

Poets, Old and New

POEMS TO VERA. By George Sterling. New York: Oxford University Press. 1938. \$2.

MAINE BALLADS. By Robert P. Tristram Coffin. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1938. \$1.75.

THE PLANETS. By Alfred Kreymborg. New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc. 1938. \$1.25.

THE BRIGHT NORTH. By Abbie Huston Evans. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1938. \$1.75.

POEMS: NEW AND SELECTED. By Melville Cane. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company. 1938. \$2.

CONCERNING THE YOUNG. By Willard Maas. New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc. 1938. \$2.

THE SILVER BRANCH: AN ANTHOLOGY OF OLD IRISH POETRY. Selected by Sean O'Faolain. New York: The Viking Press. 1938. \$2.

Reviewed by LOUIS UNTERMAYER

NOT merely because of age and experience, but because of familiarity with their craft and knowledge of effects, the older practitioners in this group should shame the newer poets. But almost the opposite is true. One need only examine the posthumous volume by George Sterling for proof. Sterling died twelve years ago; he had mastered two styles: the flamboyant and the fluently romantic; he was disturbed by the impulse to experiment, distressed by his inability to write except in the tradition. Tired of lassoing wild stars and swinging strange suns through fortissimo sonnets, he had resigned himself to sentimental narratives and love lyrics. In "Poems to Vera" there are twenty-two songs and sonnets and two long tributes "whose only propaganda is love." None is unworthy of its theme and none rises above it; each poem is pleasant, precise, easy to read, and easy to forget. The tone, with its mixture of familiar cadence and cliché, is suggested by the first lines of almost every poem: "O sweet, wild, woodland grace!" "Your beauty bids my spirit fare," "The rain hides now the hills." It is obvious that Sterling not only knew all the poetic platitudes but knew them too well—so well he could never forget them.

The comfortable platitudes slip into "Maine Ballads," but they are not, as they are in Sterling's book, the entire poem; they are incidental, almost accidental, they are even, at times, inevitable. In a foreword Mr. Coffin sensibly asks the reader not to judge these verses by the ordinary poetic standards; "they are to be

judged, both in style and plot, by the principles of folk-design." Nothing could be fairer. Most of the ballads are clever mixtures of folk-lore and free improvisation, of adapted regionalism and shrewd workmanship. The best of them, "Departure," "Lazybones," "Toothaker's Desert," "The Twins," "The Name Kept Green," and "Narrow Escape," are not remarkable in style or plot; they have no subtlety, scarcely a surprise. But they make their points broadly; and they rhyme themselves simply and (as ballads should) not too smoothly.

"The Planets," like MacLeish's "The Fall of the City," is a verse-play written primarily for the radio. The theme is ambitious: an allegory of the world and its "phases" from the World War to end war, through the return to prosperity, the ensuing depression, and the next and bigger war to end the world. Effective though the words are sounded over the air-waves, they are not nearly as forceful—not nearly forceful enough—when reduced to print without sonority and sound-effects. Perhaps allegory demands a different treatment from the mélange of idioms employed here; perhaps the author, whose specialty is the delineation of things delicate and quiet—whose forte, so to speak, is *piano*—perhaps Kreymborg has chosen a subject beyond his powers. In an effort to gain variety he indulges in too many changes of tone; the large concept degenerates into trivialities, and the humor too often runs into the grooves of musical comedy—e.g., the scene with Jupiter, belching and hiccuping, supported by a beautiful bevy of nine giggling moons. The otherwise serious blank and free verse is continually jarred by a switch to hit-or-miss rhymes, and the play's progress is not merely delayed but distorted by the intrusion of skittish lyrics. One approves the message and regrets the method.

It is the method one must applaud in "The Bright North," emotion masked in understatement, and imagination strengthened by observation. Mrs. Evans writes about country scenes with a loving but precise eye; she sees how noon "inks in the shadows," how the humming-bird "makes a taut mooring off the larkspur spike" and the "end-on cornfield twists up the slope like a Roman ribbon"; she knows how the morning-glory feels "in its velvet first hour." But there is intellectual probing and a continual philosophic play behind the description. Sometimes the philosophy overbalances the poem, and the poet, beginning in abstract contemplation, ends in self-conscious attitudinizing. But most of the pages are clear and compressed.

Observation and imagination are even more carefully balanced in Melville Cane's "Poems: New and Selected." Such

a poem as "Rural Dumpheap," like Sandburg's "Nocturne in a Deserted Brickyard," uncovers the beauty in things traditionally regarded as too prosaic for poetry; "Hymn to Night" is a memorable blend of sight and insight. Cane has experimented with subject and technique—with light for his "binding" theme and with an unusually short line for emphasis—and his experiments are almost uniformly successful. For proof the reader is referred to the compact "Two Stars," the tense little "Dawn Has Yet to Ripple In," and the suggestive "Presence of Snow." These are pieces which deserve to grace many a future anthology, and if the anthologist is not worried by the tongue-in-cheekiness of Cane's section "Lighter" he will find several surprises in the last thirty-three pages.

Willard Maas's "Concerning the Young" is a selection of *The Discoverers*, which has sponsored such discoveries as Meloney's "Rush to the Sun," Davis's "The Anointed," and Gilligan's "Boundary against Night." The selection is logical, for the author not only speaks of (and, sometimes, for) his generation, he speaks in its language. It is a speech which nonchalantly mingles the exquisite and the banal, pits the timely against the timeless, and attempts to resolve such discordances as the eternal emotions and tomorrow's headlines. Maas is not always successful in his resolutions and his pages present many confusions of aim and incongruities in style—the title-poem, for example, is a queer mixture of George Dillon and (believe it or not) W. H. Auden. But inflection and idiom are fused in "No Season for Our Season," "Where Shall We Go," "Freighted with Fear," and several others. This author seems to be more himself in the lyrical passages than in the longer projections of contemporary conflict, but, except for a few mannered pages, a warmth and richness of experience rise above the most congested lines.

In "The Silver Branch" Sean O'Faolain has selected the best translations of the best old Irish lyrics and semi-ballads. It is a notable collection introduced and integrated by an equally notable preface. The book is divided into four illuminating sections: 1. The Church; 2. The Woods, the Mountains, the Sea; 3. The Heroic Tradition; 4. Early Court Verse. Helpful though O'Faolain's notes are, the poems are self-contained and can be enjoyed with practically no knowledge of Irish myth and folk-lore. The student will be delighted with a volume at once simple and scholarly; he will be able to trace the course of experiment and convention, the emergence of nature and history as themes, the growth of the tradition of friendship, and the general freedom from sanctified taboos which affected these pagan poets. But it needs no scholar to understand these anonymous singers who wrote about a thousand years ago. Readers of Irish poetry—readers of poetry of any kind—should know and cherish them.

Pricking Bubbles of Economic Planning

FULL RECOVERY OR STAGNATION?

By Alvin Harvey Hansen. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 1938. \$3.50.

Reviewed by W. O. SCROGGS

PROFESSOR HANSEN'S book is devoid of anything remotely resembling propaganda. His attitude throughout is rigidly objective, and his tone is never polemical; but he is none the less devastating in his exposure of the inherent fallacies in many of the familiar proposals for promoting economic recovery. He offers cold comfort to the advocates of a planned economy. Even if there were no errors of judgment, he says, and if exactly the correct amount of capital goods and consumers' goods were produced, we still might suffer from booms and depressions. If production, for example, should chance to be concentrated in too brief a space of time, a period of industrial recession would necessarily follow. And who can gauge the time requirements when technological progress is constantly changing the tempo of industry? The elimination of uncertainty in such cases could only be achieved through strict regimentation and consequent stagnation.

Professor Hansen believes that intellectual regimentation has already been carried so far that it offers a serious threat to our economic stability. We are becoming a society, he says, in which most of us think alike at the same moment, and the result is often excessive optimism, with a boom, at one time and undue pessimism, with possibly a panic, at another.

Managed currency and a program of "pump priming" are rejected as inadequate. Even if internal money management could be expertly devised and kept free of political pressure, it would still offer no assurance of stability, since the world has become so interdependent that national stability is impossible without international stability as well. The most practical way to increase international stability is to promote greater freedom of trade. In support of this thesis Professor Hansen cites the relatively liberal trade policies of the Scandinavian countries which, despite scant resources, have attained a standard of living comparable with that of their wealthier neighbors.

SOLUTION OF LAST WEEK'S DOUBLE-CROSTIC (No. 246)

RICHARD STEELE—
THE GUARDIAN

It is a most vexatious thing to an old man, who endeavors to square his notions by reason, and to talk from reflection and experience, to fall in with a circle of young ladies at their afternoon tea-table.

Depressions, the author finds, are due to many different causes and no single remedy will suffice. The recession which set in during the last half of 1937 was the result of four "accidents." Prices were being inflated because of an almost unprecedented drought, the payment of the veterans' bonus, the rearmament activities of the Great Powers, and the strikes and wage increases in the United States. The inflationary boom collapsed when the drought was relieved, the bonus was spent, and so on. Full recovery obviously cannot be effected merely by a resumption of government spending. Professor Hansen believes that public expenditure may be usefully employed in times of depression to stimulate the flow of savings into genuine investments, but that it should not be resorted to as a cyclical compensatory device to stimulate consumption.

The basic requirement for full recovery is a restoration of the flow of investment funds into industry. The author does not believe that there will be a resumption of a flow like that in the two decades before 1929. He lays emphasis upon the recent decline in the increase of population and believes that this trend will profoundly affect the future of investment activity. Investment hereafter may be intensive rather than extensive, aimed more at improving the quality of production than increasing the quantity. Already there is a call for better housing as well as for more housing. Recovery, therefore, will not mean a return to the old ways.

Professor Hansen's viewpoint is thus truly progressive, in spite of his rejection of many so-called progressive panaceas. He does not share the view of many radicals and a few conservatives that private enterprise is doomed; it may play a somewhat lesser role in the total economy, but it will survive and continue to grow.

Family Album

MILLBROOK. By Della T. Lutes. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1938. \$2.50.

Reviewed by REBECCA LOWRIE

TWO of Mrs. Lutes's books, "The Country Kitchen" and "Home Grown," have described rural American life so ingratiatingly, and literally so appetizingly, that they are already small but undisputed classics. The scene is Southern Michigan; the time the eighteen eighties, when the author, Delly Thompson, was a little girl. "Millbrook" follows the Thompsons from the farm, when its endless labors became too much for Lije, to the village. The break is not a painful one, because there are old friends and new ones: the aunts, Hanner and Sophrony, the uncles and cousins; and there are the Ladies of the two churches who hum about scandals and love affairs; a murder (the axe seems to be the favored weapon of the eighties); State Fairs and country dances, even a city wanton who paints her face and reads the *Police Gazette* in the barber shop.

Though she has given "Millbrook" the structure of a novel, Mrs. Lutes has not in so much as a sentence lost the family album quality of her characters. There is no elaborately fabricated plot. Even the shock of bigamy and the melodrama of murder fall quite simply and plausibly into the small town pattern because Mrs. Lutes remembers her bigamists and murderers with her usual humorous clarity. Certainly "Millbrook" is not a piece of imaginative fiction. It may even seem, to some readers, rather tranquil and old-fashioned, but it is warmly alive, and preserves in its quaint figures, its homely speech, and its mores, a time and a way of American life which was too sound to vanish entirely, and too flavorful to be forgotten.

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