

# Secretive Emperor

*AUGUSTUS.* By John Buchan. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1937. \$4.50.

*AUGUSTUS.* By G. P. Baker. New York: Dodd, Mead Co. 1937. \$3.50.

Reviewed by FLETCHER PRATT

COMPARISON between two biographies of the same man, published within the same week, by two of the best biographers now living, is inevitable. It is also, in the present case, impossible, for neither has produced a book that trespasses on more than the remoter marches of the biographical territory explored by the other. Both Buchan and Baker recognize that the capital difficulty in dealing with the subject is the lack of data on which to analyze the most secretive mind in history.

Buchan avoids the difficulty by assuming that the mind was a mechanical instrument; that Augustus, mediocre in all else, possessed the special ability of constructive government, of constitutionalization after revolutionary upheaval, which was illustrated in modern times by Napoleon and the members of the Convention of 1787. "He realized the profound truth that a revolution, if it is to endure, must be in large part a reaction, a return to inbred modes of thought which have been neglected." In answer to the nineteen centuries of laughter which have greeted the first emperor's statement that he restored the Roman Republic, Buchan thus stoutly replies that he did that very thing—restored the small and ancient city-state dominating an Italian peninsula whose central feature was a race of lusty yeomen. The only possible method of doing this was the method Augustus adopted—that of removing from the control of the local republic the empire of the world whose weight had broken down an excellent small-state constitution. "Augustus" was a title including divine honors for its holder everywhere but in Italy;

the "Princeps" was permanent chairman of a steering committee for the government of a world empire, whose capital was by convenience rather than necessity located in the restored self-governing Latin republic. The book is largely given over to the story of how this result was achieved and the mutations through which the governmental system passed in arriving at its destination. It might be the report of a Royal Commission, in a style at once dry, clear, and vigorous, an effective simplification of matters which in most histories seem unbearably complex.

To Mr. Baker, a biographer of the emotions, for whom a simple and obvious explanation will never do when he can find an intricate one (for feelings are never easy to analyze), this is over-simplification. It is significant that when Buchan chooses to quote an ancient author it is always Frontinus, Pliny, or Tacitus, while Baker chooses Horace or Virgil, who recast fact in an emotional mould. Also significant is the case of Julia, Augustus's daughter, who, the ancient historians assure us, was condemned to banishment by her father for her flagrant violation of his edicts against adultery. Buchan accepts this story at face value and gives it a page, with the remark that the father of the world made an indifferent father of a family; Baker cannot avoid spending half a chapter in surmising some secret and deadly business behind the unvarnished narration.

From Baker's standpoint the political-instrument theory of the Augustan mind is naturally unsatisfying. In the details of Augustus's reorganization of the empire and restoration of the Italian burgher class, to which Buchan awards two-thirds of his book, Baker is so little interested that he can give it only a dozen pages. The rest is devoted to the exploration of that almost disembodied intelligence. Yet this plumps Baker squarely into the difficulty the Governor-General of Canada

avoids. "Octavian," he is finally obliged to conclude, "was more than a person. He was a committee; he was a pool into which a dozen men threw their special intelligence; he was a movement, a type of government. The boy Octavian, merely as such, would not have lasted a week. Octavian, the presiding member of the Friends of Caesar, was immortal and indestructible." Which is all very true, but leaves an unpleasant lacuna around the essential fact—what brought Octavian, in the person of the Emperor Augustus, to the presidency of that committee?

We do not know: Baker does not know, Buchan is not interested. The latter's book is thus somewhat more successful in its primary purpose than the former's, in that it achieves what it set out to do, while the materials are lacking for that delicate and fascinating psychological analysis which has made Baker one of the greatest biographers now living. Yet it is almost impossible fully to understand either book without some footnotes from the other, and for everyone but the publishers, it is fortunate that they have appeared together.

Fletcher Pratt is the author of "Hail, Caesar!," a biography of Julius Caesar.

## About the Authors

Once in a while a fine writer also becomes eminent in public life. Today John Buchan (pronounced buck'n) is the first Baron Tweedsmuir of Elsfield and has been Governor-General of Canada since 1935. His books number over fifty. He has also been a lawyer, soldier, and an M. P. He has put himself on record as wishing "to make the best literature accessible to the poorest purse," to write a full life of our General Lee, and to cement understanding between England and the United States. Buchan was born at Perth in the summer of 1876, and was educated at Glasgow University and Oxford. He has been a partner in the English publishing house of Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd. One of the best English talking pictures was made from his novel, "The Thirty-Nine Steps."

George Philip Baker makes one of his homes in Sussex by the sea, the others being an orchard in Surrey and a studio in Chelsea. Mr. Baker is a non-academic historian. He worked at Woolwich Arsenal (where his forefathers had been officials) from the age of sixteen to the age of forty-three, with the exception of four years' settlement work. When his first biography, "Sulla the Fortunate," was published in 1927, he began to earn a living as an author. Mr. Baker says he lives "in a silent film," as he has been deaf since the age of eight. He finds that "the cutting out of audibility from the actual world has the result of bringing the actual and imaginative worlds into much closer similarity." It became easier for him to enter into the minds and actions of historic figures than to deal with his contemporaries.



THE ROMAN FORUM



LA GUARDIA AT HIS DESK. Photo by courtesy of *The March of Time*.

## Mayor-at-Large

**LA GUARDIA: AN UNAUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY.** By Jay Franklin. New York: Modern Age Books, Inc. 1937. Paper, 35c; cloth, 85c.

Reviewed by ROBERT STRUNSKY

**N**EXT week New Yorkers will be called upon to choose between two candidates for Mayor who have several points in common. These include belligerence and a transatlantic background. They are both products of the "new immigration." They are both lawyers. They are both fighters, although skilled in different tactics. One difference between the two is that LaGuardia is a hand-made politician whereas his opponent is machine-made.

By all the ordinary rules LaGuardia should never have reached first base. The arena of politics has little use for party irregularity. But it went deeper than that with LaGuardia. Although his mood and temper were insurgent, they were under control. He knew the proper time to be regular and the proper time to be irregular. There has always been in him a large vein of opportunism which he fortunately directed toward exploiting a political system rather than the people by whom this system was maintained. At the same time he managed, rather incredibly, not to compromise his basic principles. If it was expedient to shelve them, he did so, but only until he got into office. Once seated, he dusted them off, polished them up, and offered them shining for popular consumption. He never reneged on them, and only once was he forced to put through a measure which he had previously disavowed—the city sales tax.

It is Mr. Franklin's contention that

although LaGuardia was a product of the "new immigration" he escaped all of its implications by growing up in Arizona. The social and economic philosophy which he represents he brought with him, not from Foggia, the Adriatic seaport of his forebears, but from the mesas of the Southwest, where he watched the herds being ridden, wrote a column for the local newspaper, and did not know the meaning of the word spaghetti. His philosophy was the sort that stems from Moscow, Idaho, rather than Moscow, Russia. It was Western Progressivism in its most rampant form, involving a fundamental distrust of Wall Street; a simple belief in a government of, for, and by the people; a practical, neighborly solution of social and economic problems. It was free from the taint of alien ideologies. It had nothing to do with the currents of European history. His biographer would have it believed that he was a voice crying in the wilderness long before the second Roosevelt got his name in the papers. As far back as 1920 the Little Flower was thinking in terms of a permanent relief subsidy for the unemployed.

He was distinctly favored by the turn of events; by the economic catastrophe which struck the nation and the world, by the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt, and by the sudden birth of a national social consciousness. On the crest of a reform wave which flooded every hamlet in the country he rode up the City Hall steps in 1933 and started running things according to his tastes. He immediately left his Republican endorsers in the lurch by refusing to indulge in the traditional patronage of a new political executive. He proceeded to lift the city out of bankruptcy.

LaGuardia's intemperateness led him into constant conflict with fascism and the totalitarian philosophy. In some instances it actually involved the nation in diplomatic imbroglios with Italy and Germany. His opponents consistently attempted to pin a communist label on him, either unconsciously or deliberately ignorant of the genesis of his liberalism.

The events of the past few years have increased his stature as a political figure. Modeling himself along the lines of the tenants of the White House, he raced around the country, made speeches in San Francisco, New Orleans, and Chicago, became, as Mr. Franklin puts it, "America's Mayor-at-Large." His biographer's enthusiasm envisions a bright future for him, the Governorship, a seat in the Senate, possibly a job as Chief Executive.

But this is only sticking out your neck. The Little Flower has still to be reelected. Whether this was in back of the biographer's mind when he undertook the biography is hard to say. What can be said, however, is that while Mr. Franklin has written an overtly partisan story, it is a story of great human interest. It is guilty of few of the excesses of partisanship. For an author so completely sold on his subject Mr. Franklin has exercised on the whole creditable restraint.

## Personal Homage to Tom Moore

**THE MINSTREL BOY. A PORTRAIT OF TOM MOORE.** By L. A. G. Strong. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1937. \$3.75.

Reviewed by JACOB ZEITLIN

**T**HIS is a red-letter year in the annals of Tom Moore's reputation. On the heels of Professor Howard Jones's admirable biography comes another, written with the ease, the grace, and the readableness which we should expect from the pen of an experienced novelist like Mr. L. A. G. Strong. Ever since his childhood, Mr. Strong tells us, when he used to listen to his grandmother's singing of the "Irish Melodies," the figure of the poet has had an attraction for him, and the writing of this book is therefore a form of personal homage. The kind of affection that inspires it determines the differences in estimate and emphasis between Mr. Strong and Professor Jones.

The former is more concerned with drawing a portrait of the man than with describing the fortunes of the literary personage; there is therefore no such massing of contemporaneous opinions on Moore's work as in the other biography. Since he does not regard Moore's contribution to the political life of his time as having any importance, he does not find it useful to put in elaborate historical backgrounds. Even in respect to the poet's distinctly literary achievements his appreciation is narrowly restricted. He