



"Jap-killer," from the drawing by Major Donald L. Dickson, of the U. S. Marine Corps.

The Biography of Nobody

AL SCHMID MARINE. By Roger Butterfield. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 1944. 142 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by FLETCHER PRATT

MR. BUTTERFIELD has attempted one of the most difficult feats in all literature—the biography of nobody; rarely attempted except in fiction and still more rarely successful even with that assistance. Al Schmid was a marine who fought heroically (he himself spits at the sound of the last word) at the battle of the Tenaru, was almost completely blinded, and received a Navy Cross. But since then there have been Attu and Kwajalein and Tarawa, with many others still to come, so that his personal part in the war will look very small by the time the lights go on again. Very small; for after all he was in action and shooting at the enemy for only a part of one night before he was hauled out by the heels.

Since then he has done nothing but marry the girl he was going to marry when the news of Pearl Harbor came over the radio. Before that he did nothing but the aimless floating from job to job of the average young American brought up at the fringe of city and country who finds school too much trouble after he has turned fifteen. It is unlikely that he will trouble history further. Only in fiction could one reasonably ask that the curtain be lifted on the outcome of that marriage.

He is, in fact, the typical case of the boy who went to war because there was a war, the young American who was fighting on Guadalcanal for blueberry pie. If his story has any importance it is because his case is typical. Mr. Butterfield has done his best to present us with all the evidence for making our own estimates in this typical case and it is a fairly good best. It is also a brief best; we could have done with a little more about Al Schmid's early days, the kind of home he lived in, and the wallpaper.

One also has the sense that the narrative has been cleaned up a good deal. But this is probably due to the fact that the biographer has no source but the subject himself for all these early passages. When the more difficult spot is reached where it is necessary to consider Al Schmid's relations with his Ruth (whose letters he returned because he did not wish her to be tied to a man 95 per cent blind) the narrative becomes considerably more adult and by this token more interesting.

In fact, this is the center of the really important part of the book, with its suggestion that the most current discussion of post-war problems is being conducted in a vacuum, since the greatest of all the post-war problems is the reintegration into society of men who have radically changed since leaving it. Al Schmid has achieved his reintegration—for the time being. But will they all?

Political Rings

THE BIG BOSSES. By Charles Van Devander. New York: Howell, Soskin & Co. 1944. 318 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by W. S. LINES

MR. VAN DEVANDER is a trained political reporter, now the head of the *New York Post* Washington Bureau. He is therefore in an excellent position from which to survey the major political rings that have been characteristic features of the American scene since long before Lord Bryce expressed his horror of our local government or Thomas Nast belabored Boss Tweed. While he of necessity delves into the histories of bosses of the recent past—Huey Long, Pendergast, Platt—for the most part his "heroes" are very much alive and kicking. Some, like the men of Tammany, are having their troubles partly through incompetent leadership, partly through failure to adjust to social and political change. Others, like Jaecle, Sprague, and Dewey of the New York State Republican machine, are proving themselves worthy successors of the late Thomas C. Platt. All of them betray a common pattern of desire for power, unusual talent, and rather loose interpretation of the idea that a public office is a public trust.

Mr. Van Devander has an eye for the color and flavor of his subjects, but primarily he is interested in the dynamics of local politics in America. With most of the men and machines described by him, the average American reader of newspapers and news magazines will have some acquaintance. He probably lacks, however, the portrait in the round which he can find in these brief but searching essays on the more important municipal and state rings in America. He will obtain also a reasonable explanation of the apparent paradox to be found in the mutual dependence of some of these machines and a national administration dedicated to the highest principles of liberalism and democracy. He will be given the story of incidents like the Aurelio case and *The Daily Worker's* endorsement of Hague. But he will not get any attempt to answer the problem posed by Lincoln Steffens, to discover and deal "with the cause of the source of the pressure to buy and corrupt"; nor will he be given the sense of the sinister which Sinclair Lewis gave us with Buzz Windrip or Dos Passos with "Number One."

+ HELP THE RED CROSS +

The All-American Hero

Davy Crockett Was a Cut from the Whole Cloth

IRWIN SHAPIRO

AROUND the end of the eighteenth century a question began to trouble the minds of Americans: What is an American? Voiced sometimes plaintively, sometimes cynically, sometimes boldly, like a challenge, it grew increasingly insistent as successive waves of immigration added new elements to our national make-up. It haunts our literature, lurking between the lines when not openly expressed, and perhaps more than anything else gives our writing its distinctive flavor. Lately, in book after book on various aspects of America, the question has evolved into an almost passionate search for identity.

The search takes the form, for the most part, of a reexamination of our past, and here the writers of today have an advantage over their predecessors. They have a little more past to work with. And having experienced a boom, a bust, a New Deal, and a Pearl Harbor, having survived a period of debunking and a period of depression, they have had a chance to test and evaluate their beliefs.

It was during the depression that the need to define our national character led us to a serious consideration of our folklore. At the risk of sending the Dies Committee into another spasm, we must credit the left wing and the WPA with having furnished much of the impetus in this direction. Not that any one group possessed exclusive rights to our folk heritage. Take the case of "Ballad for Americans," a work in the folk tradition. Written for a Federal Theatre production by a composer and a lyricist at that time associated with the left, sung on the radio by Paul Robeson, it wound up on the program of the Republican National Convention and was recorded by Bing Crosby. Benét's "The Devil and Daniel Webster," on the other hand, was first published in *The Saturday Evening Post* and was made into an opera and a Hollywood movie. The revival of balladry spread from union halls to night clubs. As for the WPA, the Federal Writers' Project alone put hundreds of writers to recording tall tales, folk customs, and regional history.

Benét himself summed up the general feeling when he said, "It has always seemed to me that legends and yarns and folk tales are as much a part of the real history of a country as proclamations and provisos and con-

stitutional amendments. The legends and yarns get down to the roots of the people—they tell a good deal about what people admire and want, about what sort of people they are. You can explain it in terms of Rip Van Winkle and Paul Bunyan, of Casey Jones and Davy Crockett—not the Crockett whose actual exploits are in the history books, but the Crockett who was a legend during his own lifetime—the frontiersman on his hind legs. And once you start digging into the latter sort of material you get more and more fascinated."

And yet, despite books like Vincent McHughes's "Caleb Catlum's America," Jeremiah Digges's "Bowleg Bill," Roark Bradford's "John Henry," Franklin J. Meine's and Walter Blair's "Mike Fink," it seems to me that all this activity failed in one respect. It produced no single folk hero who could capture the public fancy and become a symbol of what we mean by an American. In fact, aside from Paul Bunyan and John Henry, even the names of our folk heroes are unfamiliar to most of us.

We have Lincoln, of course, and there is no need here to discuss the significance of the Lincoln myth nor to belabor the point that he is a folk hero as well as an historical figure. But the mood surrounding Lincoln is that of reverence and humility; he stands too tall; he is what we aspire toward. This is right and should be so. The trouble is that we lack a companion figure to represent us as we are, an everyday sort of fellow, more legendary, more in the comic vein, in whom we can laugh at our quirks and foibles.

Which of our folk heroes can fill



—Illustration by James Daugherty, from "Yankee Thunder."

the bill? Paul Bunyan, the mighty logger? John Henry, the natural man? Old Stormalong, the great seaman? Pecos Bill, the peerless cowboy? Mike Fink, Casey Jones, Steamboat Bill, Joe Magarac, Big Mose? They are all too special. Andy Jackson, Daniel Boone? Almost, but not quite.

No, there is only one candidate with a real claim to the position. He is Davy Crockett, the yaller blossom of the forest, half horse, half alligator, with a little touch of snapping turtle—the same Davy Crockett mentioned by Benét.

I AM not the first to extol the wonderful Davy. The affection felt for him by Constance Rourke shines through her "American Humor" and led her to write the biography of the actual man; Parrington devotes a section to him in "Main Currents of American Thought"; he has been discussed by Walter Blair, Howard Mumford Jones, and Richard M. Dorson. Further, there was a time when Davy was acclaimed by every inhabitant of the United States.

The rise of the Crockett legend is in itself typically American, being partly the result of a mud-slinging political campaign. The flesh-and-blood Crockett had won some local fame as a hunter and frontiersman in his native Tennessee, and as an Indian fighter under Jackson, but not until his election to Congress did he become a figure of national importance. Even then he might not have achieved a wide reputation, for the record of his first years in Congress is undistinguished. But when he withdrew his allegiance from President Jackson and became a violent anti-Jacksonite, he was built up by the astute Whig politicians as the very arch-type of frontiersmen. To counteract the anonymous "Sketches and Eccentricities of Col. David Crockett," he allowed to be issued under his name "A Narrative of the Life of David Crockett, of the State of Tennessee"; "An Account of Col. Crockett's Tour to the North and Down East"; and "The Life of Martin van Buren." How much of a hand Davy had in them is still in doubt, but there is no doubt that the "Narrative" faithfully mirrors Davy as he thought himself to be, nor that he cheerfully lent himself to the making of a myth. An irrepressible exponent of frontier wit and waggery, he found the role a congenial one and he played it for all he was worth. According to Parrington, the myth was almost entirely the creation of shrewd politicians, but this would deny the place of the Crockett almanacs.

The almanacs first appeared around 1835, after Davy's heroic death at the Alamo. They were small, badly printed