

# Humanitarian and Poet

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER:  
*Friend of Man.* By John A. Pollard.  
Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 615  
pp. \$6.

By ROBERT E. SPILLER

TO BE a poet a half century and more ago, one had to have a long white beard and a benign disposition. Bryant, Longfellow, and Whittier met the standard; Lowell and Whitman almost did; Emerson and Holmes fell short. To write a sympathetic biography of such a poet in these days of Cantos and Quartets is indeed an achievement. The very traits as man and poet that made Whittier honored and beloved in his later years—his homespun simplicity and his naive faith—make him now seem almost old-fashioned. The most recent full-length biography (1933) met the problem by psychoanalyzing the poet's celibacy and chronic illnesses, but even that fashion is now outmoded. Apparently the pendulum of taste is swinging back to a more just appraisal of the saints and heroes of our past. By avoiding all psychological and critical issues and accepting Whittier's own verdict that he was more interested in people than in poetry—that his was "merely the farm wagon and buckboard of verse"—Mr. Pollard has painted a living portrait of a great man.

His biography gets off to a bad start, but whether the fault is his or Whittier's would be hard to say. To read the first twelve chapters is something close to an ordeal. Painstakingly we follow the day-by-day course of a farm boy and small-town newspaper editor; then that of a single-minded crusader for a long-settled cause, Abolition. The tedium is not even relieved by insights into the deeper political issues of pre-Civil-War times, for Whittier himself was a humanitarian rather than a political thinker, and his admirable singleness of mind results in a toneless narrative, written in a dull and often repetitious style. Nor does poetry liven the page, for Mr. Pollard's only critical comment is that concern for a cause somewhat took Whittier out of himself and gave a firmness to his poetry that it had previously lacked. If this were all there were to the book, we might lay it aside as a monograph by an inexperienced researcher who had his job and did it conscientiously. It would add to our knowledge of fact rather than to our pleasure or understanding.

The wise reader will skip directly to Chapter 13 and lose little of value,

for at that point both poet and biographer seem to mature and mellow. The year is 1864, when the war was over, Whittier's mother and sister dead, "Snowbound" in the making, and still almost three decades of living ahead. Then the poet must have grown his beard, for his wise humanitarian spirit suddenly ripens into something more than a cause. Then also the biographer changes, he begins to speak as a man in full control of a subject that he has lived with long and grown to understand. Not only does he lay aside his chronological method for a freer topical treatment, but he writes with a smoothness and spring which were sadly lacking before. Are there two books here, or one? If there are two, the second is complete in itself—a warmly sympathetic study of "Whittier, friend of man" and only incidentally poet. The result is as good an appraisal of Whittier's value to the twentieth-century reader as could be found.

Robert E. Spiller, professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, is an editor of "The Literary History of the United States" and author of "Fenimore Cooper, Critic of His Time."

## Belles-Lettres Notes

GLEE-WOOD, translated and arranged by Margaret Williams. Sheed & Ward. \$6. This fascinating book is the gift of a learned woman to readers less learned—at least in Middle English—than herself. In "Word-Hoard" Margaret Williams turned the translator's light on Old English literature. Now, working from manuscripts as before, and bringing many passages into modern language for the first time, she performs the same service for the literature which appeared in England between the Norman Conquest and Caxton's conquest. Neither Chaucer nor Langland, of course, could be excluded from such an anthology, and we may be grateful to the translator for giving as much space as she has to the Pearl poet with his acknowledged masterpiece, "Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight." But most of her selections, usually fragmentary, have nothing to do with masterpieces, and, as often as not, are the work of anonymous authors. They are valuable, apart from their intrinsic literary quality and for what they have to tell us about our literary origins, because they open so many windows on so many different aspects of English medieval life—a scene which is constantly illuminated by edi-



—Beitmann Archive.

John Greenleaf Whittier—"merely the farm wagon and buckboard of verse."

torial explanation—and as we read we realize that a sense of human solidarity can traverse centuries as easily, or with as much difficulty, as it can span seas and continents.

—BEN RAY REDMAN.

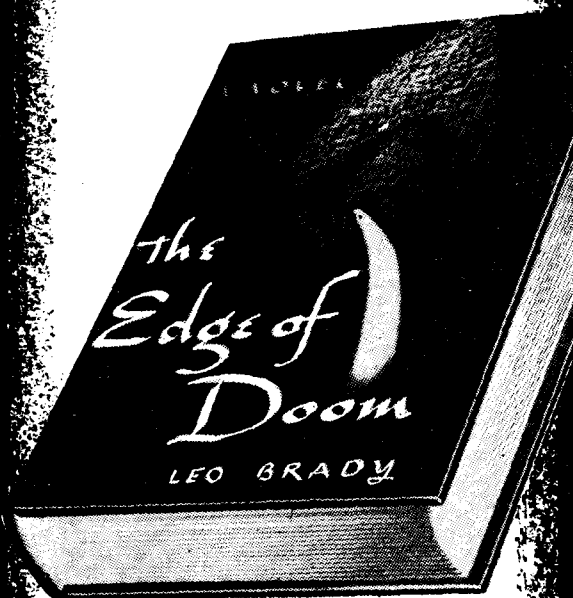
THE PHILOSOPHICAL LECTURES OF SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, edited by Kathleen Coburn. Philosophical Library. \$7.50. In the winter of 1818 Coleridge delivered a course of fourteen lectures on the history of philosophy from its earliest beginnings in Greece to his own day. In his thorough and systematic analysis he attempted to reconcile philosophy and metaphysics with religion, to show that the various philosophical movements arose to meet various social, human needs. The course of lectures was not too well attended, perhaps because he also gave in the same season his popular series on Shakespeare. The whole series of lectures on philosophy, except for the first and the fourteenth, was taken down *verbatim* by a stenographer hired by a friend of Coleridge's, and the transcript is the basis of Miss Coburn's conscientious and efficient edition. It is unique in being the only *verbatim* record of any of his courses of lectures. They do not make easy reading because of his prodigious and ill-concealed learning, his tendency to digress, and his turgid style. Besides, they lack the grace and persuasiveness that radiated from one of the greatest talkers in English letters. But they are important for an understanding of the great poet who was half metaphysician and half bard.

—ROBERT HALSBAND.

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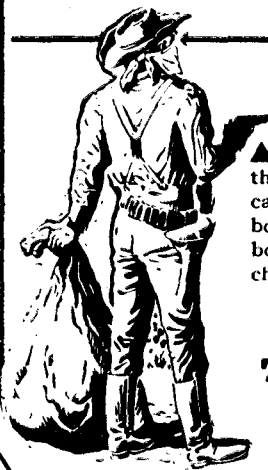
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