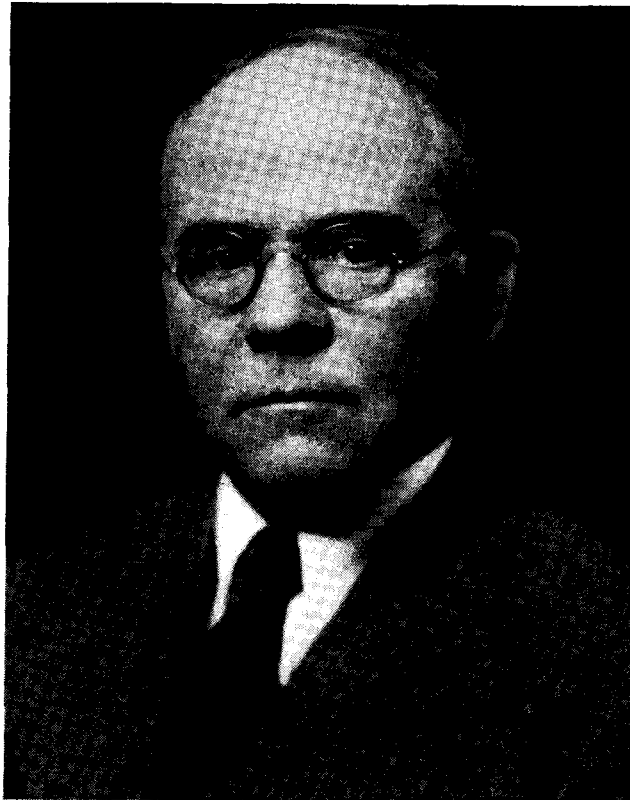


# Vachel Lindsay and America

BY EDGAR LEE MASTERS

IN the month of April 1929 Vachel Lindsay paid a visit to New York, and called at the Players Club where I saw him, and for the last time. His voice boomed and his laugh rolled and soared as of old. He seemed to me a vigorous man not changed from his former self, as I had seen him in Chicago from 1914 to 1920, as I had seen him in Springfield during those years. His eyes had a way of squinting elephantine fashion, as if he was not sure of the tenor of what was being said to him, whether it was quite friendly, or half satirical; or as if he were trying to follow studiously the words addressed to him. His mannerisms combined as ensemble had the appearance to some people of vanity and self-sufficiency of which he was not really guilty in any objectionable sense. But he was vain, and he was proud of his successes, when not cut into humilities by indifference or ridicule; and he could not abstain entirely from carrying his platform presence and manner into the moments of private converse. In a word he had ways which displeased many people, and interfered with his acceptance. On this day at the Players when I last saw him he said farewell to me when departing with his old smile; but I could see that his mood was overcast, that he was unhappy. I stood watching his figure as he walked toward Fourth Avenue. He rolled from side to side like an old pedestrian, like a tired man; he was casting his head up right and left, as if looking at the tall buildings, as if possibly talking to himself. And so he passed from my view forever.

Of those who figured in what has been termed the Poetry Revival of 1914 Lindsay was the first to become famous. He excited a marked interest in England before there was even cultivated admiration for the work of Robinson and Frost. They saw Lindsay riding a real Pegasus, an animal that went of itself, and that pranced not along the racetracks of England, but over the plains of America, over the Appalachians and the Great Divide. So keen an observer as G. K. Chesterton called Lindsay the most national poet, and



EDGAR LEE MASTERS

the one with the most normal energy of literary genius since Walt Whitman.

At home Lindsay fought with desperation against forces that choked his utterance. He saw that material prosperity was beating down the hope of youth, something that Altgeld saw and expressed. Lindsay knew that the defeat of Bryan was a defeat of the wheat. Many of his purest songs radiate from economic centers like this. When he wanted to make magical Springfield he had in mind the Athens of old, just as Alcott cherished that dream with respect to Concord. Channing said many years before Lindsay was born, "The true sovereigns of a country are those who dominate its mind, and we cannot consent to lodge this superiority in the hands of strangers. . . . A foreign literature will always be foreign. It has sprung from the soul of another people, which however like, is still not our own soul. A country like an individual has dignity and power only in proportion as it is self formed."

It is absurd to say that men like Lindsay cannot be cherished, protected, and preserved. There are ways in plenty.

They did not condemn him to hemlock, but they doomed him by failing to protest against his doom, by failing to give him help out of their useless abundance. They could have consulted and decided upon some way to give him bread, and let him do his work for his city and the country, taking from that work what was good, and throwing the rubbish away.

But it was not his own city, it was not his own State that let him wear himself to death; nor was it even the America that we have been describing. He was at last as a creative artist in the hands of vast forces, some of which had been set in motion by the spirits he most admired and with whom he was closest in blood. It was men like Alcott, Thoreau, Channing, and Theodore Parker who did the most to destroy that Virginia which was Lindsay's deepest love, and the subject of his last great poem. It was these men who gave honor to the materialistic movement which imperialized America; it was these men who unmenacingly

disguised with their moral character the campaign of money Hamiltonians, which overthrew Jefferson in the realm of practical affairs. That having come to pass every other plutocratic device and trick followed. With the vulgarization of the American mind, resulting from cupidity, came the 2,000,000-subscriber magazine, proving by its popularity that there are not more than 200,000 enlightened people in the United States. These readers of such publications are part of the contingent who tortured Lindsay in Spokane. These publications and their leaders give no support to poetry or to any art, or to

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Next  Week

WINTER ORCHARD

By JOSEPHINE JOHNSON

Reviewed by Stephen Vincent Benét

THOMAS MORE

By R. W. CHAMBERS

Reviewed by Garrett Mattingly



VACHEL LINDSAY AND HIS FAMILY

any work of genuine merit. The rule of such people, and such a civilization was hard enough for Lindsay; but this peaceful man, and lover of the whole world in the name of Tolstoy, had to live in a time when internationalism was preached by New York, before America as a nation had anything to give as a nation. He had to live in a land already internationalized by the unassimilated breeds of many lands, and really by the dominance of old world cultures but made inherent and without a natural spirit by such mixtures. How could the old courthouse America cope with such vast forces as these?

"There are two Americas," wrote Will Durant.

The English code of thought and manners must eventually succumb to the continental cultures that encompass and inundate it; but for the present that British mood dominates the literature, though no longer the morals of the American East.

This is immensely true and well said. Lindsay with all his other difficulties, inward and outward, had to stand against the enormous power behind this cultural condition. Not being Eastern American he made in fact only a slight impact upon it; and after the first excitement about his poetry subsided he was treated with supercilious indifference, and the field which he had broken and harrowed and sowed was taken and reaped by pro-English artists. He found that there was no Union of spirit and mind in America; and that his own West cared more for the East than it did for the West, and cared more for Eastern poets than for him who had striven to give Springfield and Illinois a soul. They preferred the Arthurian legends to those of Johnny Appleseed and Andrew Jackson.

The period of Longfellow was one of wine that had fermented and settled into

its characteristic flavor and body, even if the product was second rate. But today the American mind is in another ferment, and is not made. For this reason it is not established in a definite American character. It is touched with irrationality, corresponding to the bubbling and the popping of mashed grapes in a jar. It is vacillating without well-grounded principles of any sort, without the integrity of a matured substance cleared of all alien and inharmonious stuff. It is like the English mind during the War of the Roses, in respect to its tumult and its incoherence. Our political leaders prove these things, and some of our best writers are proofs of them. Their vision and imagination are defective and half born. Lindsay himself suffered from this defective imagination and vision. The physical and spiritual plasm of America are both in the making. Lindsay with his excellent thyroid and his pituitary instability was a budding outgrowth of this life stream. His education and environment did the rest to make him what he was. But if there is no real America how can we ever win it? Leaving undiscussed now the method it may be said that when America ceases to be many things, and so ends its life of being nothing, and when it becomes one thing, and by that becoming is a union of peoples fused and homogeneous, Lindsay's poems will live to address it, even though the America of the old courthouse passes completely away. It is a good deal to say of any poet that he is for all time. But in that comparative sense in which Herrick and Donne, for example are for all time, Lindsay too will last. The fact that America is young, that Lindsay lived in the first century of the nation's career, and interpreted in his peculiar way one of its most luxuriant stages will fix his historical permanence.

But finally he did sing of an America, real and imaginary, historical and fantastic, worshipping and skylarking, toiling, building, and at games and trade. He was the voice of that mythical America of colonial heroisms and splendors, which is the imaginative setting of Washington and Jefferson, and of horse-riding and fox-hunting Virginia. The travels of Ulysses over the ancient Greek world, encountering giants, lotos eaters, enchantresses, and marvels of earth and air, are scarcely more varied and charming, more resplendent and magical than the vision which Lindsay recorded of America. He was the celebrant in free and sinuous measures of Daniel Boone, Johnny Appleseed, and the pioneers of the Appalachians. He sang Andrew Jackson, one of America's priceless possessions, into a new fame which is bound to mount higher as a matter of heroic lore as America recedes from the days of men in jeans who fought for a principle, and having won the fight celebrated the victory in dance on the hills, where they poured libations of cider to the spirits of great emancipations from city gods. Lindsay was the bard of the Indian, and the best that we have had; and he chanted the covered wagons, the long trails to California, the tragic transformations of the war between the States, and the ruin of Virginia and its pastoral culture. Lindsay was the comic muse of the Negro, of the amorphous and awkward-footed days of 1889, which soon turned to the agrarian revolt under Bryan. He saw America, and rightly enough, as baseball all through long summer days of white clouds and blue skies. He saw it as the prize ring of John L. Sullivan, as the white tops of the American circus, the only circus of magic in the world. He saw America as movie queens, as transcontinental motoring, and as a race of youthful, dancing sweethearts, crying out the joys of new freedoms as they swarmed over a terrene of mountains, plains, and forestry; or swam along the golden coasts of California, radiant in the ecstasies of music and passion. These were the young who inspired his heart, and then broke it when he was no longer young, but still continued to see them pouring ever fresh into new life, while he longed to sing them as he did at first. All this was Lindsay's America. It was a democracy of youth and happiness, strength and hope. It was America at play, high hearted, free, and just, with all wrongs ended in the name of Jefferson, and the great heroes like Milton, men of vision and music. This motley America, so noisy, so irrational, and so confused, was well reflected by Lindsay's mind, whose nature partook of the things his imagination pictured for it. He was in truth the lame boy, whose fairy was "the shoes of song, the wings of rhyme." How little of the

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# Inside a Mental Hospital

ASYLUM. By William Seabrook. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1935. \$2.

Reviewed by ARTHUR H. RUGGLES, M.D.

**D**URING the past few years there has been a flood of books written by the former mental patient, the drug addict, and the doctor in the mental hospital. The titles have tended to be dramatic, the subject matter often distorted, and as literary productions most of them have been decidedly inferior.

Asylum is a good old English word meaning a safe retreat. William Seabrook has used this title for his book deliberately, because the mental hospital where he was fortunate enough to find a haven of refuge, and a place for adequate treatment, meant asylum to him. The author is well known. He has written on a wide variety of subjects, has lived life freely, tasting the lights and shadows of life all over the world. In "Jungle Ways," one of his more recent books, one began to wonder whether fire water might not modify both his life experience and his literary productions, and so it has proved.

His scene is laid in a mental hospital in the East, so accurately and so vividly portrayed that the reviewer had little difficulty in identifying it, and yet the author has shown the utmost restraint in the use of identifying data, and has produced a story entirely consistent with the ethics of the medical profession which forbids advertising even while giving a vivid picture of the treatment of alcoholism in a modern mental hospital.

This book should do much toward introducing the layman to the inner workings of a mental hospital and give him a much clearer understanding of mental disease than has been gained from any other recent works. As Clifford Beers autobiography, recounting the experience of a mental patient twenty-five years ago, gave a vivid description of the dark chapters in the history of the treatment of mental disease, so "Asylum" becomes the present day exponent of what is being done in the best of our mental hospitals, and represents a true picture of some of the results of treatment in mental sickness.

Mr. Seabrook's differentiation between the wish to be saved and the will to be saved is a point which has long been made by those understanding the underlying psychology of the alcoholic, and it is now generally recognized that the wish to be saved is a prerequisite to successful treatment. But the wish alone is not enough and must, as the author points out, be followed up by the will to accomplish, translated into hospitalization, or, without hospitalization, long continued cooperation with the psychotherapist.

Every individual undergoing treatment reacts in his own individual way, and in "Asylum" Mr. Seabrook has given us a telling story of his own personal conflicts, irritations, and achievements, and has clearly portrayed the environment and his individual reactions to place and persons. His whole book gives the distinct impression of a sincere effort to describe a vital experience in the life of the alcoholic for the benefit of those who may need help.

The description of the wet pack used as a sedative for restlessness and excitement, the psychology introduced into the religious services, the reaction of patients to visitors, the therapeutic doses of the movies, and the scenes in the occupational classes are all given with the keenest appreciation of the effect upon the individual and the group. The mental hospital's difficulties in the treatment of the alcoholic are frankly stated, and the serious prognosis in these cases is admitted with a great deal of realism. Vignettes of the mental hospital depicting personalities and mental disorders are done with clarity and represent fairly well the range of psychoses and psychoneuroses seen day by day in the hospital for mental diseases. Only very rarely is literary license displayed—for example, where it is stated that a delusion of being Napoleon Bonaparte is one of the most common delusions, a generalization which can hardly be founded on a wide experience.

After three months' abstinence from alcohol, the author describes a mental and physical state which has much in common, as he himself indicates, with religious conversion, in which there is a certain poignancy of thought and feeling which he had not experienced before, except under the influence of alcohol. Whether this represents a physiological change due to the complete elimination of alcohol from the system, or is what the psychoanalysts term the stage of transference, or whether it is a part of the author's own personality previously subjected to much of the mysticism of the East, it is hard to determine without more accurate knowledge which, of course, cannot be gained merely by reading the book. The emotional effect of music is well known and its therapeutic application in the mental hospital is already well beyond the experimental stage. Therefore, it is possible that "listening to muted Siegfried and Valhalla motifs—symphonic Rheingold excerpts coming from Carnegie Hall, tuned low on the radio," may, as Mr. Seabrook suggests, have triggered the emotional response to this reaction.

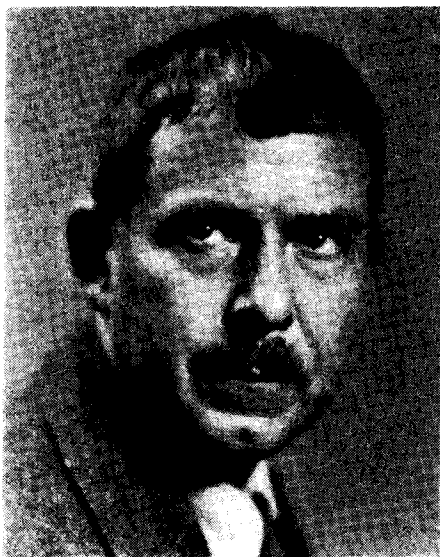
Depicting the personalities and events of the hospital so clearly and in such illuminating fashion, one can only wish that the author might have gone on and told in a bit more detail of his own reactions to the therapeutic interviews with his physician. The description of the individual incidents occurring during the patient's treatment, and the need of retention of a sense of humor are done with delicacy and in great contrast to the altogether too often maudlin sentimentality or strained effort to make the reader laugh that we have so often encountered in attempts of other authors to place on the printed page a picture of the mental hospital from the inside. Extremely keen insight into the problem of personality is shown by the statement that there is one thing that the mental hospital and the psychiatrist do not accomplish—namely, a change in the essential personality of the individual. Mr. Seabrook has given his readers a most faithful picture of what psychiatry is today accomplishing in the places where it is best practised.

Arthur H. Ruggles is superintendent of Butler Hospital, Providence, R. I., and consultant in mental hygiene, Department of University Health, at Yale University.

## Last Outpost

By VALENTINE ACKLAND

"**N**OTHING between us and the Pole,  
Higher than this hill—" you said,  
"This hill that we are on—"  
And the wind swept on,  
The wind that came from the Pole,  
Ice-cold and dark, and heavy as lead.  
Leaning out of our window, backs to the South,  
Looking, and hearing the wind come over,  
Seeing the stars flash bright and flaring  
And the moon flaring,  
We, on the last hill, the last outpost of South,  
Peered out like beasts from our flimsy cover.



WILLIAM SEABROOK