

# H. L.: A Writing Man

BY BOOTH TARKINGTON

**H**ARRY LEON WILSON was a writing man. He hated the phrase "English prose" because he thought it pretentious; but English prose, made American, was what he strove to produce. He was a craftsman, didn't think or talk about the "art of writing," because he took his work too seriously for that; and, because he was also really an artist, he'd have borne severe torture rather than call himself one. His conviction was that language is a means, not for self-expression, but for communication; therefore he expressed himself with clarity. He never tried to get either beauty or humor into his work; both will be found there because they were in the temper and quality of the man himself.

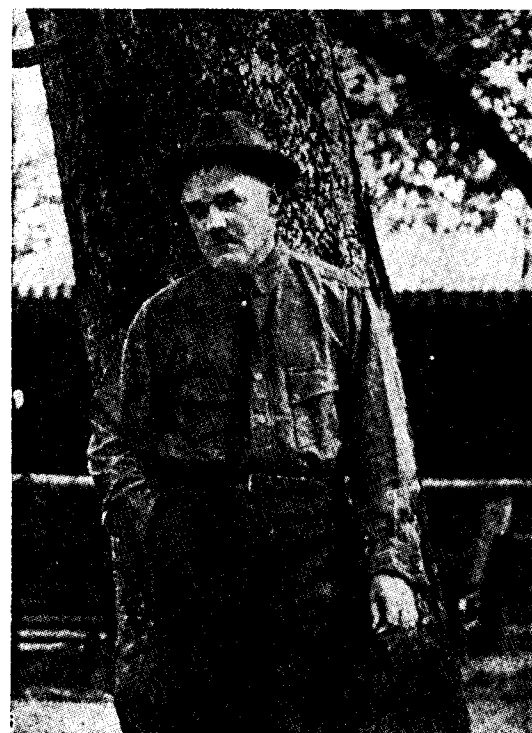
Some of the kindly editorials written about him after his death might have given him a momentary grimace, could he have read them. He wouldn't have expected any editorials at all—he was a vacuum about "publicity"—but if he could have imagined beforehand any obituarial comment he would have expected it to run somewhat astray, and the moment's grimace just mentioned would have been his substitute for a laugh and "I thought so!" He laughed seldom, smiled rarely; his years of editing a professionally humorous journal hadn't left him much capacity for the physical expression of mirth—he'd investigated and corrected too many thousand jokes. One of the editorials, though, would have drawn at a corner of his mouth.

He'd have liked its friendliness, of course, because that quality was genuine. The editorial spoke of his singular genius in surprisingly introducing Lincoln's Gettysburg address into the filming of "Ruggles," bringing that solemn note suddenly into the midst of jocose passages. The episode will be looked for in vain in Wilson's book,

and its appearance in the film affected his stomach, because, as I've said, he was really an artist. A contract had left him powerless to suppress the director's inspiration. Wilson wrote to me that when the "picture people" told him of their great Lincolnian idea his impulse was to respond, "Why not use the Lord's Prayer, too?" He didn't say it, because he was afraid they'd do it.

Another of the admiring and genuinely friendly editorials said something that he'd have accepted unregretfully; it said rather wistfully that he'd never received special distinction or high honor "at the hands of the aristocrats of literature," possibly meaning that he'd never had a Pulitzer Prize or a great fuss made over him by metropolitan reviewers. Wilson would have agreed that the "aristocrats of literature" hadn't seen much in him; but he'd have done so because he'd forgotten. The National Institute of Arts and Letters, which, generally speaking, has contained the best names in American arts and letters since its foundation, elected him to membership about thirty years ago; but probably only a few times since then did Wilson remember that he was officially of that distinguished group.

Moreover, there was a literary aristocrat who in his lifetime represented royalty itself to the minds of almost every American writing man. He was William Dean Howells, the most authoritative and penetrating critic of writing our country has known, and a good word from him in his lofty literary department in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* was the accolade. He was late in "discovering" Wilson; but when he did find him, at last, raised him to the peerage. Howells's delight in "Bunker Bean" and in "Ruggles" was



Harry Leon Wilson

profound; in "Ma Pettengill" it was an ecstasy.

Wilson could write anywhere, even on Capri, where, in the autumn of 1905 and the winter and spring of 1906, he lived in the beautiful, unbelievable villa that Elihu Vedder had built there. Vesuvius was meditating an eruption, just across the bay, and the fire works display from the mountain became more and more prodigious until the final great eruption of 1906. Wilson sat at a desk, unceasingly playing his own game of solitaire that he'd invented and at intervals setting down the cards to make a note for the novel that engaged him.

After the volcano had spent itself, he came to Paris, took rooms in the Boulevard Raspail, and wrote. He'd never seen Paris before and wouldn't look at it—he was writing. Every afternoon at four o'clock he walked a block or two to the Café du Dôme (not in those days a sight for tourists) and played cards during exactly two hours; then went home and wrote again. It took me about three months to convince him that he ought to spend a morning in the Louvre and at least half an hour in the Sainte Chapelle. He did, somewhat grudgingly, and immediately returned to his work in the Boulevard Raspail and his cards at the Dôme.

Then, being young and irresponsible, I lightheartedly coaxed him away from both, got him out to the country and a house over the Marne to write a play with me. One of the editorials I've mentioned spoke of this play, saying that it "glorified" a rustic American type, and this again

would have brought Wilson a brief grimness, for it was a reminder of the unforeseen and rather absurd pure accident that made our first play written together outrageously "box-office" and gave it a run of plethoric years.

A manager had asked for a play about Indiana to fit a "star" of his, and Wilson and I decided that an "Indiana type" would be theatrically effective if seen against an exotic background. Therefore we projected an untraveled young Kokomo lawyer of only local experience into Sorrento.



**Booth Tarkington**

Both Wilson and I had often delighted in the complaints and the innocent bragging of Americans who were abroad for the first time and looked upon the continent of Europe as uncomfortable and degenerate. We'd even collected expressions of strong feeling we'd heard uttered by some of these—bits of stalwart patriotism, which we put into the mouth of our Kokomo wanderer. Otherwise we made him as agreeable as we could and of course gave him a comedy-melodrama triumph in the end. Our feeling was that the audiences (if there came to be any) would laugh at him with us when he complained of Europe and bragged of America; but that they would indulgently forgive him his nonsense and like him in spite of it.

The American audiences, when the play was put before them, did nothing of the kind. When our young man announced from the stage that he wouldn't "trade our State Insane Asylum for the worst ruined ruin in Europe" they didn't laugh at him forgivingly, they applauded thunderously. In all such matters they felt as he did. Shocked play-reviewers who had been abroad heard this applause and thought that Wilson and I had slyly

planned to produce it; they announced that we had written "bunkum." Audiences promptly increased in numbers and in noise; and the two astounded playwrights, as innocent of the critics' charge against them as they were of inciting the audiences' one-hundred percent enthusiasm, were besought to write more plays.

We did—eight or nine, I think. Wilson, always workmanlike, took up with me the task of filling orders. For several years we were collaborating playwrights, and then, almost without forewarning, he faded away. "We'd written an honest little comedy that fell into the hands of a much beloved actress who knew what the public wanted. They wanted her, she said, just her, and what she did to our play—to make it her—became with every rehearsal just that much more upsetting. I think it was from Montreal, an evening or two before the Poughkeepsie try-out, that I received a telegram from Wilson, mentioning that he was on his way to Banff. I didn't see him again for nine years.

Then, after he'd written "Bunker Bean" and "Ruggles" and "Ma Pettengill," in California, he came to join me in Maine, to construct some more plays. He waited to see a few rehearsals of the first ill-fated little series we did then—and faded away again, this time permanently from my sight. He went back to California to write "Merton of the Movies" and to be vaguely astonished by its popular success and by what was paid him for the subsequent serials that he wrote. He gave most of it away.

In 1902 Wilson became a "best-seller" with "The Spenders," and, because he was really a writing man, he threw his best-sellerness away the next year with that penetrating and somewhat somber historical novel about the Mormons, "The Lions of the Lord." Then he wrote "The Boss of Little Arcady," a novel obviously by a man charmingly in love; and after that "Ewing's Lady." These books are out of print, of course, and may remain so. Probably they fall into the class of forgotten novels, a matter understandable since such masterpieces as "The Damnation of Theron Ware" and "The Grandissimes" are now forgotten novels. "Ma Pettengill," "Ruggles," and "Bunker Bean" aren't yet forgotten; it would be a pleasure to think that they won't be. Such books are harder to write than are tragedies; they need a rarer talent than do searchingly realistic explorations into toughness or profoundly formless aphrodisiacs for the adolescent minds of the physically adult. Wilson never dropped down into the easier kinds of writing.

Once he stopped, did almost no work

at all for more than a year; and during that time I hadn't even a letter from him. Then he wrote me:

I've been reading—reading some books I'd never read and rereading some I had. Hegel, Kant, Schopenhauer, Spinoza, Herbert Spencer, Tyndall, Huxley, Nietzsche; a dozen others. So now I know everything—the nature of matter, the law of life and the universe, all about what man is, whence he came, where he's to go, and why. It's a wonderful thing to know all this and to be sure that I'm now able to solve all questions.

He always ruggedly enjoyed his own discomfitures.

A few years ago his head was hurt in a motoring accident, and after that his memory began to fail him at times—times that were gradually more and more frequent. This was a calamity that he took in his own strides; no blow on the head or in the heart ever got a wince or a murmur out of him. He planned a novel—one that would say of this present world all that his life had given him to say of it—and, when he found the story to carry this burden, and made a synopsis, he sat down day after day to play solitaire and take his notes. At these he worked hard, pondering both deeply and eagerly, and some of them, now and then, he sent to me. I found them stirringly brilliant, noble in wisdom, and urged him to begin the manuscript. He couldn't, for now his memory grew



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#### **Charles Laughton as Ruggles of Red Gap**

so queer that he had to have somebody with him when he walked abroad, because by himself he couldn't find the way home. Still he worked, set down the cards as he dealt them, took notes and planned his book. He made notes, planned the book and worked upon his thought for it, the day that he died. He was a writing man.



# The Film as a Recording Machine

DOCUMENTARY FILM. By Paul Rotha. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. 1939. 320 pp. \$3.75.

Reviewed by IRIS BARRY

EVERY motion picture is, in one sense, a document for it inevitably contains imbedded within it various kinds of information about the individuals and the society which produced it. The fashions of its particular time are recorded in it, however unintentionally, as regards ideas and opinions as well as regards clothing and speech. This is true even of costume or historical pictures, for we find that a film such as the Sara Bernhardt "Queen Elizabeth" or the Garbo "Queen Christina" usually tells us more about the era in which these particular actresses flourished than about ancient times.

But in a more special sense, the motion picture has been used since its beginnings as a recording machine. Important events—war, coronations, disasters—and exotic landscapes have always been attractive to it. The newsreels date from 1910. Travel films have been popular since they were run in simulated railway coaches in 1903. And in this work of reportage, an important step was taken by Robert Flaherty when he attempted to set the life of an Eskimo on the screen in "Nanook" and, while doing so, to enrich and humanize it by interpreting and selecting the photographic mate-

rial so as to present a particular point of view or opinion about it. To many lovers of cinematography, "Nanook" was the first true documentary film in the stricter sense in which it has recently been used, and Flaherty's later "Moana" and "Man of Aran" stand out as masterpieces in this particular field.

Latterly another kind of documentary film has developed. These are, as a rule, sponsored films made in order to express an opinion, to create good-will, or to carry a message. Just as some large industrial concern puts a program of concerts on the air, so in England other industrial concerns have similarly sponsored films illuminating some facet of social life. More important perhaps, the English government itself has undertaken film production. The Post Office, notably, has issued quite a number of intelligently-conceived motion pictures calculated to bring home to the English taxpayer exactly what services are being performed for him by that department. Neither these nor the others sponsored by industry have been what are commonly known as advertising films: but they might come under the heading of public relations. Young men of particular enthusiasms have entered this field of production—musicians, writers, and others who feel that in the film lies a new medium for the expression of faiths and opinions.

Better known in this country, of course, are the admirable films—also government made—of Pare Lorentz, "The Plow That Broke the Plains" and "The River." These set before the citizen problems that face him and his elected representatives and, at the same time, suggest solutions. Even more recent are films like Joris Ivens's "Spanish Earth" and "The 500,000,000" which examine and definitely take sides in current conflicts. In another mood "The City" has lately looked into the vital question of slum-clearance and town-planning.

Mr. Rotha's book traces the whole development of this approach to the use of the motion picture as an educative, clarifying, persuasive, and propagandist medium. In this, the second edition, he has added much new information and defines the purpose of documentary film, as he understands it, as an attempt to "bring to life" certain essential factors and problems of modern experience. This explanation is usefully supplemented by a further definition, given in a lucid preface by John Grierson, who says that the documentary film is attempting to close the gap between the citizen and the community and that it is seeking new ways, as radio has also done, of educating public opinion in a democracy. All who are interested in education in its broader sense will find this book of very considerable interest, while those interested solely in the motion picture for its own sake will find it a mine of information. The appendix with its copious data on directors and on films is especially useful: the book is essential to any decent library.

There are those who will consider the whole topic of British documentary film one of relatively narrow interest, since few of the films are to be seen here and then only semi-privately. It is perhaps true that its practitioners take themselves a trifle seriously and that Mr. Rotha—who is one of the most noted of them—writes at moments with a pontifical and almost immodest finality. There are, after all, other possible opinions about much that he states. He has a tendency, I feel, to attempt to restrict the medium itself and to insist overmuch what is and what is not good documentary film or, even, documentary film at all. But this is a fault that arises from enthusiasm and from a particular vocation. His comments on the social aspects of the cinema alone, not to mention the admirable illustrations, the useful appendix, and much else of real merit in the book, much more than outweigh it.

Iris Barry is curator of the Film Library of the New York Museum of Modern Art.



Courtesy of Museum of Modern Art Film Library

Still of "Moana of the South Seas," by Robert Flaherty.