

# The Journal of the Confederacy

A DIARY FROM DIXIE. By Mary Boykin Chesnut. Edited by Ben Ames Williams. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 572 pp. \$5.

By ALFRED HOYT BILL

February 15th, 1861. . . . On the train, just before we reached Fernandina, a woman called out: "That settles the hash!" Tanny touched me on the shoulder and said: "Lincoln's elected." "How do you know?" "The man over there has a telegram." Someone cried: "Now that the black radical Republicans have the power I suppose they will brown us all." . . . I have always kept a journal . . . but from today forward I will write more.

**S**O BEGINS Mary Boykin Chesnut's revealing and fascinating record of life in the Southern Confederacy; and she was as good as her word, writing in fifty journals a total of nearly 400,000 words, down to the last passionate line amid the ruin that the Federal soldiers had made of her home at Camden, S. C., four and a half terrible years later:

What is the matter? Enough! I will write no more.

Born a Boykin of South Carolina, she was married at seventeen to James Chesnut, Jr., son of a father reputed to be the owner of a thousand slaves, United States Senator from South Carolina from 1859 until shortly before the outbreak of the war, colonel and aide-de-camp to President Davis, and later a general in the Confederate Army. Generous, courageous, witty, wise, and critical in the best sense of the word, she was not only the personification of all that was best in the South of her time but, in her thinking, far ahead of most of her contemporaries, men or women, in the North or the South. And all of her best she put into her diary, for she wrote without fear or favor.

Of the earlier version of her journal—some 150,000 words, published in 1904—an elderly Southern gentleman of the old school remarked to me many years ago that it was well that it had been pruned so judiciously or about half the gentlemen of the South would have been staring at each other over the sights of dueling

pistols. There were, indeed, hints of prudent suppressions. But now that her work appears very nearly in its entirety, admirably edited by Ben Ames Williams, it proves to be no chronicle of scandal. What the diarist saw, and saw so clearly, she put down without malice and generally, consciously or unconsciously, because the happening contributed to her picture of her time. About herself she was equally unsparing:

Mrs. Chesnut [her mother-in-law] was bragging to me one day—to me a childless wretch—of her twenty-seven grandchildren. . . . What of me! God help me, no good have I done . . . with the power I boast of so, the power to make myself loved.

Of what was suppressed in the earlier book her feminism and her hatred of slavery are most striking in the new volume. Like Robert E. Lee, she saw slavery as a greater curse to the white man than to the black:

I wonder if it be a sin to think slavery a curse to any land. . . . Like the patriarchs of old, our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines. . . . Any lady is ready to tell you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household but her own. Those she seems to think drop from the sky. My disgust sometimes is boiling over. Thank God for my countrywomen, but alas for the men!

The rule by which she wrote was the perfect one for the diarist. "I write," she warns her reader more than once, "current rumor. . . . I write down all I hear; and the next day, if I hear that it is not so, then I write down the contradiction too." And therein lies the charm and value of her narrative. One gets the feel of the time as if one were living it: the joy over victories that were never won, the grief and terror of defeats that never happened.

One senses the fashionable, house-party atmosphere of the Spotswood Hotel in the June of 1861, where ladies intrigued against each other to get arms and uniforms for their husbands' regiments, and Mrs. Davis ran about lobby and corridors in her handsome evening dress collecting statesmen and generals for an impromptu meeting of her husband's cabinet. One sees "stodgy old Richmond" become "fast enough for anybody" as the war goes on. One shares in the sumptuous suppers at the Chesnuts', the Senator Semmeses',

and the Iveses' in the winter between Gettysburg and Cold Harbor, while something close to starvation has begun to stalk the streets outside. And one hears the feet of Jefferson Davis, grief-stricken by the accidental death of his little son, as he tramps the floor overhead the whole night through.

It is hardly too much to say that what Samuel Pepys's diary is to the reign of Charles II, Mary Boykin Chesnut's is to the Confederacy. To thousands now and in years to come it will be a fascinating source of information, an invaluable aid to the understanding of a great period, and a lasting delight.

Alfred Hoyt Bill is author of "The Beleaguered City," a history of Richmond during the Civil War.

## Americana Notes

THE ROBERT E. LEE READER, edited by Stanley F. Horn. Bobbs-Merrill. \$5. Mr. Horn calls this compilation "in no sense an anthology," but it is difficult to describe it as anything else. It is a compilation of writing about (and sometimes by) Lee, arranged in chronological sequence, with the intent of producing, in Mr. Van Horn's words, a "mosaic portrait." Of the seventy-six titles listed in the bibliography, sixty-one were published after Lee's death, and thirty-five of these during the present century. In an apparent effort to avoid peppering the text with dates, italics, and footnotes, the citations are assembled by short title at the end of the text, with full titles appended in the succeeding bibliography—a somewhat confusing arrangement. A brief critical appraisal of each source would have been valuable. Whether Mr. Horn accomplishes his design "to present a full-length portrait of Robert E. Lee by means of extracts selected from the writings of many who had taken the Confederate commander as their subject" is something the reader must decide for himself. To this reader it did not seem that the por-

(Continued on page 33)

## The Mole to Its Child

By Georgie Starbuck Galbraith

**M**Y SON, we burrow underground. Through cold and damp and dark. The lot to which our race is bound Is harsh indeed. Yet mark That though we are by nature blind, Yet heaven favors moles. For of all creatures God designed, Only the moles have souls.



# Most Deserving Murders of 1949

JUDGE LYNCH

IT USED to be said of Londoners—most likely still is—that they enjoyed the annual Christmas Pantomime because they could be sure they would hear the same old jokes that they had laughed at since childhood. The same, to our jaundiced eye, is true of television. It's amazing how long the old vaudeville gags and skits remain laughable—and how often they are used. Which is a long way of getting around to the fact that the detective-story mixture for 1949 was very much as before. Rarely has there been a more static twelve-month in whodunit history. There were a few promising newcomers, writers "to be heard from," but no bright new stars. The old-timers were in there pitching with the same control and change of pace that distinguished their performances in earlier years. But none of them did anything especially distinguished. Nineteen hundred forty-nine was a "safe" year in mystery annals. With a few exceptions—which fooled nobody—the output was workmanlike and entertaining. But there were mighty few titles that engendered many lusty cheers. About the only one that

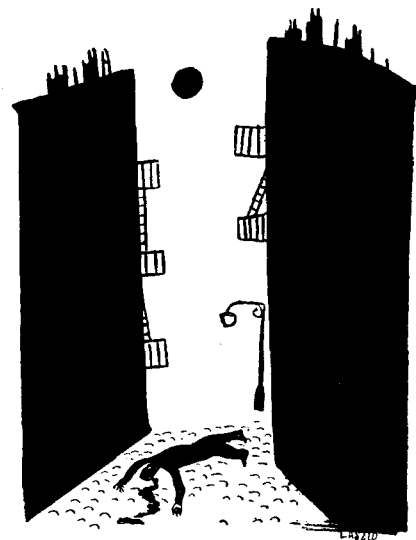


affected the Judge that way was "The Screa—" —but that's not quite fair. The book in question was published in December, and the last good yarn one has read sometimes seems to be the best. So the Judge has gone back over the year's output and checked those books that particularly entertained him. Here they are:

"Head of a Traveller," by Nicholas Blake (Harper, \$2.50), perhaps the best British yarn of the year. "Not Negotiable," by Manning Coles (Dou-

bleday, \$2.25), an upper-brackets Tommy Hambledon story and a shade better than the other Hambledon yarn, "Diamonds to Amsterdam," which appeared later in the year. "Walk the Dark Streets," by William Krasner (Harper, \$2.50), a grim affair and not for the queasy, but extremely effective and well written. Definitely un-grim, in fact, delightfully wacky was "The Gun in Daniel Webster's Bust," by Margaret Scherf (Doubleday, \$2.25), and even wackier, although not so soundly plotted, Richard Wormser's "The Hanging Heiress" (Mill, \$2.50). The Judge echoes the published (in advts.) statement of Mr. C. Fadiman that the drinking sequences in "What a Body," by Alan Green (Simon & Schuster, \$2.50), are among the funniest in fiction, but much of that tale left him rather cold: altogether too cute. The year saw the first new novel by Raymond Chandler in several years. Funny thing about that excellent item—"The Little Sister" (Houghton Mifflin, \$2.50). You read it and you recognized Philip Marlowe and you fell under the Chandler spell of epigram and terse, brutal treatment of the lingo—but it seemed as if you had read it all before, and not long ago. Then you realized that there had been so many good carbon copies of Chandler in the last five-six years that when the real McCoy came along it seemed reminiscent. Which isn't so. Chandler, for the Judge's pelf, is still the unsurpassed swift-tough-literate mystery-monger. The looniest title of the year was "The Girl with the Hole in Her Head"—which turned out to be strictly true and decorated a first-class story. In the English ranks the runner-up to the Blake opus mentioned above was undoubtedly Michael Innes's "The Case of the Journeying Boy" (Dodd, Mead, \$2.50). That brilliant job was more in the suspense than in the straight detective-story field, which leads up to a mention of the Judge's favorite suspense story of the year, "The Blue Ice," by Hammond Innes (Harper, \$2.50). In the suspense field may also be listed two novels not generally included in the criminal category—"Shadow of a Hero," by Allan Chase (Little, Brown, \$3), and "Mist on the Waters," by F. L. Green (Harcourt, Brace, \$3). There was a remarkably good Ngaio Marsh story, "A Wreath for Rivera" (Little,

Brown, \$2.75), the customary Agatha Christie—"The Crooked House" (Dodd, Mead, \$2.50)—and the best Ellery Queen story in several years, "Cat of Many Tails" (Little, Brown, \$2.75). The 1949 Rex Stout story about Nero Wolfe and Archie was also above average—"The Second Confession" (Viking, \$2.50). One of the Judge's favorites, Hilda Lawrence, was represented by a brace of long-shorts—"Duet of Death" (Simon & Schuster, \$2), both good and trickily presented. The outstanding volume of shorts for



the year was, as usual, "The Queen's Awards"—although a little too much on the *aficionado* side to please all readers. And that brings us down to the story which began this listing. Its full title is "The Case of the Screaming Mimi," by Frederic Brown (Dutton, \$2.50)—and for those readers who can take 'em tough, shocking, and surprising this is tops. In spite, we may say, of some distressingly cute writing.

With a couple of precincts missing, it looks at the moment as if the total number of detective stories published during 1949 would be in the vicinity of 170. Almost all of these were full-length novels. There were about half a dozen volumes of factual stuff—of which the Judge recalls most favorably "Crimes That Shook the World," by Richard Hirsch (Duell, Sloan & Pearce, \$2.75). Six volumes of short stories also appear in the total. About those newcomers mentioned in our first paragraph—the most promising of the lot seems to be Dorothy Salisbury, whose "The Judas Cat" (Scribner's, \$2.50) was above average. And there is one story coming up in early 1950 that should be a knockout if it's half as good as its title. It's called "And When She Was Bad She Was Murdered."

Judge Lynch conducts SRL's *The Criminal Record* department.