

**Personal History.** Benjamin Constant and Guy de Maupassant, two Frenchmen whose relations with women were hardly models of decorum, are the subjects of important new biographies reviewed this week. Constant, author of "Adolphe" and political pamphleteer during the Napoleonic era, provides the British writer Harold Nicolson with an absorbing study of inner complexes. Francis Steegmuller has turned his attention to Flaubert's famous pupil, Guy de Maupassant, and points out the motivation which prompted Maupassant to write as he did. . . . More homespun chronicles are to be found in Bill Mauldin's "A Sort of a Saga," an account of the cartoonist's boyhood in New Mexico and Arizona, and in "Uncle, Aunt and Jezebel," which our reviewer describes as a Baltic "Life with Father." . . . Oksana Kasenkina, the Soviet teacher who was news in '48, tells of her "Leap to Freedom."



## Swiss-Family-Robinson Mauldin

A SORT OF A SAGA. By Bill Mauldin. Illustrated by the author. New York: William Sloane Assoc. 301 pp. \$3.50.

By JOHN T. WINTERICH

IF TOM SAWYER had been born in 1921 instead of around 1835, and if he had spent his boyhood in New Mexico and Arizona instead of in Missouri, he would have lived this life and written this book. The fact that he here appears under the name of Bill Mauldin is wholly without significance—Tom Sawyer could have thought up a name like that as easy as pie. The fact that Bill Mauldin, like Tom Sawyer, had a brother Sid merely accents the parallel. Sid Sawyer was something of a stinker, but Sid Mauldin was good stuff. Both Sid Mauldins, in fact; Bill's father was a Sid, too.

This book (I am willing to go out on a limb on this) is the first auto-

biography ever published in which the narrator is the offspring of a mother who was born after 1900. Bill himself was born in New Mexico in 1921, and his first memory was of smoking cigarettes (Chesterfields, if Liggett & Myers want to make something of it) in a village in old Mexico at the age of three. The elder Sid had gone down there in pursuit of some will-o'-the-wisp, but the Mauldins only stayed a year, and then came back across the border and rented a house in El Paso, where Bill underwent the only tour of urban life described in these memoirs. The description requires two paragraphs.

At the close of its El Paso period the family rolled back to New Mexico, and New Mexico and Arizona are what this book is mostly about. The depression came along when Bill was nine or ten and didn't bother him much—all a child has to do to enjoy a depression is to survive it. It hit Sid, Sr., harder, of course, even in a region where gila monsters, sidewinders, and gophers flourished and neighbors were few. Sid, Sr., free-enterprised through most of it, but toward the end he took a Government job bossing a crew of privy-builders. The thing wasn't boondoggling—water supply became cleaner in many communities, and previously untraceable illnesses vanished.

There is not an

overplus of people in this narrative, outside of the four Mauldins, who were sufficient unto themselves and lived an engaging sort of Swiss-Family-Robinson existence compounded of opportunism, ingenuity, and make-do. There are quite a few animals, wild and tame, in particular the goat named Nanny. Mauldin is a little put out at the lack of originality that christened her Nanny—it was like calling a dog Rover, he says. (I have read about dogs in books who were called Rover, but I have yet to meet one in life.) Nanny, by the way, died a scintillating and spectacular death.

What people there are stand out the more clearly for their very fewness. There was the schoolteacher who insisted that pigmy should be pronounced pij-my, and that the t in often was put there to be spoken. There is little about ancestors, but one of them receives brief and merited mention—Mauldin's maternal grandfather, George Bemis, who was a fellow passenger with Mark Twain on the Western journey that produced "Roughing It"—see Chapters II and VII of that earlier chronicle.

This is a book that can be read without the slightest awareness of what happened to Bill Mauldin later when he got to be a big boy of eighteen and went away to give the Germans and the generals what for. There isn't anything about that here, or even any foreshadowing of it. Instead there is just a nice flow of reminiscence, all of it enjoyable, all of it real-sounding, with only an occasional suggestion of the familiar Mauldin bite. This is a true Western for all tastes, for both sexes, and for almost all ages, written with a deftness and suppleness that makes the reader wish all autobiographers could get in their licks before their prose atrophied. The book isn't a sort of a saga—it's the real thing.



—Drawings by Bill Mauldin from the book.

## Kasenkina's Story



Oksana Kasenkina—"a get-me-out-of-here letter."

**LEAP TO FREEDOM.** *The Autobiography of Oksana Kasenkina.* Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co. 295 pp. \$3.

By MARTIN EBON

**T**HIS book brings back a few hot summer weeks in 1948 when the papers were full of stories about the Russian schoolteacher who had jumped from a window of the Soviet Consulate in New York. It was a dramatic form of escape from Soviet authority toward freedom, and it captured the public's imagination. The event was spectacular, and Oksana Stepanova Kasenkina became a symbol of escape from tyranny.

What made Kasenkina jump? In the background was, of course, the fear of returning to the country where her husband had been sent to an Asiatic labor camp, where her son had been reported missing while fighting with a punitive army battalion. In the foreground were the "atmosphere of hostility, intolerance, and corruption" of the Soviet colony in New York, "a precious microcosm sustained by fear and privilege."

To anyone who knows the mechanisms of the Soviet system, this is a touchingly naive book. In spite of her early indoctrination in Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism, Oksana Kasenkina remained essentially non-political; she kept thinking of herself as a teacher of biology, an "objective" and far from political science. The latest theories of Trofim Lysenko had not yet completely corralled biology into the tight enclosure of Stalinism.

The book begins with a description of the author's youth and family life prior to the Bolshevik Revolution. It quickly moves on to Kasenkina's career as a teacher. The chapters dealing with the recent war are particularly gripping. That she was ever permitted to go abroad at all, was due to imperfect record-keeping by the Soviet secret police; her husband's disastrous "deviations," together with her own lack of Communist Party membership, should have made her definitely unreliable to Moscow's officialdom.

The final chapters, which cover Kasenkina's escape to freedom, provide the coherence that was lacking in last year's day-to-day news stories. They show her bewilderment and naivete. She became a resident of Alexandra Tolstoy's Reed Farm through the good offices of the anti-Soviet Russian language paper *Novoye Russkoye Slovo*. But the atmosphere at Reed Farm, where monarchist Russian refugees eyed her as a potential Bolshevik spy, so unnerved Kasenkina that she wrote a silly, hysterical get-me-out-of-here letter to Soviet Consul Lomakin. The consul and a few of his henchmen entered Reed Farm through a ruse, but they did not remove Kasenkina against her will. Only when she belatedly realized her own incredible stupidity did she make her famous leap.

There are a few fascinating touches: Kasenkina sneaking into the Roxy to see the movie "The Iron Curtain"; Soviet Ambassador Panyushkin bullying her into giving a fake press interview; the wife of Andrei Gromyko as she begs Kasenkina to make Gromyko's son Tolya stay away from the pretty Klava, who, after all, was only the daughter of an embassy chauffeur; the whole network of spies, with pupils spying on their teachers, to assure that Soviet representatives do not fall for the blandishments of American bourgeois society. All in all, a simple, moving, horrifying book.

### LITERARY I.Q. ANSWERS

1. Night. Henley: "Invictus." 2. Olde Man. Lyly: "Euphues and His England." 3. Thou. Shakespeare: "Hamlet." 4. My either hand. Herrick: "A Child's Grace." 5. Roses. Read: "New Pastoral Book." 6. The other shape. Milton: "Paradise Lost." 7. Loves. Charles F. Hoffman: "Sparkling and Bright." 8. Merry Margaret. Skelton: "To Mistress Margaret Hussey." 9. Enough. Heywood: "Proverbs." 10. Your heart. Lindsay: "To a Golden Haired Girl." 11. Care. Carman: "A Toast." 12. Old age. Wordsworth: "Dear Child of Nature." 13. A poem. Alexander Smith: "A Life Drama." 14. Order. Anna H. Branch: "The Monk in the Kitchen." 15. Teeth. T. A. Daly: "Mia Carlotta." 16. The bat. Aiken: "Miracles." 17. I. Fielding: "Don Quixote in England." 18. Naught. Burton: "Anatomy of Melancholy." 19. Shins. Chambers: "The Recruit." 20. Woman. Scott: "Mar-mion."

## On Flaubert's Pupil



Harold Nicolson—"a measure of dignity" for Constant.

**BENJAMIN CONSTANT.** By Harold Nicolson. New York: Doubleday & Co. 331 pp. \$4.

By LEO GERSHOY

**B**Y FORMAL standards the man Benjamin Constant was unworthy of Harold Nicolson's gifts as biographer. Despite his one indisputable literary masterpiece, "Adolphe," and his impassioned pamphlet against Napoleonic despotism, "De l'esprit de conquête," he was neither a great writer nor a great thinker. Nor as occasional man of political action from the later Revolution through the Bourbon restoration did he fill an especially notable place in history. The *affaires de coeur* of the gay deceiver and charming wastrel were the talk of more towns than one as well as an ambulatory refutation of his own surname. No doubt his sensibility, somewhat after the order of Laurence Sterne's, served him in good stead in his career as gallant. It imparted tenderness to his disillusioned libertinage and reconciled later reproaches of conscience with earlier promptings of his erotic imagination by assuring him that to follow his biological urge was after a fashion to assume his rightful place among accredited men of feeling.

What was there then to attract Nicolson to Constant's sentimental journey, with its medley of amours, relatives, travels, adventures with great and humble, its wasted opportunities, its occasional shabby or cowardly acts, and moments, still more exceptional, of loftiness or creative production? Not the tawdry story, as the world saw it or deeply involved participants judged the facts. Rather the opportunity, one suspects, to try to make sense of the