

Reminiscent of Rousseau

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF JOHN MIDDLETON MURRY: BETWEEN TWO WORLDS. New York: Julian Messner. 1936. \$3.

Reviewed by ARTHUR COLTON

MR. MURRY'S autobiography begins with childhood and closes at the end of the world war. Dates are more or less inferential, but J. M. M. seems to be about thirty years old. Katherine Mansfield is already consumptive, but she lived until 1923. They have just married, after an association of six years. The tie between them has become closer, the devotion more intense. But they are both strange people. Their association with D. H. Lawrence and his wife Frieda is also close and strange.

The Lawrences and Katherine Mansfield were peculiar and definite personalities, now known to us from other sources. It is Murry whose peculiarity here emerges. What sort of a person was he? One uses the past tense, because, though he is still in active career, the autobiography closes about 1918. The "Two Worlds" between which he finds himself at that date were a world consisting of moments of solitary vision, "Where I was at home because I was not," and a "world of act and suffering, of love and friendship," in which "I was, and was in anguish and in insentience."

This J. Middleton Murry is puzzling. The autobiography creates the puzzle rather than answers it. Readers of several of his books have supposed him negative if not negligible. There were two books on Lawrence, and two, I think, on Katherine Mansfield, but those gifted and extraordinary artists still wait their better interpreters. There were four or five religious, or semi-religious books; one called "The Evolution of an Intellectual," but one's impression is they were intellectually rather thin. But the J. M. M. of the autobiography is as extraordinary in his way as Katherine Mansfield and D. H. Lawrence. He throws little clear light on, nor makes visible, either of those strange creatures. "Katherine, when she is Katherine, writes like the South West Wind" is a phrase worth remembering. He felt that she was a writer in a sense that he was not. He was not a creative artist. But as to himself he is as candid and revealing as Rousseau, more simple, more plainly honest, and with a singularly interpretive understanding of the psychology of boyhood. He must have been more clever than definitely appears. He won his way by sheer ability and hard work through Christ's Hospital and Oxford to the editorial boards of The Westminster Gazette, The Athenaeum, and The Times Supplement. He had no end of friends who thought him "odd but charming." "As a person," he says, "I was quite extraordinarily underdeveloped and chaotic."

Every man seen from within looks to himself indefinite. A cloud from within looks like a fog. A lake, if you are inside it, is just water. Clearly enough Murry was sensitive and found life a painful ex-

perience. The suburban family of a small clerk in a government office in London often changes residence and has few social roots. At Christ's Hospital and Oxford he entered the current of old tradition and immemorial background. The isolation of these strata from each other in English society has been seldom so vividly suggested. He was adaptable to the new atmosphere, but never at home in it. He always felt rootless. Lawrence's proletariat as a subsoil was comparatively rich.

Murry's idealisms were numerous and besetting. He had "a prodigious faculty for work." His autobiography may be unimportant but at least it is curious, and it does remind one of Rousseau.

Letters to the Editor

(Continued from page 9)

hounded mercilessly by the censor during their lives, would nod assent in their graves.

And so it is doubly difficult to understand the attitude of the intelligent opponents of the Bad Book Bill. Most of them seem to feel that something should be done about pornography. They must realize that they are dealing with actualities, and that they cannot stop the flow of smut by taking sporadic cracks at outlets. When pressed for a solution other than the Bad Book Bill, they merely shrug their shoulders and say that the present law, while not perfect, is the best makeshift available.

Mr. Davis is not quite as resourceless as all that. He has a plan. He proposes that each State set up an official Board to which a publisher or bookseller might submit a book for examination prior to publication and distribution. If the Board found the book unobjectionable, its decision would be conclusive proof of its legality in any attempted prosecution later on. If the Board held otherwise, the book could still be published and sold, but anyone dealing with it would be act-

ing at his peril. An indefensible scheme, shot through with endless possibilities of bureaucratic intermeddling, corruption, political reprisal, and bigotry. I find it hard to believe that Mr. Davis was aware of the implications of his plan.

The word "censorship" has been rather loosely used. It is sometimes employed to mean pre-censorship, i.e., the submission of material in advance and prior to dissemination to an administrative body for approval. Motion picture censorship is an example in point. The word is also used to denote the prosecution of material after circulation. It is needless to point out that the first species of censorship is the more vicious one; it is characterized by all the evils attendant upon the tyranny of previous restraint.

Shortly after Caxton set up his press in Westminster in 1476, the Crown forbade all printing except by royal permission. That was the beginning of pre-censorship. It continued for about a hundred years, eventually calling forth Milton's "Areopagitica" which still stands out as one of the most impassioned pleas for free expression in the history of letters. Pre-censorship of the press was abolished in 1695, and has not been in force since then either in England or in America.

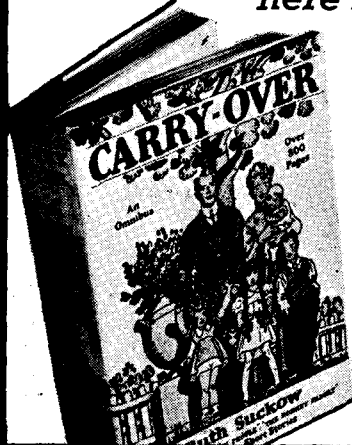
Yet what Mr. Davis proposes to do is to set up a machinery for the pre-censoring of books; he would make book censorship duplicate all the stupidity, the viciousness, the indefensible bungling of motion picture censorship.

I doubt whether anyone can, in dealing with a subject as vague and debatable as obscenity, prescribe a curative specific. The best that one can do is to indicate generally the principal objective, i.e., the greatest possible freedom of expression consistent with the protection (not codding) of public morals. I think that the enactment of the Bad Book Bill or its equivalent in various states would be a step in the right direction. There may be other and more salutary steps, but I am sure Mr. Davis's suggestion is not one of them.

ALEXANDER LINDEY.

New York City

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The PHOENIX NEST

CONTEMPORARY POETRY: BY WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

THERE is a deal of homely verse in Masfield's new volume, "A Letter From Pontus" (Macmillan. \$2), and I am sorry to say I found much of it quite prosy. The book starts with the story of Ovid's exile, and ends with the story of Dick Whittington, except for the last brief poem, "Sweet Friends," which is of unusual autobiographical interest and in which Masfield seems following on the famous epitaph of Shakespeare in a new way:

Print not my life nor letters; put them by:

*When I am dead let memory of me die.
Blessed be those who in their mercy heed
This heartfelt prayer of mine to Adam's seed;*

*Blessed be they, but may a curse pursue
All who reject this living prayer, and do.*

That would seem to preclude biography in the future. But will it indeed be so? Probably not, with so famous a man. Masfield can still tell a story, but there is a monotony to blank verse and couplets relieved mainly by his power of exact description of natural things, remembered scenes, and simple folk. The poem on "Australia" benefits by this in scenes described, "Joseph Hodges" by the same. But where has gone the poet's historical sense to wax so completely royalist in "Westminster Hall," and in full-hearted defence of Charles the First? "Ten generations have not yet gone by," and the Puritans to him are still merely "rebels facing their king." Is that the result of being Laureate, the unconscious re-acceptance of Right Divine? Certainly the execution of King Charles is still a matter to be debated, but hardly in such fashion. "Ballet Russe" is a failure because the manner is too heavy for the matter. On the other hand, "The Wild Geese" is the best poem in the book—both vivid and significant. The devout hopes expressed in "The Will" and in "Hope" are obviously sincere, but depress the soul when one thinks how often such prayers have gone up from the poets to no avail. The new world will never be won by that alone.

In general Masfield is as likeable and staunch a man as ever, as revealed in this book, but certainly the magic has passed from his verse in it; and that on the heels of having written an unusually fine novel the same year. His best feats in this new book of poems could really have been accomplished in prose. We will hope it is only his prose year and that true poetry will gush again.

But if Masfield may not have a biography, there is one in preparation upon E. A. Robinson, and as a pursuivant we have Laura E. Richards' brief book of reminiscences of him, "E. A. R.," published by the Harvard University Press. Among treasurable things in it are excerpts from a paper Robinson himself wrote for *The Colophon*. Collectors of Robinsoniana will find the book essential.

Two volumes by younger poet that I should have reviewed before this are Gilbert Maxwell's "Stranger's Garment" and Daniel Whitehead Hicky's "Call Back the Spring." The former, Mr. Maxwell's, is published by Dodd, Mead & Company; a decidedly attractive and dignified volume that deserves more notice than it seems to have received. Mr. Hicky's latest work comes from Henry Holt & Company. After reading both books, however, I seemed to have read enough iambic pentameter and couplets for many weeks. Neither poet has much range. When Mr. Hicky approaches ballad or song—as in his lynching poem, "Dark Justice," and "Song Out of Erin"—he does rather badly. In his sonnets he has a certain distinction. He has more color in his poems, as a general rule, than has Mr. Maxwell. But the uniform level of Mr. Maxwell's poetry is higher. "Mirage at Midnight" is an impressive lyric. The sonnet for Edna St. Vincent Millay is remarkably good. "Memory Recurrent" (bad title) is a good poem. "Two Mothers" is an interesting portrait poem and so is "Ishmael." Mr. Hicky's "Bloodroot" does him credit, as do a few of his sonnets. He seems to have had wider success with magazine publication than Mr. Maxwell.

Harold Vinal is known to all poets as editor of that excellent poetry magazine, *Voices*, encourager of writers of verse, and a poet in his own right. In "Hurricane" (Stephen Daye Press: Brattleboro, Vermont) he has now written "A Maine Chronicle." Several sections of the poem have already appeared in periodicals specializing in poetry; but the book is a continuous chronicle, and the island it celebrates is in Penobscot Bay. Mr. Vinal tells the stories of eight people associated with the island, and in so doing delves in dark drama and tragedy. As to the poetry in the book, in these last years Mr. Vinal's work has greatly strengthened, so that today he must accept judgment in comparison with the best. By such judgment he still appears to need more power of organization of his material and a deeper impress of his own personality on his work. His phrase, also, in this day when a number of younger writers have such keen instinct for the revelatory word, could be improved. Despite these strictures, he is a good workman and has written an interesting narrative with beautiful passages.

SOLUTION OF LAST WEEK'S DOUBLE-CROSTIC (No. 120)

JOHN FLETCHER—
"WEEP NO MORE"

Violets plucked, the sweetest rain
Makes not fresh nor grow again;
Trim thy locks, look cheerfully;
Fate's hid ends eyes cannot see;
Joys as winged dreams fly fast
Why should sadness longer last.