

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

Meet the

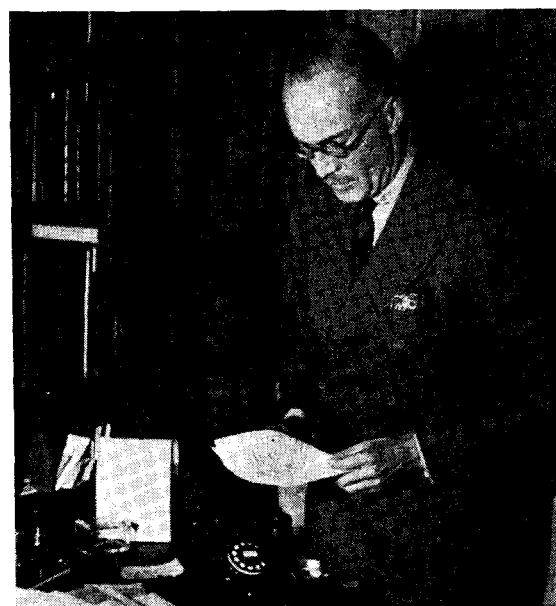
Saturday Review News Pictures



LIN YUTANG, author of "My Country and My People," interviewed in Asia magazine's offices. He will spend the next year near Princeton, N. J., writing a book on the art of living.



Dr. Lin explains to the Herald Tribune reporter that the art of living doesn't mean philosophy or "high-flown thoughts" but "the superficialities of which life is made up."



COL. RALPH W. ISHAM, owner of the Boswell MSS from which the first complete edition of the "Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides" will be issued next month, holds an unpublished letter from Voltaire to Boswell. Writing in English from Ferney, Voltaire disclaims knowledge of the soul, and refers Boswell to young scholars and priests.



CORNELIA OTIS SKINNER, widely known monologist of "The Wives of Henry the Eighth," takes a bow for her book of humorous sketches, "Excuse It, Please." Here she is with clippings of early reviews.



GILBERT SELDES (above), author of "Mainland," at home with the lively art of George Gershwin; I. J. SINGER (below), who wrote "The Brothers Ashkenazi," occupies an editorial desk in the office of The Jewish Daily Forward.

