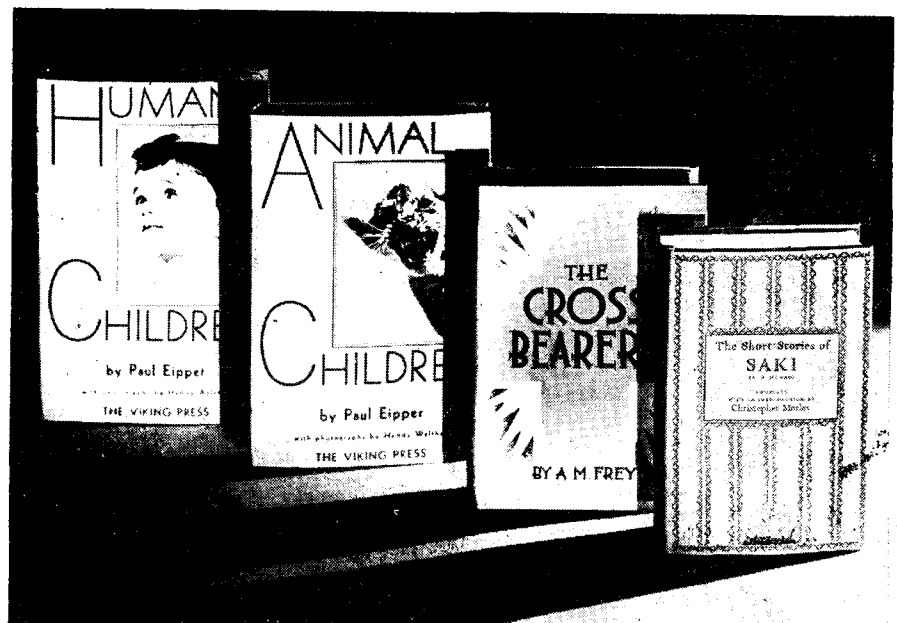
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**Books of Special Interest****China Today**

CHINA: The Collapse of a Civilization.  
By NATHANIEL PEFFER. New York:  
The John Day Company. 1930. \$3.

TORTURED CHINA. By HALLETT ABEND.  
New York: Ives Washburn. 1930.

Reviewed by HENRY KITTREDGE NORTON  
**H**ERE are the considered reactions of two capable American observers who have spent several years in the intensive study of whatever it is that passes for China today. The conclusions of each are utterly discouraging so far as the future of China is concerned. If both were not competent men and did not support their doleful conclusions with ample evidence, one might hope that they had allowed their pessimism to run away with them. But the burden of proof is upon optimism.

Peffer approaches the subject from the point of view of a temperamental liberal and Abend perhaps with a more conservative attitude. But both alike find that Chinese civilization has fallen into utter confusion and see no possibility of a rehabilitation without outside assistance. Beyond that the two authors go different ways. Peffer thinks outside assistance cannot be made effective. Abend would go in and straighten out the country even if it took the united armies and navies of the powers to do it.

Peffer's book is written with his usual philosophical analysis of current situations. One misses with pleasure both the note of futile complaint and the easy condemnation of statesmen for not doing what seemed so obvious to the author of the "White Man's Dilemma." Here, with more maturity and a more balanced judgment, Mr. Peffer has given us a survey of the course of events in China which well justifies the title "The Collapse of a Civilization." If he has not added materially to our store of facts, he has at least marshalled them anew and vivified them with a style which is as brilliant as ever. This style fairly sweeps the reader through what might easily have been a long and sordid recital. Only occasionally does it drop its burden altogether and soar into the realm of pure verbal exultation, as for example in the statement that "ancestor worship is the ceremonialized consciousness of the unity of time."

Peffer's thesis may be summarized in a few of his own sentences. "After what is happening in China now there can be no returning. There is nothing to return to. . . . A clean sweep is being made of all that remains of the old order. What the times began the Chinese themselves are finishing. There are no conservatives left. . . . It may be said that the one point of fixity in the flux of China today is the desire to break with the past. . . ." In brief, Chinese civilization has collapsed.

Out of this collapse, there must arise a new China, but as to what that China will be, there is no answer. It may be "fifty years perhaps, more likely a hundred, and maybe two hundred" before the answer is found. And the world must wait patiently for the answer although by it, "whenever given, the future of the whole world will be moulded."

Mr. Abend has not Mr. Peffer's patience. He agrees with Mr. Peffer that China has gone to pot, but he is impressed with the suffering—the torture, he calls it, and perhaps the word is not too strong—of the Chinese people and the incidental misfortune which their failure to "be incorporated into modern civilization" brings upon that civilization.

China, according to Mr. Abend, has ample resources, material and human, to become reasonably well off itself and to make its contribution to the wealth of the rest of the world. But in order to develop them there must be peace and good government. That could happen in China "only by a miracle."

Lacking such a miracle, the only alternative seems to be an international intervention—a benevolent intervention undertaken solely to end China's misfortunes both for the sake of the Chinese people and because of the prosperity which a proper settlement of China's problems would help to bring to the rest of the world.

There in all its nakedness is Mr. Abend's proposal. We have to go no further than the other volume under review to find the opposing contention. Mr. Peffer speaks of "glib, superficial conclusions, of which the most banal and commonplace has been the need for international intervention." He goes on to assure us that such an attempt would be "attempting to play traffic policeman to an earthquake."

Mr. Abend by no means belittles the difficulties attendant upon his plan. He points

out both the disrupting jealousies among the powers, their mutual and perhaps mutually justified suspicions, and the instinctive resistance of the Chinese to foreign activity of any kind. This instinctive resistance is perhaps the one element of unity left in the country. But international intervention would be rather an expensive way to bring it into action, and once aroused, there would be no assurance that the result would be desirable.

There are weighty arguments for and against the intervention proposal. But against it there appear to be two which outweigh all the others on both sides. One is that it is impossible: the other is that it would not work. Mr. Abend's plea for action is worthy of all praise. But Mr. Peffer's exhortation to let it alone is the better counsel.

**Biography's Early Life**

ENGLISH BIOGRAPHY BEFORE 1700.  
By DONALD A. STAUFFER. Cambridge:  
Harvard University Press. 1930. \$4.

Reviewed by CHARLES DAVID ABBOTT  
University of Colorado

**I**T is probable that no major literary form has been more neglected by scholars than biography, especially in its origins and early career. Perhaps this is because English biography is supposed to begin with Boswell, to whom it does indeed owe much of its modern importance, but in the very act of proclaiming Boswell's genius we are likely to underestimate the value of the many Lives written in those long centuries before England entered upon its period of rationalism and refinement. Boswell produced the masterpiece, and we forget his humble predecessors, until we are reminded of their accomplishments in such a book as this by Mr. Stauffer. Here we have the whole course of English biography set before us, from its Latin and Anglo-Saxon beginnings to its seventeenth century achievements and prophecies of what is still to be. And through it all Mr. Stauffer is a good guide. He has a large sympathy with the men whose biographical efforts he interprets, and a quick eye for all their charm and their merit. He has dived into all manner of curious corners and byways in pursuit of his quarry, and he has come up with a goodly collection of interesting figures. If, on occasion, he grows too lyrical about a hagiographer or a Caroline divine, he is only venting some of the enthusiasm that was necessary to carry him through a task of such extensive proportions; and perhaps we need enthusiasm to spur us into a proper appreciation of Sir John Perrott and Nicholas Ferrar, and the chroniclers of their lives. His industry cannot be too highly commended; the bibliography with which he concludes his book is a splendid example of what such a bibliography ought to be.

Mr. Stauffer's study makes it abundantly clear that before the eighteenth century biography tended to celebrate men remarkable for their piety and their service to religion. Even after 1600, when secular "Lives" became somewhat more common, it is still the men of the church who command most attention. Even the greatest of the works here examined concerns churchmen, though in this case the good Izaak's heroes were notable for something other than mere piety and saintliness. The purely literary man, however, the statesman, the soldier, rarely served as a subject. There are, of course, exceptions, like Lord Brooke's "Sidney" and Lord Herbert's "Autobiography," which go a long way towards mitigating this unfortunate tendency of early biography, but it is none the less true that, in general, we have a weary waste of ecclesiastical eulogies, which is only occasionally lightened by the grace of a Walton or the wit of a Fuller.

Mr. Stauffer, himself disheartened perhaps by the plethora of religious unctuousness, struggles to unearth the secular, and he introduces us to some very entertaining figures, such as Lady Anne Halkett and Lady Anne Fanshawe and the iniquitous Stephen Marshall, whose "Life" is an uproarious parody of the more pietistic biography. But we are still forced to conclude that our ancestors were too afraid of the hereafter to look upon biography as anything other than a means of teaching how souls might be saved. Though many interesting works were produced, among them nearly every type of biography, their scope and their aim were too narrow; it remained for later ages to show how vital and how absorbing could be the lives of more various and more edifying, if less holy, personages, from Bamfylde Moore Carew, the king of the gypsies, to Isadora Duncan.