

school mathematics is ample. Considerably less is adequate for the enjoyment of some of the most stimulating chapters, for example "From Crisis to Crossword Puzzles or the Beginnings of Arithmetic." For about half the book a grammar school education is sufficient. With this much mastered, the remainder should not be beyond anyone willing to take a little trouble. Excellent illustrations enliven the exposition. The entire book covers about the same ground that a junior college student will have traversed by the end of his second year, through arithmetic, algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and the easier stages of analytic geometry and the calculus.

To this general statement there is one most important exception. The concluding chapter, "Statistics or The Arithmetic of Human Welfare," explaining incidentally the mathematics of heredity, goes beyond the usual junior college course. Fully as approachable as the earlier chapters, this last will give many explorers a thrill like that which Keats experienced on first reading Chapman's Homer. Here many will catch their first vision of a new earth; whether they will also glimpse a new heaven is more doubtful. In fact the author fires some barbed remarks at enthusiastic economists and others who go off half-cocked from an overcharge of graphs and deadlier mathematical ammunition whose explosive habits they have failed to master.

From what has been said it must not be inferred that Professor Hogben's book is just one controversy after another. It is not; a mass of orthodox mathematics is developed in a way which is unorthodox only for its unusual interest and constant touch with the everyday life of busy mortals. The book is not a substitute for the usual texts, but a supplement, and it is admirably adapted for self-instruction. Almost any page will provoke interesting discussion, even—perhaps especially—when it is possible to differ with the author on historical grounds. Yet the book does present an integrated account of usable mathematics from a consistently human point of view, and in doing so is probably unique in its field. Those who need rigor in the calculus or alternatives in the history can get both in numerous places not overlapping the specific contribution to mathematical enlightenment which this book makes. It is a book for fascinated browsing for any serious student, and one to delight any amateur who wishes to see what mathematics is about and what it can do for human beings. No doubt any pedantic ass could point out things that would be unacceptable in an examination paper. To judge the book on this level would be to put oneself in the category designated.

*Eric Temple Bell is on the staff of the California Institute of Technology, and author of "Men of Mathematics," reviewed two weeks ago.*

## Room at the Top

PRESENT INDICATIVE. By Noel Coward. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1937. \$3.

Reviewed by JAMES THURBER

NOEL COWARD, with a couple dozen plays behind him, will not be thirty-eight years old until December. He started to work and live at such high speed when he was still in short pants that by the time he was twenty-one he could look back on triumphs and failures in the theatre. On his twenty-fifth birthday he had his first smash hit, as author and actor, when "The Vortex" opened in London. He was by that time a widely experienced man of the stage. As young as Mr. Coward is, this book is the story of more than thirty years of public appearances. He made the first of these appearances when



NOEL COWARD (RIGHT) IN 1911  
With Philip Tonge in "Where the  
Rainbow Ends."

he was six, at a children's concert, singing and accompanying himself on the piano. At seven he worked out a dance routine. When he was nine he wrote a tragedy, forced some little neighbor girls to act it out and, when they giggled and forgot their lines, bashed the eldest over the head with a wooden spade. At ten he became a professional (his parents were poor and had to take in roomers) appearing, for two pounds a week, as a page boy in a comedy starring Charles Hawtrey. At thirteen he was in a repertory company. By the time he was nineteen he had written several plays, a novel, some verses, short stories (which he sold), songs, and lyrics. He wasn't yet twenty-one when he sold his first play, to Al Woods, for \$2,000 (it was never produced). This amazing pace has never let up. To pack in all the events of his career he has had to write a fast-moving, streamlined chronicle.

Noel Coward's comedies created him as surely as he created them. They built up in the popular imagination a witty, talented, and superficial young man, who flew into fame almost as quickly as Lindbergh. This is the legendary figure, complete with high-powered car, glass of champagne, and stream of repartee. Such a figure needs no past and suggests no future, it just stands there, forever bantering and forever smug. Mr. Coward's efforts in the theatre to present another side of himself and of his talent have not met with lasting success. When, in his recent series of nine short plays, he jumped tragically out of the window in "The Astonished Heart," it was to land in a more familiar comedy part in the play that immediately followed that one—and obliterated it. Mr. Coward's genius for light comedy has pigeon-holed him. But whatever you may think of his varied talents, "Present Indicative" does much to destroy, I think, the legendary personal Noel Coward of the comedies.

His book is the story of his struggle—not flight—to the top, of his humiliations and triumphs, his ovations and what he calls "kicks in the pants," his easy sailings and his dead ends. It does not appear as apology, defense, or rebuttal—there is in it (someone is sure to ask) no reference to Mr. Keith Winter or his *roman à clef*, "Passionate Pygmies," in which the character of Andrew Jordan was supposedly taken from the Noel Coward of the legends. There is none of the bright malice for which some readers will disappointedly search and while the book is highly amusing in many places, there is an effortless avoidance of "Noel Coward lines." It is a candid and straightaway setting down of what has happened to him and what he thinks about it. "I am neither conceited, overbearing, rude, nor insulting to waiters. People often refer to me as being 'simple' and 'surprisingly human.' All of which is superficially gratifying but, on closer analysis, quite idiotic." Thus a discussion of conceit, ending with "My sense of my own importance to the world is relatively small. On the other hand, my sense of my own importance to myself is tremendous."

His humiliations, if anything, have predominated over his triumphs. An audience in Chicago laughed through his serious play "The Vortex"; an audience in New York walked out on "This Was a Man," while he sat in a box; an audience in London greeted "Sirocco" with boos and shouts and Bronx cheers—while he fought back at them from the stage. The story ends on a high note—the great night in London when the Royal Family came to see "Cavalcade." The book teems with celebrities, but the accent is on a few friends, most of them not known to fame. It presents surely the most vivid picture of the theatre, from the writing of a play to the end of a long run, that has yet been done.

## Spokesman of America

WHITMAN. By Edgar Lee Masters. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1937. \$3.50.

Reviewed by CLIFTON JOSEPH FURNESS

IN this book, the first biography of Whitman for several years, a pupil surveys his master through understanding eyes. Reading Masters's "Whitman" is an enjoyable experience. It is not so soured as was his book on Lincoln. Throughout it rings honest, reverent, even grateful. By inference comes testimony of what Masters gleaned from his Whitman. And it is the choicest Masters. As I read, the feeling grew upon me that the Edgar Lee Masters of "Spoon River" has come back. He is not above superimposing his own personal attitude at times. But he is sputtering less, acquainted more with grief, touched with mellow reason.

This book is grounded on sufficiently thorough research to have made it the ready reference book on Whitman, if it were "mortised and tenoned" in the necessary scholarly apparatus. Sources are not invariably cited. A few footnotes or references in an appendix might have served as a hinge to turn the reader toward a fuller knowledge of Whitman. On the other hand, it has sacrificed literary charm by becoming largely a compilation; in many parts the work lapses into a patchwork of quotations. Certain chapters read like excerpts from an anthology.

However, the work is an ideal introduction for one ignorant of Whitman. It has cleared up tangled knots in Whitman tradition. At last we learn the straight facts about Whitman's illness and death, and the official findings of the autopsy. We are given the entries in Whitman's bank book, the details of drawing up his will, and a critical analysis of the squabble over the treatment of Whitman's housekeeper, Mrs. Davis. Whitman emerges from under the searchlight, little or none the worse for the inspection. We are relieved to find that Mr. Masters finds no evidence to substantiate syphilitic infection, and to know that Walt did not mistreat Mrs. Davis. Whitman does not fare so well in respect to his veracity at the hands of his new biographer. "Whitman was not above telling 'whoppers.'" Masters attributes this trait to Whitman's "secretiveness," or "deficient historical faculty."

The mysterious element in Whitman centers in sex. Masters's treatment is the sanest so far advanced. He handles the story that Whitman told about being the father of six children better than anybody else has yet done. He scouts the

whole idea. The reputed romance in New Orleans and the "love affair" with Anne Gilchrist are admirably handled. This is the first time that "the mysterious woman" who has dogged Whitman in pseudo-biographies has been properly debunked. At last we have a Whitman biographer who passes over the New Orleans episode without a search for juicy fruit. Masters is honest: "He wrote no letters about romances, for he had none."

In the Gilchrist chapter he faces facts, but lets them speak without romancing. He presents a clear statement of "What Anne Gilchrist felt and what Whitman did not feel." Masters finds that Whitman "wrote her into no poem, just as he never sang a woman . . . He wrote no poem to her." (Is it possible that Masters has overlooked the poem "Going Somewhere" that Whitman wrote as "a memory-leaf for her dear sake"?) Probably correct is the final inference that "by his nature he did not love women romantically . . . Women . . . did not interest him so much as men did."

Adequate consideration is given to Whitman's thought on politics. The social consciousness of today is quickened more than was that of Whitman's contemporary audience. This element in Whitman has recently been brought forcefully to our attention by Professor Louise Pound, and others.

Whitman's philosophical and religious ideas had constant and direct effect upon his writings. Masters exposes him as "incapable of a systematic philosophy," and calls his muddled ideas of philosophy "ostentation concerning things that he knew about in the most fugitive way." He agrees heartily, however, that Whitman's cast of spirit was essentially mystical rather than intellectual. He gives the Quaker element in Whitman's thought its due place (as have W. S. Kennedy and Harrison Morris also). Masters frequently refers to the "cosmic consciousness" postulated by Whitman's friend, Dr. R. M. Bucke. He skirts the deeper aspects of the subject, but then sheers off. He writes like a mystic who is afraid of his own nature. What he does say indicates that he could have given the best picture yet attained of Whitman in this important aspect. Like many contemporaries who feel themselves instinctively drawn toward Whitman, Masters is conscious of what Whitman meant when he said, "Darest thou now O Soul?", but he stops short of launching a real research into the spiritual world.

Masters's literary criticism of Whitman is on the whole the most definite contribution of the book. His estimate of the ultimate significance of Whitman is that "Whitman is the great spokesman in America . . . for the life of freedom."



© 1887, G. C. Cox  
WHITMAN

## The Heritage of the Forty-Niners

YOUNG ROBERT. By George Albee. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock. 1937. \$2.50.

Reviewed by DUNCAN AIKMAN

ONCE again, a California novel insinuates that the forty-niners were of the same bloodstream with the folk heroes. Mr. Albee, however, does the job with certain distinctive innovations. Instead of the forty-niners themselves, replete with bowie knives, gusto, and Bret Harte setting, he gives us the second and third generations—still shaggy and untamed, and speaking an antique Homeric wisdom in runes and Old Testament cadences—against the background of San Francisco's stuffiness in the early years of the century.

To the respectable hardware merchant's little boy who tells the story, the Lime-wrights were fascinating, yet a little terrifying. There was Conor who ran a waterfront livery stable. There was Flann, the sailor, who was alternately either getting himself benedicted for heroism or blacklisted for maritime union agitations. There was Dermott, the rancher, Dana, the preacher, and Angus, the labor leader, to whom hating the capitalists was a kind of poetic mysticism.

Above all, there was Angus's son, Robert, who could out-fight or out-learn any boy in the San Francisco public school system, but generally didn't try to because he was too busy cultivating whatever personal interest he happened to have at the moment. It might be going on the strike picket line with his father. It might be building tunnels under San Francisco's suburban near-mountains. Or it might be a matter of trying to absorb all astronomy in three months, as Robert attempted at Stanford, or of pushing the art of being tough to its highest refinements which happened to be his specialty in high school.

Something, Mr. Albee seems to be saying, drives a man of high and poetic gusto for life out of the social mechanism for living as California (or any other American state) has organized it. From Conor to Angus the elder Limewrights, being nearer the land and the past, managed some kind of an adjustment. But Robert, throwing away his life at twenty on an inconsequential labor brawl which interested him merely because he happened to be on hand, is tagged as one of civilization's tragic waste products. California, in other words, had to throw her best forty-niner blood away because she had no sensible way of harnessing it.

This is highly suggestive social criticism. The only flaw in Mr. Albee's performance is the strong smell of the saga. He trembles too much between Cuchulain and Middletown to be at all times credible.