

Letters to the Editor: *A Letter from George Santayana On Writing "The Last Puritan"*

Santayana's View of America

SIR:—Thank you for sending me the interesting and profound criticism you have made of "The Last Puritan." You are particularly clear-sighted when you say that my view of America is a college (an undergraduate) view, and that Olivers in general might have merged their consciences later in the vast life of the country. I am not blind to this fact, but this was originally, when begun forty-five years ago, a college story; and besides the main stream of American life, though I felt its force, was not known to me intimately enough, or loved by me enough, to allow me later to describe it. But in Mr. James Van de Weyer and in Senator Lunt, also in Edith and the Rev. Edgar Thornton, I give glimpses into the background, which I do not pretend to describe further. Oliver *could* have lost himself in that background, as Edith actually proposed that he should; only here the *mystical vocation* which was also a part of his heritage—Jonathan Edwards had it—interfered. This is not a specifically American thing: all that is American, or modern, is the absence of any tradition in which the born poet or God-intoxicated man could take root. He therefore simply evaporates and Peters out.

G. SANTAYANA.

We print this letter by permission because of the interest of many readers in "The Last Puritan." That it was begun in the nineties as a college story reflecting an undergraduate view of America, and tempered later by a philosophy that played upon the essence of civilization, may help many to understand the drift and conclusion of the novel. The reference in "Peters out" seems to be to the not too unhappy degeneration of Oliver's father, Peter, connoisseur of easy living.

The Federal Theatre

SIR:—The Federal Government is engaged at the present time in spending \$5,000,000 in support of the professional theatrical people temporarily out of employment. The program of the Federal Government in so doing is threefold; first, to give relief to the unemployed theatrical workers; second, to provide entertainment of cultural value to the community; third, ultimately to re-establish these professional theatre workers on a self-supporting basis in their own profession.

It is believed that a program of this importance requires that the plays presented be of a high literary and dramatic quality. Examination of the production plans from coast to coast reveals this program in operation, with one hundred and fifty-eight plays showing or rehearsing. More than nine thousand theatrical people are on the payroll with companies in some twenty states.

The administrative set-up throughout the country is now complete, the legal difficulties of admission, touring, and amusement tax adjusted. The extent of



"I JUST LOVED YOUR AUTOBIOGRAPHY—I HOPE YOU'LL WRITE ANOTHER."

theatrical unemployment has been gauged, the country divided into thirteen regions, and in many places all eligible theatre workers have been requisitioned.

In New York the theatre program is well under way. Two legitimate theatres have been opened to the public. February 4th "Walk Together, Chillun" was presented at the Lafayette Theatre, Harlem. This play was written and directed by Frank Wilson, star of "Porgy." February 21st the Manhattan Theatre opened with "American Holiday," by Edwin and Albert Barker. This production unit is headed by Edward Goodman, formerly associated with the Washington Square players.

Within a fortnight two more theatres will lift curtains, the Willis in the Bronx with "The Woman of Destiny" and Daly's at 63rd Street and Broadway. The Daly Theatre is occupied by the Experimental Group, headed by Virgil Geddes, author of "Native Ground."

Still in rehearsal but shortly to reach the New York public are the productions of the Poetic Theatre, The Living Newspaper, the Anglo-Jewish, the German, the One Act-Experimental, the Children's, Negro Youth, Russian, Continental, American Historical, and Dance.

Alfred Kreymborg is managing producer of the Poetic group with Emile Bevilacqua directing. They are preparing W. H. Auden's "The Dance of Death," a brilliant satire in verse and music of which the first production was given at the Vassar Experimental Theatre. The German Theatre is doing Kleist's "Der zerbrochene Krug." John E. Bonn, director, has been identified with the modern European theatre for the past twenty years. An English version of "The Idle Inn," prepared by Jack Charash, is the first play to be done by the Anglo-Jewish.

This summary, which is but a partial

listing of the New York program, may serve to give some insight into the character of theatre undertaken. Competent professionals are engaged in shaping the project which the government hopes will serve to bridge the gap between those people who desire drama and the players, artists, and technicians able and anxious to provide them with their wish. We cannot tell where it is leading, but we do know from the response of 350,000 persons nightly from coast to coast that the federal theatre is appreciated.

HIRAM MOTHERWELL,

Director, New England Region
Federal Theatre Project.

Information of Federal Theatre activities may be obtained from Edwin Armstrong, Magazine Publishing Department, Federal Theatre Project, 201—8th Avenue, New York City, ME dation 3-5962.

Fifteenth Century Books

SIR:—The closing date for registering in the *Second Census of 15th Century Books in America* is March 16th. Books printed before 1501 should be reported by collectors before that date.

I am meanwhile especially desirous of locating:

- 1) The Hoe, Pembroke, Devonshire, and Fenwick copies of the Mainz *Catholicon* of 1460 (Hain *2254; Gesamtkat der Wiegendrucke 3182);
- 2) and the fragment of the "Passio Christi," which Dr. Konrad Haebler in 1927, in his *Die italienischen Fragmente vom Leiden Christi*, discussed as a possible Italian imprint of the early date of 1462.

MARGARET BINGHAM STILLWELL,
Librarian.

The Annmary Brown Memorial
Library of Incunabula,
Providence, R. I.

John Chamberlain: Hostage to Fortune

BY CLIFTON FADIMAN

THE office allotted by the *New York Times* to its daily book reviewer is about half the size of Groucho's stateroom in "A Night at the Opera" and is apparently constructed to prevent its inmate's thoughts from straying. I sat beside Bob Van Gelder (who is built, poor fellow, along crew-man lines) waiting for John Chamberlain, and terrified at the notion of another adult wedging himself into this sanctum-let. One inch before my nose was a wall; tacked on to this wall was a length of string, bravely trying to look like a clothes-line; and on this string a sweat-shirt and a pair of gym trunks, partly draped over a shelf of new books, were hung up to dry. They were Mr. Chamberlain's shirt and trunks and I remember thinking of them as heavily symbolic of his temperament. In the first place, they underlined the attractive, almost boyish informality which can juxtapose a sweatshirt and a severe row of books for review. In the second place, they represent the other half of Mr. Chamberlain's double life, its non-literary side. Without his daily tennis (he says he takes it as others do aspirin) he wouldn't be able to review books at all.

Well, here is Mr. Chamberlain, thirty-two years old, and one of the literary white hopes of a generation which has still to develop its Mencken and its Van Wyck Brooks. Perhaps he is the man. At any rate, he is one of the few worth keeping an eye on. In the course of a little less than three years on the *Times*, he has proved that it is possible to review a book a day and be consistently intelligent. He has attracted an audience that never before gave a rap about books, not to say book reviews. Though a daily journalist, he has influenced serious opinion. And he has developed a style, easy but not trivial, allusive but not pedantic, which people have come to look for, somewhat as they used to look for the reviews of Mr. Mencken in the old days long before Mr. Mencken went *juramentado* and started after the New Deal with a butcher knife.

Mr. Chamberlain, as has frequently been remarked, is young, and looks younger. I suppose, like so many gently nurtured, college-bred Americans, he will never really look very old. He owns a shy, deprecating smile (complete with dimple) and a tentative manner of speaking, both tending to obscure the fact that his mind has a sharpness and an unbluffability quite remote from that of the conventional college graduate. He is the kind that will never try to out-argue anyone, but on the other hand will rarely permit himself to be fooled. Hence, though in one way he is their delight, he is also the despair of book publishers.

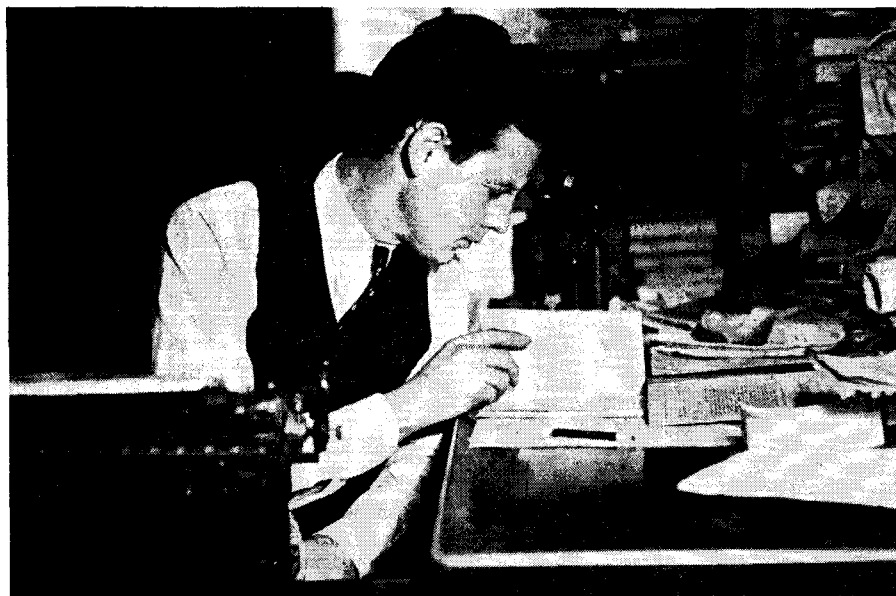
When he started the *Times* job, he had only one idea—"to stir up the animals." He has stirred 'em.

In case you follow, as I do, Mr. Chamberlain and his opinions, here are a few facts to paste in your scrapbook, for future reverence, so to speak. He was born in New Haven, has lived all his life (with the exception of one year) in the East, attended the Loomis Institute at Windsor, Connecticut, and, following the example of his father, or maybe just for geographical convenience, went to Yale. He was no child prodigy. Before eighteen he did very little serious reading and at Yale was a good but far from brilliant student. His class ('25) was very footbally and, possibly in reaction, he turned gradually to the world of ideas, in defiance of all decent college traditions. We pass rapidly over the fact that he wrote poetry and note that he was on the board of the *Yale Literary Magazine*, ran an F.P.A.-ish column in the *Daily News*, and was chairman of the *Yale Record*. He specialized in a mild way in history and was fortunate in having his eyes opened to contemporary literature by his roommate, William Troy, who is now a most notable critic himself.

Once free of Yale, he fiddled around aimlessly in the big city for a while, and then got a job with Thomas F. Logan, Inc., writing ad copy. It lasted four months. He followed this with three years with the *Times*, as a reporter, covering one thing and another (including Washington) and finding his interests tending more and more toward problems of national politics and economics. (It was this period that gave him his practical grounding in the American scene and enables him to consider a book on politics as

soundly as he does Willa Cather's latest novel. He is no "literary" book reviewer.) Toward the end of 1928, he took John Carter's place as assistant to J. Donald Adams on the *Sunday Times Book Review*, quickly made a reputation for himself as a first-rate man, and capped the first part of his career by publishing in 1932 his brilliant "Farewell to Reform." For five months he was one of the editors of the *Saturday Review of Literature* (adv.) and from September 1933 to date he has been running his remarkable daily column in the *Times*. He is now about to make another jump. This week he goes with *Fortune* and his friends will echo the wish that fortune may go with him. (His first assignment, by the way, is a study of the Supreme Court, the only nine in existence made up of six right-fielders and three left-fielders.)

To my mind any daily book reviewer is a marvel but Mr. Chamberlain is something extra-special. For he has rarely been satisfied merely to recapitulate the content of a book, add a little harmless gossip, and close with a helpful paragraph of casual judgment. His stuff has been analytic, more like monthly periodical journalism than like the hurried product of the daily grind. How did he do it? For one thing, he has that peculiar journalistic gift of being able to write—and write well—under pressure. And he writes quickly, straight on to the typewriter, without much revision, 1200 words in an hour and a half (which makes him a good typist too). If you think it's easy to write 1200 sensible words about a single book in an hour and a half and keep this up five times a week for three years, just take three years off



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