

papers in Dublin. One of the most revealing of these is a letter of explanation Yeats wrote to Robert Gregory, Lady Gregory's son. In it he explains how again and again he had been prevented from doing the natural, instinctive, and right thing by the reason he substituted for impulse in his personal life. If you would understand how his friend AE could cry out, "If only he would be natural!" if you would appreciate Mr. Ellmann's difficulties in shadowing so artful a dodger, read that letter. Surely Yeats had more than his share of what someone has called "the crookedness of the Gaelic mind."

It is typical of Yeats that he wrote the letter (more to put himself right with himself than with the Gregorys), that he probably did not send it, that he omitted it from his published autobiography, that he preserved it among his papers to be read and used by others after his death.

Surely this new life of Yeats is the most revealing and exciting yet to be written. Naturally, some of it is bound to stir controversy and argument. I wish for time, for instance, to go over Mr. Ellmann's interpretation of "Oisín," his explanation of the meaning behind the symbolism of "The Herne's Egg," his judgment of "Purgatory." Also by elaborating and documenting what everyone has long known—that no critic can accept at its face value anything Yeats has written of himself for publication—Mr. Ellmann casts doubt on the trustworthiness of the Yeats manuscript books and diaries on which Mr. Ellmann has in part based his study. These, too, may well be full of red herrings. Selection can be reticence, and there are reticences here to balance the revelations of new documents. But Mr. Ellmann's essential thesis that Yeats was an essentially shy man whose whole life was an attempt to cure himself of that shyness, to learn to act like other men, seems to me hard to deny. Seen thus from the inside, Yeats's life takes on both pathos and dignity, his development from a poet who fled life with Oisín into one who grasped reality greatly becomes a moral as well as an artistic achievement.

Every student of Yeats knows of the poet's professed hatred of rhetoric. When Ellmann warns us not to be deceived by this profession and points to the poet's magnificent use of the rhetorical question, one picks up the hint and runs with it to the realization that Yeats's poetry is Irish oratory at its greatest. It is personality speaking, personality in action, a glorious voice with which the reader, like a spectator at a play, identifies himself, echoing the master-

ful mouth when it recites "Out of the murderous innocence of the sea" or speaks of "The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor."

A young man from Michigan, who graduated from Yale the year Yeats died and now teaches at Harvard, has dispelled much of the mist and haze that hovered around both Yeats the

man and his work. From now on no one can study Yeats without studying Ellmann on Yeats.

Horace Reynolds, who has written many articles on various aspects of Yeats's work, unearthed and edited for the Harvard University Press Yeats's "Letters to the New Island."

Creators of "Walden" & "Tristram"

HENRY DAVID THOREAU. By Joseph Wood Krutch. New York: William Sloane Assocs. 1948. 298 + xiii pp. \$3.50.

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON. By Emery Neff. New York: William Sloane Assocs. 1948. 286 + xviii pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by MILTON CRANE

WILLIAM SLOANE'S American Men of Letters Series has been inaugurated most auspiciously by the publication of Joseph Wood Krutch's "Thoreau" and Emery Neff's "Edwin Arlington Robinson." These first volumes, as well as the works announced to be in progress, give promise of a series of considered evaluations by gifted critics. And it is clear that these studies will not suffer from the narrow academicism that has marred earlier series of this order, especially in England.

Joseph Wood Krutch's "Thoreau" is a superlative example of richly informative biography and balanced assessment effortlessly combined in a single book. The figure of Thoreau is one to daunt the most audacious scholar and critic, but it is difficult to imagine a better or more comprehensive treatment of Thoreau's life and writings than the one Mr. Krutch has given us. For Mr. Krutch is neither an idolater nor an iconoclast; he propounds no thesis which his examination of Thoreau is designed to support. His book is an eminently sane and delightful marshaling of those facts which alone can permit us to arrive at our own conclusions about the author of "Walden," the man whose essay on "Civil Disobedience" became a crucial element in Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy and policy, the man who denied the value of the developing American civilization and who has nevertheless remained what may be called the conscience of America.

Mr. Krutch makes much of the warring elements in Thoreau; he is unsparing in his revelations of Thoreau's inconsistencies, of his illogical thinking and behavior. Some

readers may even find the book unsympathetic to its subject. But Mr. Krutch is throughout scrupulously fair, at whatever cost in sentimentality. The lack may be supplied by the pilgrims to Walden Pond, who hallow Thoreau's memory by eating picnic lunches. For Mr. Krutch, Thoreau was no "nature-lover" in the common sense, and he must be clearly distinguished from those writers who turn physical nature into facile, elegant sentences or who shudder deliciously before "Nature red in tooth and claw." Nature was nevertheless capable of shocking him, and he once scolded her for putting herself "on the level with those who draw in privies." In Thoreau the Puritan and the pantheist maintained an extremely curious and sometimes precarious balance.

The final chapter is a brief but admirable discussion of Thoreau's style (or styles, to follow Mr. Krutch) and offers a brilliant, unpedantic analysis of those qualities in excellent prose that most stubbornly defy analysis. In this, as everywhere in his book, Mr. Krutch writes with a wit and finish that have made his work an ornament of contemporary American criticism.

Mr. Neff brings to his critical biography of Robinson a profound and sensitive understanding of one of America's most extraordinary poets. It was at once Robinson's misfortune and his glory to have come to maturity in a barren era for poetry: the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth. His generation produced, in Robert Frost, only one other poet of the first rank who continued to practise his art.

Robinson's story is one of passionate artistic devotion that bordered on the suicidal. Virtually self-trained, apart from his two memorable years at Harvard, he began almost without warning and without volition to write poetry of hard brilliance and deceptive simplicity—and paid for his devotion with a life of poverty, relieved by occasional gifts from patrons and interrupted by exhausting labor at

jobs unsuited to him. The discovery of Robinson by President Theodore Roosevelt is too well known to bear retelling; and one can only wonder how far T. R.'s pleasure in "The Children of the Night" goes to refute the preposterous legend of Robinson's "obscurity," a theme which constantly recurred in early (and later) reviews of Robinson's poetry. The job in the New York Customs House, to which the appreciative President named the poet, must have convinced Robinson that he stood in direct line of descent from Chaucer.

Even more depressing than Robinson's attempts to earn a living from the world on its own terms were his efforts to write such literature as might bring him a little money. Again and again he reported in letters that he was working on short fiction; poetry was unsalable, unless one had the brainless optimism and easy jingles of a James Whitcomb Riley, but prose might find a market in the great popular magazines. Robinson's didn't.

And, abruptly, America became aware that Robinson was her most distinguished living poet. He had, nevertheless, to wait several years before he was able to support himself without the aid of his loyal friends; but at last he became moderately prosperous and even saw his "Tristram" distributed by the Literary Guild. Strange are the ways of poetry in America.

Mr. Neff has achieved rare success in blending three distinct elements in his book: a biography of Robinson, a critical account of Robinson's poetry and thought, and a literary history of the reception of Robinson's work, both here and abroad. (The last is a sometimes appalling chapter in the history of our national taste.) Any one of the three, presented in Mr. Neff's evocative and admirably lucid prose and informed by his personal friendship with the poet, would mark out this book as exceptional; the combination of the three makes a book which is equally profound in its scholarship and in its sympathy with the subject, equally sensitive in discerning the unique qualities of a difficult personality and in appreciating the universal implications of a single man's life and career. The analysis of "The Man Against the Sky" shows Mr. Neff at his best as a critic of poetry, unobtrusively calling the reader's attention to crucial passages of the text and proposing analogues and sources without ever falling into that simpleminded theory of literary influence that makes the pedantic critic of poetry a bull in a china shop. Mr. Neff's penetrating and illuminating book is a study such as Robinson deserves.

NOVEMBER 13, 1948

Personal History.

"The irrepressible man," as Morris Ernst has described himself, has written another instalment of his autobiography in "So Far So Good," reviewed this week. It follows after "The Best Is Yet," published in 1945. . . . The personality and career of Morris Ernst, the fighting liberal, remind one of another "irrepressible man" of the same stamp, Fiorello La Guardia, whose fragment of autobiography, "The Making of an Insurgent," was published last May not long after his untimely death. La Guardia's memoirs form a striking contrast to a fragment of autobiography written by a rather different son of Italy, Benito Mussolini, reviewed on the next page. The bombastic "Fate of Mussolini," ably edited by Max Ascoli, adds a third apologia for the Fascist state to Admiral Maugerie's "From the Ashes of Disgrace" and Marshall Badoglio's recent "Italy in the Second World War."

Multiple-Cause Crusader

SO FAR SO GOOD. By Morris Ernst.
New York: Harper & Bros. 1948.
271 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by EDUARD C. LINDEMAN

ALTHOUGH Morris Ernst is still a comparatively young man he has become something of a legendary figure in American life. His devotion to civil liberties is nationally known. It often happens, as it did in far-off Washington state this past winter, that the town's leading liberal lawyer will turn to me at lunch and say: "Listen, what kind of a guy is Morris Ernst?" Henceforth, I shall have a ready answer; I can say: "Read 'So Far So Good,' for in this autobiographical volume he has made a valiant attempt to reveal himself."

It will be necessary to emphasize the word "attempt," because there remains still a quixotic strain in this volatile personality. His motivations

are not entirely clear, nor is this to be expected since none of us can speak with complete assurance in this realm. Perhaps I can make my meaning clearer if I give a synoptic account of his conception of himself. He says of himself that he is a multiple-cause crusader, and if one wishes to find the key which explains the diverse causes for which he fights the search begins and ends with civil liberties. He insists that he writes books not with any literary pretensions, but merely as a form of self-expression. He believes what he believes with convictions so strong that he cannot refrain from striving to persuade others to believe as he does. His likes and dislikes, inclusive of people, are sharp, decisive, and of the either-or variety. He enjoys association with important people but he is not overawed by their greatness. For example, his veneration for his friend Franklin Roosevelt does not restrain him from calling the late President "a gay chatter box." He develops an uncomfortable itch whenever he finds himself moving toward the majority. His most profound enjoyments are derived from espousing unpopular causes. His deepest suspicions are aroused by persons or groups seeking ends by means of secretive methods.

In short, there is a type of defiance in his portrait of himself. "More errors," he asserts, "arise from inhibited indecision than from impulsive behavior," and in this connection he echoes Ralph Waldo Emerson, who also believed that an erroneous vitality is to be preferred to a deadly accuracy. This thesis, which has played an important role in American social action, was also stated by Emerson's contemporary Horace Mann, who put it thus: ". . . false conclusions which have been reasoned out are infinitely worse than blind impulse." This puts Morris Ernst in good company, but it



Morris Ernst: "More errors arise from inhibited indecision than from impulsive behavior."