

# World's Greatest Cellist

PABLO CASALS. By Lillian Littlehales. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 1948. 232 pp. \$3.75.

Reviewed by HERSCHEL BRICKELL

THIS is a revised edition of the biography of the world's greatest cellist, first published in 1929, and written by an American cello player who has known Casals for many years and in a variety of circumstances. It is a warmly sympathetic study of a supreme artist who is also a well-balanced human being, and if not faultless from the purely literary point of view, it has the considerable merit of presenting its subject full-length as man and musician.

A Catalan of Catalans—he was born seventy years ago this December in the village of Vandrell, not far from Tarragona—Casals now lives an exile in Prades, a little French town in the Eastern Pyrenees. He refuses to play in public as a protest against the Franco dictatorship, but his silence, against which no arguments can prevail, is not solely a symbol of his nationalistic spirit, for he would not play in Hitler's Germany or Mussolini's Italy.

Many of his fellow-countrymen, who idolize him as much because of his patriotism and loyalty to his principles as because of the honor he has brought his country, have discussed the possibility of his becoming president of Catalonia, another Paderewski, if his native land should be liberated, a prospect that seems sadly remote, particularly in view of our recent shameful overtures to Franco.

Miss Littlehales has a good, if not complete, chapter on the Catalan background of Casals, but apparently remains somewhat confused as to the distinction between the Catalan and Spanish languages and the characteristics of the two peoples. For example, she expresses surprise that Casals, as a "Spaniard" (the quotes are the reviewer's), is an organized, efficient person, with none of the *mañana* spirit in his system, when the Catalan time-sense is actually much more North American than Iberian, which is one of several reasons why the Catalans are often called "the Yankees of Spain." Anyone anxious to pursue the Catalan question further will find Dr. Josep Trueta's recently published "Spirit of Catalonia" an excellent little book.

Casals, who was christened Pau, and who, as one of his friends puts it "condescends to the use of the Spanish form Pablo," was the son of a musician father and a self-sacrific-

ing mother, who had a number of other children to concern themselves about. They were poor people who had little to give their talented son, an infant prodigy, except their interest and faith.

He was playing in Madrid when a little past twelve and in his early teens was sent to the Brussels Conservatory by Count Morphy, secretary to Queen Maria Christina, to study composition. His first appearance at the conservatory was a perfect manifestation of his two outstanding characteristics, his musicianship and his pride. The cello teacher asked what he could play, and he answered quietly, "Anything," an answer from a stripling that provoked ironical remarks which wounded the sensitive boy deeply. But when the teacher settled upon a composition as difficult as he could think of, Casals played it so brilliantly as to amaze the other students and embarrass the professor, who apologized and asked him to remain in the class. Casals refused and left Brussels, knowing that his decision would cost him the prized support of Morphy.

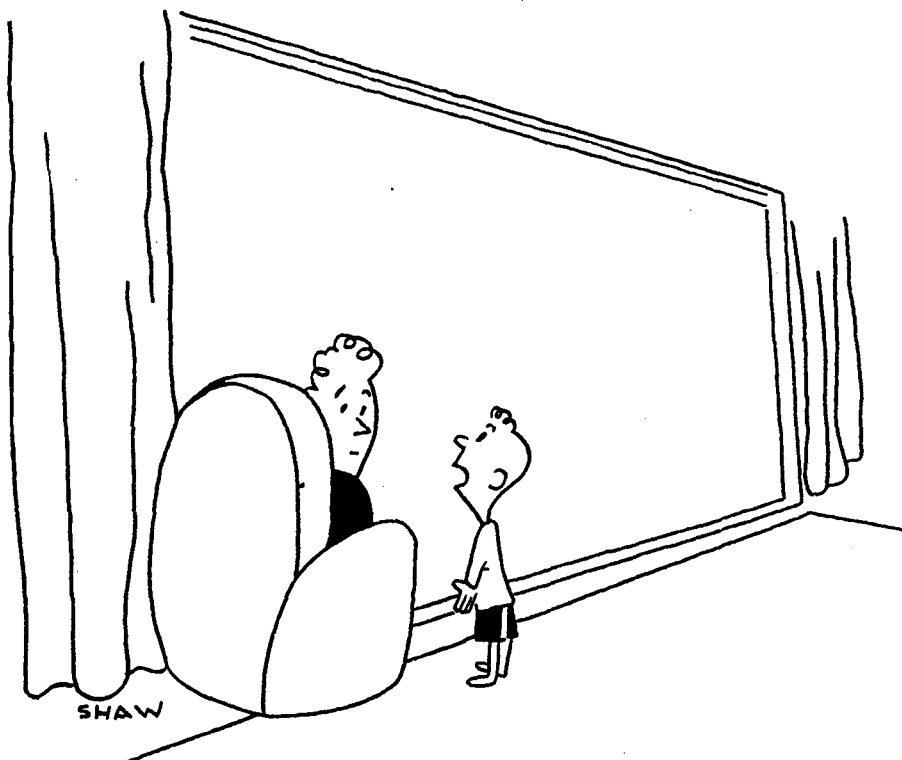
With his mother's help, he made a start in Paris, but illness sent him back to Barcelona, and it was not until he was twenty-two that he made his debut with Lamoreaux's orchestra and with resounding success. His distinguished career followed, the outlines of which are familiar to all music

lovers of this generation, and a master was universally acclaimed.

But Miss Littlehales makes it clear that Casals has never had his fullest satisfaction from being a mere virtuoso, even one of the greatest of all time, and declares that he has often said he was never so happy as when rehearsing an orchestra, working with other musicians. Once he toured with his American wife, Susan Metcalfe, the lieder singer, as her accompanist, and it is another indication of his innate modesty that he considered more than once giving up his cello to provide the piano background for the music of other performers! He is also a composer of consequence.

In Barcelona, Casals organized and conducted one of the best orchestras in Europe, the Orquesta Pau Casals, and for twenty years was its leader. And true to his unswerving loyalty to the people, he organized, with notable success, concerts for workingmen, in this supplementing the magnificent work of Clavé, who was responsible for the two great choral groups, the Orfeos Catala and Gracienc, makers of music none who ever heard it can forget.

Miss Littlehales has written a sympathetic, appreciative, affectionate, and understanding biography, and has not neglected to put in a good chapter on the technique of Casals. He who can read these glowing pages without a sense of heartbreak at the fate of Catalonia and Casals must be callous indeed to the sufferings of some of the best and noblest of his fellows.



"Is it true the family fortune was made by betting on Truman in '48?"

**Poetry.** Too often the fate of a poet of our time is being reduced in the public mind to one or two or three poems endlessly reprinted in anthologies. So swift seems the pace of time, so many the supplicants clamoring to be heard, that the older poet's whole work is shouldered aside, and for a time almost forgotten. Here below Robert Hillyer handsomely redresses the balance in the case of Siegfried Sassoon, and William O'Connor supplies a new perspective to the work of a later—and now older—British poet, Louis MacNeice. Meanwhile a few recent American poets receive due notice. Perspective, it may be said, is what one finds so lacking in most modern criticism. The rule seems merely to cry up or cry down. The range of the critic is often narrow, whereas poetry should have the whole world's range.



Louis MacNeice—"neither 'lamed by fashion' nor caught in a circle."

## Master of His Idiom

**HOLES IN THE SKY.** By Louis MacNeice. New York: Random House. 1949. 61 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by WILLIAM VAN O'CONNOR

THE poet who inclines toward taut rhythms and compressed meanings may exhaust his reader or, on occasion, seem pretentious, but he works nonetheless in the direction demanded by his art. The obvious and influential virtues in the style of Louis MacNeice have in the past often come perilously close to being vices. His free rhythms, which make possible a conversational and offhand manner, are sometimes so loose that they have almost no metrical tension. His earlier idiom, at its best clear and supple, is sometimes journalistic and commonplace. Seemingly only his intelligence and his knowledge of Latin and English metrical forms have saved him from the unbuttoned style.

The MacNeice of "Holes in the Sky" is a master of his idiom. The reader rarely feels, as he might have in the past, that the poetic structure is in danger of disintegrating. In such a work as "Autumn Journal" (1939) the prose effects often got the better of the poetry. In "The Stygian Banks," a long poem in the latest volume, the prose quality remains, but the poet controls it. The asides, never irrelevant, serve to inform the theme, and the symbols recur in a kind of contrapuntal pattern. And in "Week End" a concentration of meaning is achieved by holding to a central conceit—no word or sentence is self-contained in its meaning because no human action can be isolated.

And "Week End" is the closest MacNeice comes now to the kind of satiric irony he wrote, along with Auden, in the Thirties. The latest poetry is without flippancy or brassy knowledge.

It is no longer youthful. The most persistent subjects are, as in "The Stygian Banks," children and middle age:

I am alone  
And you are alone and he and she  
are alone  
But in that we carry our grounds we  
can superimpose them,  
No more fusing than a pack of cards  
is fused  
Yet the Jack comes next to the  
Queen. Though when they are  
dealt  
You will often fail of the sequence;  
only you know  
That there were other cards in the  
pack, there were other people  
And moss roses and beanfields and in  
yourself  
Monk and lover and a battered hoop  
With you for once behind it—and a  
coffin  
With you for once within it.

A number of poems arise from the doubtful peace of these years after the war, with a husband back from his years in the desert, with an Eng-

land "stiff and older," and with the look of childhood haunts seen through eyes that saw the war.

None of the poems deal with "big" subjects. A few at first reading are delusively simple. Two or three seem to miss the mark—or, at least, do not give up their meanings easily enough to make their virtues apparent. Not curiously perhaps, a number of them, "Autolycus" and others, are concerned with the craft of poetry or employ figures of speech that suggest a concern with the poet's craft. In "Elegy for Minor Poets" he evokes the pathos inherent in the failure of talents that did not catch fire, in poets "who knew all the words but failed to achieve the Word—." MacNeice himself has neither been "lamed by fashion" nor caught in a circle. In the corpus of poetry written in our time his should have a high place.

## Winter Night

By Eric Wilson Barker

**S**TILL in his tree, a gray lynx listens:  
The pinewoods crack in a freezing vise;  
A coyote ranging the frosty barrens  
Wails to a moon as cold as ice.

The streams that carried the night-dark otter  
And watered the crested mountain grass  
Are locked in white and armored silence  
By reeds like bayonets of brittle glass.

A sheep that coughed on the frozen hillside  
Lies still for the kite that follows the lion  
When the steel lances of winter sunlight  
Strike on the seas that take Orion.

In bitter swirls of the green Atlantic  
The gathering icebergs growl and roll,  
Stalking through wastes as wild and lonely  
As skies that glitter toward the Pole.