

to legalize prohibition. And there are more facets to the contacts between the Canadians and *Les Canadiens* than Mr. MacLennan has depicted, and more kinds of Canadians and *Canadiens*. However, there is nothing quite so stupid in a book review, nor more infuriating to an author, than to complain because it isn't a different book. "Two Solitudes" tells a first-rate story in an accomplished and adult manner and, perhaps more importantly at the present time, presents a sincere and unprejudiced picture of Canada's great internal conflict.

## The Faces of English Soldiers

*FACES IN A DUSTY PICTURE.* By Gerald Kersh. New York: Whittlesey House. 1945. 162 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by ROBERT PICK

MANY years after the battle of Valmy Goethe in his "Campaign in France" gave a brief account of what he had done and seen on that fateful day. Although the local limitations of an eighteenth century battlefield had offered him as fine an overall view as any war correspondent can ask for, Goethe's presentation was surprisingly unmilitary; its detachment and the author's own calm preoccupation with civilian affairs have puzzled readers ever since. Somewhat later Stendhal wrote his famous piece of, or rather out of, the battle of Waterloo. He broke up the battlefield panorama into a number of highly individual "shots," and succeeded superbly in re-enacting the controversial feelings of modern men engaged in man's most horrid, though most ancient, business. Tolstoy went back to the Homeric pattern of war fiction—his fighting men are primarily a part of the fighting country; only today and in witnessing Russia's total war effort do we fully understand "War and Peace." But in Western writing, the nineteenth century has produced appallingly little which can match Stendhal's trail-blazing piece—a few pages by Kipling, or a few paragraphs in some of Maupassant's stories set against the backwash scene of the Franco-Prussian War. The poor literary crop of the last war is a matter of record. Practically nothing is likely to survive except the still unfinished work of the great Polish novelist Joseph Wittlin and, perhaps, as a war book of sorts, Remarque's anti-war novel.

The foregoing brief survey of modern battle fiction is intended to make readers feel more grateful than they generally seem to be toward the new generation of soldier novelists. Following on the heels of Harry Brown's "A Walk in the Sun," Mr. Kersh's little book

For my own part, I am sorry the story does not continue further so that we might get a glimpse of the village of Saint Marcs in the present war. I would like to know what is happening among the Catholic Federation of workers, the Trades and Labor Council, the C.I.O. and C.C.F. I would like to know what has happened to Drummond's genial Habitant, Jean B'tiste, since he became something very different: the French Canadian worker. It is in that change that the developing drama of Quebec now seems to lie.

should make us aware that, in this most difficult field of all, contemporary writing need not blush in the company of the classics. In fact, both these young authors have gone a step farther in painting credible portrayals of modern fighting man. They have both had the courage to introduce Fear as an essential element of man in battle. It is significant of the futility of such national labels as "the traditional English trend towards understatement" that the Englishman Kersh is even bolder and more brutal on that score than his American confrère:

All night long he will ask himself: "Of what am I afraid? Death? . . . No! Pain? . . . No!" Pryde dreads these shadowy soliloquies; they end where they began, and start all over again: "Of what am I afraid?"

The answer is: Nothing. Simply that he is afraid: Fear is his Familiar—it always is with him, half a pace behind him, playing with him, clawing his hair on end. All his life, Pryde has been on the run, glancing back over his shoulder. And he knows that now Fear is running shoulder-to-shoulder with him . . . and that

very soon Fear will glide ahead of him and at a certain moment turn and show him its blank, stupefying face . . . And then . . .

Yes: he is desperately afraid—of Fear.

Directness and boldness have been characteristics of Mr. Kersh's writings from the very start. His has been a highly unusual career by English standards; he has at times been a baker, a night-club bouncer, and a professional wrestler. His productiveness as an author, playwright, and movie writer has been amazing. He joined the Coldstream Guard long before war broke out, and has gallantly fought in the North African campaign.

North Africa is the scene of his present book. And as in Harry Brown's novel, it is an isolated action of a small unit which makes for all there is of a story. This time it is an "impossible" task, a forced march of a Royal Archers' column across the desert and the attack of an enemy outpost—an enterprise against overwhelming odds, ordered to a hopelessly undermanned and underarmed group within the "hopeless little army" of that early stage of the Libyan war.

That march and what goes on before it, rather than the final skirmish, form the core of Mr. Kersh's novel. Flies and unbearable heat, thirst, and strafing Nazi planes produce a misery common to all. Some remain by the wayside. Those who survive overcome their plight each in his own way. One of the men has seen God Himself. Another—he has become a lord on the eve of the march—escapes into half-hearted cynicism. Others talk of their homes, their gardens, their wives, while still others merely chatter about girls they have met or, more plainly, of tarts they have slept with. And out of these casual talks Mr. Kersh builds up the faces of these English boys who, "short rather than tall," are "accustomed to living on an average of thirty-two shillings a week." They don't do much thinking on why they are in the dusty desert. Yet out of that dust and out of the haze of their feelings rises a new self-respect and, in spite of their being "sick with fear," a new strength.

Mr. Kersh has a peculiar liking for picturesque metaphors—which sometimes (as when talking of a couple of missing men who "have slipped out of the column like a handkerchief from a sleeve") adds color to his style, but at some other times leads him perilously close to ornate mannerisms. Perhaps in this present instance he wants to counterbalance the wealth of overcolloquialisms in the dialogue by that faintly precious touch in his narrative. Be that as it may, his novel belongs to the very best of its genre. No one interested in the art and the power of fiction can afford to miss it.



Gerald Kersh

# Americana on the Half Shell

I AM GAZING INTO MY 8-BALL. By Earl Wilson. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1945. 283 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by ABEL GREEN

EDITOR'S NOTE: Abel Green, editor of *Variety*, famed journal of the entertainment world, herewith presents a review in authentic *Variety*-esque.

IF this review of Earl Wilson's "I Am Gazing Into My 8-Ball" is too gusty for the staid *Saturday Review* (to corn a cliché) don't forget that our brassy Boswell of the brasseries and brassieres is no Elsie Dinsmore. Wilson's prime pursuit is that of the *N. Y. Post's* Saloon Editor. (He treats exclusively with the Booze Who, as he puts it.)

In this anthology of the lustier, gustier, bustier things, which Wilson has ground out occupationally for the *N. Y. Post* and his syndicate, his book is 1945 Americana on the half shell. If posterity ever cares to look back to a relatively new wartime brand of American journalism it will note that Wilson, for non-pro consumption, does what *Variety* muggs, addressing what we like to think is a pretty hep bunch of showbiz readers, never dare to do. As the so-called "Bible of the Show Business," we restrict ourselves to "prostie," if it's absolutely necessary to describe a disciple of "Mrs. Warren's Profession" as part of the plot. An effeminate emcee might be referred to by a *Variety* mugg as having "soprano hips." A low comedian does a prattfall, a burley stripper tosses her torso, biz boffs in Buff . . . but Wilson is a feller like this—he comes right out with it.

Reportorially accurate is his observation that "stinks," as part of a strike story assignment, was daring eight years ago, but we all know now which flatties wear falsies; what leg pads mean; which of the saloonatics patronizes establishments which advertise "we fix flats," etc.

In his screwball parking lot of characters you run into ex-prizefighters like Mister Packey O'Gatty, masseur to Miss Billie Boze, and assorted ex-Mrs. Tommy Manvilles who wear only towels when they're masseused—i. e., the beauts not the pugs. (Which reminds me of the chorus girl who introduces herself to her new dressing roommate, "I'm Mrs. Tommy Manville, aren't you?").

And so, to continue, Wilson's bar-room parlance of today may yet become the parlor conversation of tomorrow—if it's not that way already. Frank measurements of busts (Carole Landis, Grace Moore, Lana Turner, 'Annie-Pie' Sheridan, Choo Choo Johnson, Lenore Lemmon) and "educated"

derrières, a la Diosa Costello of the Latin-American niteries; discourses on whether Tallulah Bankhead wears panties; Jules Brulatour's untoward prattfall in a conga-type bistro; rhinestone dancers who wear their jeweled adornments while on cafe floor navel maneuvers; Elinor Troy's naivete which pays off like Dun & Bradstreet; why Boyer doesn't wear his toupee; vicarious "interviews" with the Duke and Duchess, Garbo, *et al.*, are all part of Wilson's passing show. (Why Boyer doesn't wear his toupee in public may have included a footnote why Jessel has several version of the "rug," with more or less hirsute adornment. We can't refrain from punctuating our fave about putting salt on the false thatch to make it look like dandruff.)



Wilson is a skilled craftsman and his style is amusing and sometimes biting, although, in the main, kindly because the characters require little accentuation of their negative aspects. In this respect Wilson differs from H. Allen Smith's more devastating commentaries on contemporaneous fads and foibles. Smith, Mel Heimer, and Maurice Zolotow are of one pattern. Wilson is more factual, too, as in his reportage of phonetics, whether it is Wallis Windsor's British drawl, the Schnozzle's Greenpernt accent or Gregory Ratoff's "Rawshun" brogue.

Never wishing to wax wise at his victim's expense, it seems that his subjects foil for Wilson in as surefire a manner as does Frank Fay's mythical lapine. Thus, playing perfectly straight for his comedic typewriter are Tallulah Bankhead who took the pledge for the duration, stating that above all she misses her mint juleps ("I'm Southern, you know!"), but from there she tells all, whether or not she wore panties while filming "Lifeboat" for 20th Century-Fox. The chapter anent the insulting bonifaces (the customer's always wrong) embraces Mike Romanoff, Toots Shor, and (the late) Jack

White. It virtually writes itself. Only lacking is our favorite wheeze about the customer at 21 who asked for the \$2 dinner and the waiter inquired, "Yes, sir, how do you like it, sir—on white or rye?"

The Kellogg's Cafeteria cast of corny characters vie only with the Metropera claque king; Harry Richman's passionate worshiper-from-sufficiently-not-afar; Queenie Markowitz of The Bronx, and, of course, the omnipotent Broadway Rose who gets into everybody's hair.

Among newspapermen, on and off the so-called Broadway beat, Earl Wilson enjoys a double affection because he's a reporter who is expert at his craft, and entertaining always because he's different. That about answers his compendium of screwballiana, as assembled in "I Am Gazing Into My 8-Ball," so far as the reader will be concerned.

In the gemuetlich pre-war era, the popular European conception of America was a cross between Chicago gangsters and cowboys-and-Indians, as witness those bizarre bistros of a happier day, to wit, the Club Arizona in Budapest and the Wild West Room of the Haus Vaterland in pre-Hitlerian Berlin. It's comparable to the road company Apaches on the rue de Lappe, attired in Fanchon & Marco accoutrements to fit the "Mon Homme" mood music for benefit of Yank tourists. But whatever the phoneyess of the popular American conceptions of old Gallic customs and French postcards, nobody got bored. Hence nobody got mad.

Wilson, in reverse, reads like an American postcard. As such, he's diverting enough in a world where every diversion is to be welcomed. But a major thought intrudes. His "8-Ball" is certainly not for crystal-gazing by impressionable fourteen-year-olds. We hate to think of what a Campfire Girl might think about after she digests how Elinor Troy flies, Pegasus-like, on specially chartered planes from coast-to-coast just to be with Tommy Manville . . . but then, Elinor is also good to her mother. It says here.

## SOLUTION OF LAST WEEK'S DOUBLE-CROSTIC (No. 571)

C. MABEE:

THE AMERICAN LEONARDO\*

(THE LIFE OF SAMUEL F. B. MORSE)

In large part this is Morse's book, the record of how he felt when he ran for Mayor of New York, . . . met rival telegraphers, passed slave girls in the Charleston Battery, painted President Monroe . . . or received the bows of Napoleon Third.

\*Pulitzer Prize, 1944.