

firsthand impressions by a Chinese official Wu Yung (alias Yu-ch'uan), who attended upon the Empress during her flight from the capital after the entry of Allied troops into Peking in 1900; and secondly, in that the story centers almost entirely upon the Boxer Uprising and the consequent flight. One gains thus an intimate glimpse of the Boxers, their methods and superstitions, the powerful and forceful personality of the Empress, the then completely subdued Emperor, the Eunuch Li Lien-ying, the Empress's favorite Jung Lu, and a mixed picture of upright and avaricious officials. A really intimate portrait is made of the scheming Yuan Shih-k'ai, the cruel Ts'en Ch'un-hsuan hovering over the career of the author like his evil genius, and above all, the interesting Li Hung-chang. And in the background, one sees the comical credulity of the people, their hatred of the Christian missions, the amazing popularity of the Boxers (a secret society which attained such power as to try magistrates, run riot in the capital, and have its devotees among members of the palace), and the amazing incompetence and lack of discipline of the imperial guards.

The idea that the Empress Dowager should have ordered a fight against the legations at Peking and virtually declared war against the entire world is so amazing that sometimes it is difficult to understand its coming from this sagacious woman. However, let the author tell the story as the Empress Dowager had told him.

... the main trouble was that Jung Lu gave incorrect information and the Empress Dowager thought, as she was told, that the Powers had already declared war [on China]. She had called this audience primarily to consider how to fight and not whether to fight or remain at peace. She felt that to fight or to be at peace was no longer the question. And her ministers did not understand the situation. They thought it was to discuss peace or war. ... Their answers were all unexpected by the Empress and finally everything was wrong; the more they talked the more they were at variance. After the meeting they questioned each other about the news that the Powers had declared war. Neither the Grand Council nor the great officials had had any word of it. They were all surprised. Jung Lu had sent his memorial secretly and no one else ever saw it. Had her courtiers known of what Jung Lu had done they could easily have told the Empress that the foreigners had not declared war and trouble would have been avoided.

Above all, from this little volume of memoirs stands out the character of the author, a courageous mandarin who had the audacity to fight the Boxers single-handed, the folly to let a golden chance for fattening his purse slip through his fingers, and the wisdom of resigning from office before the revengeful Ts'en Ch'un-hsuan could pursue him to his ruin. A genuine memoir well worth a night's reading.

Lin Yutang (see page 8) is the author of "My Country and My People."

Getting Serious About Laughter

IN PURSUIT OF LAUGHTER. By Agnes Repplier. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1936. \$2.75.

Reviewed by DAVID MCCORD

THE first enchantments of the Middle Ages were certainly not laughter, and Miss Repplier's rich and embroidered essay loses—perhaps inevitably—its first and only ground by starting pursuit where no quarry is in sight. She admits as much; but the admission invites the reader at once to cold porridge and thereby violates one of the cardinal principles of the essay as entertainment. "The ready laughter of the Middle Ages," she says, "is unavoidably left out. It has slumbered for five epoch-making centuries, and might sound unauthorized in our ears." That is no idle conclusion, even in the presence of so pleasant a persuader as Miss Helen Waddell. What laughter Miss Repplier can find there is a faint distorted echo. Her book really begins with the Elizabethans.

From then on her chapters are strong and jellyful of history, anecdote, and supporting wit. It is only a fair caveat to the prospective reader that this essay of so engaging a title is not, nor is intended to be, a rollicking performance. It was Max Beerbohm (whom she fails to mention) who remarked that of laughter nobody ever died. But in the midst of its creators, even back to the Middle Ages, I can think of no one save Meredith and Stephen Leacock who have ever attempted to run it down for its own reverberating sake. Indeed, it has long needed the recognized blessing such as this. We have been like Elizabeth's Episcopalian during the bishopless years of Oxford, Wells, and Ely: "Who in Hell will confirm us?" he said.

If Elizabeth's half literate England "was short of laughter, and was beginning to want to laugh," the way was opened under the Restoration and Charles the Second—in whose defense the essayist is at her excellent best. "We know the degree of refinement in men by the matter they laugh at and by the ring of the laugh," said Meredith—a truism which must have been observed before. The Restoration laughed too loud—and too long, if I re-

member its plays. Landor went deeper than Meredith: "Genuine humor and true wit require a sound and capacious mind, which is always a grave one." The contemporaries of John Bunyan, who were also the approximate contemporaries of Dryden, Farquhar, Vanbrugh, were on the wrong track. Most of their laughter died with them, which is not perhaps as much our fault as theirs. Since 1700 the English have laughed more steadily—and better.

This is not a definitive essay. The people who become its pegs might be other people: Dr. Johnson for Hogarth, the early Pope for the later Hood, more of Gilbert and less of Sir Joshua Reynolds. It does not matter. Wit clings to them like

barnacles, and the best of Miss Repplier's work is in example rather than in theory: "Hook sat down again, and rattled off an improvised ballad about the goodness and badness of the shots. Coleridge, overcome by admiration and by punch, pronounced him a genius, as great as Dante, only different."

America comes in at the end of the book. From an American pen, and because we call ourselves a humorous if not a



Disraeli

AGNES REPPLIER

witty people, we might expect somewhat more. I doubt if we deserve it. But I doubt also, and without research, that our recorded laughter does not antedate Mr. Artemus Ward. "What the pun was to England," says Stephen Leacock, and Miss Repplier repeats it, "bad spelling was to America" (vide Ward, Billings, Nye, and Lowell). But she forgets that in the hands of such wits as Messrs. Christopher Morley, Louis Untermeyer, and F. P. A., the American pun is dying a new death every day. Mr. DeVoto will want something said for frontier humor, but he will approve the homage to Mark Twain. Beyond, on either shore, there is more laughter than she has pursued. *Punch* was founded in 1841: What of the *New Yorker*? Rather than ask, I shall merely disagree with Freud who believes that laughter is a release of static energy, a free and joyous waste of a force which might be stored and utilized. Let us waste it. Or Miss Repplier, in her own inimitable way, can do it for you.

David McCord, poet and essayist, is the author of "Oddly Enough," "Bay Window Ballads," and other books. He was formerly on the drama and music staff of the Boston Transcript, and associate editor of the Harvard Alumni Bulletin.

The Mystery of Saint Joan

SAINT JOAN OF ARC. By V. Sackville-West. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1936. \$3.

Reviewed by MILTON WALDMAN

GO at it as he may, the biographer of Joan of Arc is bound to find himself entangled in the dilemma of proceeding upon evidence to reconstruct a story with which evidence is incompetent to deal. The facts show, beyond the faintest shadow of a doubt, that a seventeen-year-old girl, illiterate and a peasant, went forth from her home to do a great and improbable thing; a thing so great and improbable that it was unlikely almost beyond belief that ordinary human beings should ever have given her the chance to try. Yet they did, and she succeeded. She declared that she was sent by God, through personal instruction from His saints, and her contemporaries, both the vulgar and those in authority, acceded to her mission on that basis: indeed they would have accepted her on no other. Only it happens that we, the great majority of us at least, find it impossible to take so simple a view of the causes of her impulse, her acceptance, her achievement. But we have no other to take that will remotely satisfy the criticisms of our intelligence.

Miss Sackville-West puts the dilemma with neatness and a sort of poignant clarity: "I am in the unfortunate position," she confesses, "of anybody torn between an instinctive reliance on instinct, and a reasonable reliance on reason. . . .

Our ignorance and limitations, indeed, are still such that we may well question the audacity of approaching such a question at all. We are in the position of a schoolboy who, having attained to some acquaintance with simple or even compound fractions, would aspire to comment on the higher mathematics. The outcome of such an attempt

in the eyes of an informed mathematician would be piteous and laughable in the extreme. Just as piteous, in the eyes of succeeding and more enlightened generations, may be the attempts of the childish twentieth century to fumble towards the explanation of a phenomenon which to the more adult information of the future may offer no difficulties whatsoever. It is possible, conceivable, and indeed probable that with the expansion of our knowledge in the physical, physiological, and psychological worlds such problems may cease to be problems and may become the commonplace of ordinary information.

In other words the understanding of Joan and her Voices may belong to the twenty-fifth century as once it belonged to the fifteenth, but lies outside the grasp of the twentieth. That, I think, is true.

But if the mystery remains, so does the splendid story which it suffuses, and Miss Sackville-West makes a first-rate job of the retelling. Of the facts everything is there that one could reasonably want to know, nothing amplified that a good biography could sensibly do without. The narrative flows along ever so easily, sympathetically, each detail chosen with care and right instinct, every obscure point argued out skilfully and without parade. And from the whole emerges a most satisfactory picture of the swart, short-necked, close-cropped girl, downright, straightforward, exalted all at the same time, one palpably no less at home in her father's earthy cabin on the banks of the Meuse than in the circle of her heavenly father's saints to which she from her thirteenth year aspired.

In one conclusion I strongly dissent from Miss Sackville-West, that Joan "possessed no special qualifications for her tremendous mission." I do not think that the mystery lies there; the girl plainly had the soldier's genius that appears to visit those of her race in particu-

lar regardless of age or sex. To doubt is not only to doubt the facts but to bring in another element of obscurity into those very simple, elementary battles—as well as to align one's self with the maddening condescension of Anatole France which Miss Sackville-West so rightly scorns. I also doubt whether Charles VII was quite the ass she makes him out to be. And one thing many will vaguely miss—the sense of Joan as a symbol of her sex's highest aspirations, passions even, which only a biographer who was a poet as well as a woman could have illuminated.

Milton Waldman is the author of a number of historical biographies, including a life of Joan of Arc. His "Catherine de Medici and Her Family" is about to appear.

Fox Hunting Officer

SHERSTON'S PROGRESS. By Siegfried Sassoon. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1936. \$2.

Reviewed by A. W. SMITH

MR. SASSOON wrote of a Fox Hunting Man and an Infantry Officer appealingly, objectively, and with sympathetic humor. From civilized maturity he wrote of a Sherston who once was and now is not. There was a promise that the young Sherston would grow up. But Sherston, it seems, never grew up. Mr. Sassoon still writes of him as one who was, but in a manner which makes it appear that he still is.

The book begins where the "Infantry Officer" left off. The first third deals with Sherston, an inmate of a shell-shock hospital in Edinburgh (like all Mr. Sassoon's fictitious names the disguise is easily penetrated). Sherston had made himself notorious with his statement—ultimatum—what you will, declaring that he would no longer take part in the war. He had thrown the ribbon of his Military Cross into the Mersey; he was refusing to accept his pay.

At Slatford Hospital he played a lot of golf and spent a lot of time cleaning his clubs. At last he was able to compromise with conscience or to overcome his neurosis, whichever way one prefers to look at it. He demanded to be sent back to France.

The last half of the book has been taken without apparent alteration from a youthful and not very entertaining diary which covers war experiences in Palestine and France. At that time, when Barbusse was considered subversive and disloyal to the cause, it would have found an appreciative audience. It is very heartening and quite synthetic and might have formed the basis of his letters to his Aunt Evelyn, telling only as much as it was good for her to know.

A. W. Smith, an officer in the British Army during the war, is the author of "A Captain Departed."



THE CANONIZATION OF JOAN OF ARC AT ST. PETER'S IN 1920