

## Wagner-et al.

THE METROPOLITAN OPERA GUIDE. By Mary Ellis Peltz and Robert Lawrence. New York: The Modern Library. 1939. 511 pp. \$1.25.

Reviewed by PAUL HENRY LANG

"THE new opera audience of America extends from coast to coast," begins the introduction to this volume, one of imposing proportions. It is true, indeed, that opera, formerly an exclusive monopoly of a small coterie, is now reaching all strata of American society through the radio.

It is doubtful whether one can find a genre of art the center of more ardent controversy than the opera. Although seemingly the result of an effort to imitate classical tragedy, opera is one of the most original creations of modern civilization. It is evident that a piece of poetry cannot be set to music without considering the particular problem involved in this relationship, for poetry has its laws and music follows its own rules. The problem is curiously transformed according to its country of origin. German musical genius likes to indulge in dreaming and in metaphysics, hence German lyric drama (with the exception of Italianate works) is not, properly speaking, opera, that is a harmonic union of text and music, the balance being upset in favor of introspection. French opera is, more than any other form of the theater, an expression of decorative art, and English opera has never gone beyond a modest start. It is only in Italy, birthplace of opera, that we see "the divine marriage of music and poetry accomplished in a harmonious way" (Roland), for the sensibility of the Italians is lively and simple enough to prevent the words from becoming abstractions.

It is the great tragedy of the modern lyric stage that it considered the operatic esthetics of Wagner as the only valid doctrine of music drama; but the musical world is awakening to the realization that there is perhaps more to opera than Wagnerian music drama, that music can create characters which are feasible in music



"Parsifal." (Illustrations in columns one and two from "The Metropolitan Opera Guide.")

only, and that such characterizations constitute its supreme task. When Mozart was accused of having distorted the characters in Beaumarchais' "Figaro," Stendhal came to the rescue with an observation that should be the motto of every book on opera. "One can say that Mozart distorted the play as much as it was possible, but he changed Beaumarchais' picture entirely; the essence is no longer in the situations, all the characters turned toward the tender and the passionate; what is merely indicated in the original is entirely developed in the music . . . 'Figaro' is a supreme blend of wit and melancholy. . . ."

It was hoped that a publication sponsored by the Metropolitan Opera Guild would endeavor to inculcate love and understanding for opera in a public avidly waiting for guidance, that it would point out to this public that Wagnerian music drama is not the alpha and omega but simply one segment of operatic history, that there is a wealth of incomparable masterpieces waiting to be performed, and that there would be an apology for the repertory of the Metropolitan Opera. Instead the authors have given us a pedestrian and amateurish com-



"Götterdämmerung"

pilation of opera plots (available in many others works with much more literary zest) with one-page introductions to whole centuries of music. Not a sensible word about opera and its own esthetics, not a sentence which would indicate a faint understanding of the soul-searching qualities of the lyric drama, nothing but prosaic marginal directions of stage movements and such elaborate and authentic historical data as the exact degree of membership of certain composers in the Legion of Honor, and the burying place of the original heroine of "La Traviata". Even the scant introductions to operatic periods are liberally sprinkled with inaccuracies, and if an appraisal or criticism is tendered, it usually takes the form of a comparison to Wagner, naturally to the detriment of the other composer. We are sorry that an excellent opportunity has been missed, but hope that the professional excellence that is required in Metropolitan opera productions will yet find an echo in the literary ventures of its supporting Guild.



Leo Walmsley

## Discovery of Life

LOVE IN THE SUN. By Leo Walmsley. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1940. 303 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by N. L. ROTHMAN

THERE may be something in a plain recital of the events in "Love in the Sun" that will explain the great charm it possesses, or the rare satisfaction it will provide its readers. A man and his wife arrive all but penniless upon one of the bleak stretches of the Cornish coast. They rent a flimsy shack set in some stony soil and make a home of it, building, digging, planting. With garden and boat they begin to wrest a hard living out of sea and land. Their life is strenuous; at the same time there is a natural and simple logic about it that breeds a deep contentment, for it is governed by an uncomplicated sequence of effort and reward, every labor bearing its fruit as well as every blunder its punishment. The man achieves enough of vision to look back upon all he has known and write of it when he can. A baby is born to them and they heighten their efforts to make a living for three.

With this the story itself is told, but there remains the superb treatment Mr. Walmsley has given it, a treatment that is arresting not because it is new (as some of the enraptured British reviews suggest), but because it is classic, good, and has been too long neglected. It is simply the old magic of calm understatement combined with solid, rich detail, and for a good early example of it we must skip back to, let us say, Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe"—others will come easily to mind. Such is the source of this book's curious charm, its nostalgic simplicity. The man speaks to us with an impersonal directness unparalleled in

the recent novel. There is no self-conscious, romanticized personality coloring his words, no emoting over critical moments. The life in the book is not his, it is that of the world he and his wife have lived with, the sea and cliffs and sun and weather and townsfolk, so baldly and perfectly set down that we are always forgetting the narrator, which is miracle enough for any first-person book.

So sure and winning is this quiet narrative that one may well rise from it with a gnawing doubt: is everything else, all the keen and complex artistry of this century's novels, an overstatement? It is very much like turning from an orgy of technicolor to one of the best in black and white. The question need not be argued or answered; Mr. Walmsley has demonstrated that the old artlessness proves to be good writing and makes a good novel today. More than that, it is the style best suited for echoing the clear and ringing note of affirmation which sounds throughout the book. In this day of negation we shall remember, as much as anything else, the Yorkshireman's hearty yea to life.

## That Next President

1940. By Jay Franklin. New York: The Viking Press. 1940. 319 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by JOSEPH HILTON SMYTH

POLITICAL prophecies are, at their literary best, items of dubious merit in a writer's portfolio of tricks. They have a lamentable habit of boomeranging, when least expected, to knock into a cocked hat the more solemn pretensions of their deliverers, as witness Mr. H. L. Mencken's learned pronouncement on the eve of the 1936 Presidential campaign that "a Chinaman could win against Roosevelt." To outline, however sketchily, the political scene of tomorrow as it will be played in these United States requires either sublime courage or an almost complete recklessness for the consequences of inaccuracy. Undoubtedly it was courage, and a firm conviction in his political faith, that prompted Jay Franklin to hazard his reputation as an acute commentator of current events, and for that he is to be admired. His predictions for

the year 1940, as well as his interpretation of the various trends in national affairs, are not quite so praiseworthy.

For Mr. Franklin, as readers of his newspaper column are aware, is neither objective nor non-partisan in his reportorial point of view. It is not so much that he is violently New Deal—for there is much that he finds to criticize in the workings of the Roosevelt administration—but rather that he is so definitely and violently anti-Republican. The prospect of Republican "Tories" once again entering into power in Washington fills him with a fear as deep and painful as would be Mr. Tom Girdler's at the thought of John L. Lewis sitting in the White House. It is Mr. Franklin's belief that in 1932 America was on the verge of a revolution, brought dangerously close to a head by Hoover's do-nothing policies, and that credit for frustrating this revolution belongs to the New Deal proposals of Roosevelt. Many of those proposals, however—again according to Jay Franklin—were not successfully carried out. Part of the blame rests with the factional disputes among New Dealers, part with sabotage by Republican opponents. Whatever the cause, the resultant loss of power by the Democratic Party was evidenced in the 1938 primaries. By the early part of 1939, it appeared that the Democrats would defeat themselves.

What, then, happened to change the political scene? It is Jay Franklin's contention that up to September, 1939, it would have been Roosevelt or ruin for the Democratic Party in 1940, that the President's personal popularity with the voters far exceeded party lines. With the outbreak of the European War the political picture changed overnight. To quote:

The New Deal-Tory "war," which had split the Democratic Party, disappeared in an atmosphere of reconciliation and friendliness. It had been a good war while it lasted but it was a dangerous luxury to indulge in time of crisis. Republican response was more cautious and more grudging, as the G.O.P. itself split wide open on the issue of neutrality, and Roosevelt approached the 1940 campaign with reasonable assurance that he could be painlessly renominated and re-elected or name his own successor. . . . When the test came, Roosevelt and Roosevelt's New Deal were revealed as the moral key to American survival. To few men has history given so magnificent an accolade, that in time of trouble his opponents turned to him for leadership. . . .

The book "1940" may find Republican readers, but few Republican admirers. The year 1940 is another matter.

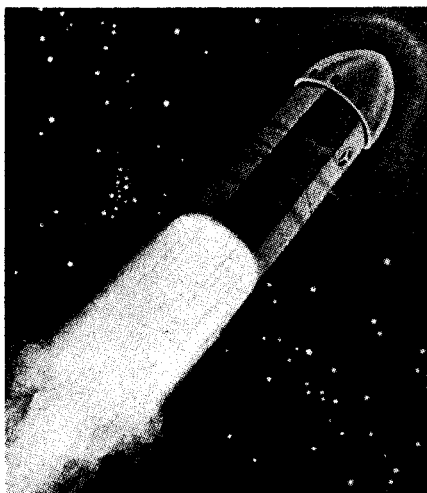
## Main Lines of Science

SCIENCE MARCHES ON. By Walter Shepherd. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co. 1939. 420 pp., with index. \$3.

Reviewed by GEORGE R. HARRISON

THIS book represents a unified view of certain scientific developments which have popular appeal. Instead of carrying each branch of science through from its beginnings to the present day, the author ignores arbitrary boundaries between the sciences as much as possible, and presents a group of parallel histories. Each chapter deals with some particular phase of scientific development, such as "The Idea of Evolution," "The Conquest of Material," or "The Conquest of Force," from the earliest times to the present. The subject-matter is taken from astronomy, biology, chemistry, geology, mathematics, medicine, and physics, and is ideally chosen to awaken interest in science, or to answer the "how" and "why" questions of adolescents or adults.

"Science Marches On" is well-written and appears to be, in the main, authoritative, though the discussion of television was obviously written by an Englishman, and some of the other material on physics is a trifle outdated. Minor limitations of this sort are to be expected, however, in a book covering such a wide range of subject-matter. There is a great wealth of excellent illustration, though it is



An artist's conception of newest kind of "space rocket" in flight.

perhaps not captious to point out that the "modern type of X-ray tube" shown is of the vintage of 1910, while the picture labeled "thermocouple" turns out to be a radiomicrometer. The thirty-odd plates are excellently chosen and reproduced, though unfortunately many of them had to be placed far from the matter they were designed to illustrate.

The author appears to have carried out his appointed task very successfully, and has brought to the various subjects discussed a freshness and interest which are often missing in more formal presentations.