

were uncurbed and, frequently, out of control.

Then, without prologue or preparation, came the semi-autobiographical portrait-narrative "The Dust Which Is God," published in Bill's fifty-sixth year, a volume which won the Pulitzer Prize. Apart from its technical competence, it showed that no one had written as fully, or as frankly, about William Rose Benét as Bill himself. Here was the boy and the man, the lover and husband, the poet and private person. And here was the public citizen, the hater of cant and the fighter for justice, the champion of the freely uttered and freely circulated word, the ardent liberal devoted to the truth. The prize-winning book was followed by the militant "Day of Deliverance" and "The Stairway of Surprise," the latter title inspired by Emerson's "Merlin." His gamut was widening. A deeper voice was matched by a more impassioned music. The lover of liberty found new expression in his celebration of civil rights, in hymns to those beaten, betrayed, and crucified because they allied themselves with unpopular causes, in rhapsodies to the true democracy.

Shoulder to shoulder now they stand:
Our valiant dead and all our valiant living
To vivify with giving and forgiving
This Country of the Free, the impartial land
That it might be: with heart and mind
and nerve
Its many-in-one to strengthen and
preserve.

I will not see it a pen for bleating
sheep
Watched by sly wolves; or, in new
dark ages,
Industrial feudal lords dispensing
wages
Each from his fief and his baronial
keep. . . .
Now, in this age, when, whatsoever
the weather,
We must fairly together live or die
together.

At sixty-four he had written, edited, and compiled some thirty-six books, including a novel, several anthologies, and an invaluable "Reader's Encyclopedia." Varied though they were in technique and intention, they were united by an intensity of spirit. To intensity he added integrity—and a pervasive kindness. He may have had enemies (improbable though it seems), but he never referred to them. He neither spoke bitterly nor wrote meanly of anyone. His poetry was the man: generous, sometimes too lavish, overflowing with forthrightness and brotherly good will. With Bill's death there is a little less generosity, a little less faith and good will in the world. Our literature will be thinner and our lives poorer for the lack of these.



Masefield: Shock of Rediscovery

HORACE GREGORY



—Helen Merrill.

Horace Gregory

since 1930, the year that he became England's Poet Laureate, little enough has been written about his verse, and most of that little has not been in praise. In the years immediately preceding World War II the figures of other British poets, all writing a different kind of verse than Masefield wrote, made their appearance above a transatlantic horizon. And from then onward until the end of the war it became extremely difficult in terms of critical styles and fashions to find a name for Masefield's verse at all. Yet as the war ended a change in literary atmosphere, something that is still un-

THE present year may seem a tactless, ungainly, unfashionable time to rediscover the poetry of John Masefield. No one has seriously written of his verse for many years—exactly how long that time has been I do not know—but

folding, something that can be discerned and felt, rather than briskly defined and placed at the head of a reading list, began to take on shape and color. In this environment the verse of Rudyard Kipling came up for reappraisal and Thomas Hardy achieved new stature as a poet rather than as a novelist; both Edith Sitwell and Walter de la Mare were discovered to be very "modern" and very much alive, and today, in the presence of his new book of verse,* the same shock of rediscovery attends the verse of Masefield.

To see Masefield's book clearly and to remove the haze of critical prejudice through which books are looked at, reviewed, but seldom read, one must go back to earlier and the lesser known recent writings of John Masefield. One should remember Masefield's early distrust of legend that attends the lives of poets, that he once wrote of Shakespeare:

Legends are a stupid man's excuse for his want of understanding. They are not evidence. . . . There are, un-

*ON THE HILL. By John Masefield. New York: The Macmillan Co. 122 pp. \$1.50.

fortunately, many graven images of Shakespeare. They are perhaps passable portraits of the languid, half-witted, hydrocephalic creatures who made them. As representations of a bustling, brilliant, profound, vivacious being, alive to the finger tips, and quick with an energy never since granted to man, they are as false as water.

The passage also shows Masefield's standards for writing verse, of the need beyond personal legend and mastery of craftsmanship, to convey a sense of human action and "vivacious being" in the work itself. Later Masefield wrote of the greatness of "Macbeth," "'Macbeth' makes images of power in the mind of every instructed man now in the world," and then showed how Shakespeare drew from two separate stories in Holinshed the strong lines of action in his play. The implication is, and the point is made again in Masefield's poem "Biography," that factual dates and events in a poet's life are of lesser moment than the vision of life that the poet creates within a book or on the stage. This view has no claim to being original but it is decidedly remote from one of personal vanity and may be accepted as a polar extreme from the ambitions of the minor poet who is afflicted with a Byronic attitude.

In writing of himself in prefaces to his books and in autobiographies of his youth his gaze is on the external objects of his memories. The tone in which he speaks—for the prose is conversational—is pure, direct, softly accented, and deceptively innocent. The serene, clear voice of Masefield's prose has far more than charm to recommend it. I quote a paragraph from his tribute to Swinburne in which the anecdote withholds its dramatic meaning until the end; as Masefield tells it, it recaptures the entire Swinburne:

I never spoke with him. A few years later, when he had ceased to seem the miraculous Master of the art, it was my fortune for many days together to sit at the same table with him in the reading room of the British Museum. He was then very old, frail, and deaf. The magnificent head was all that remained of the prophet and seer; the rest was a little shrunken stalk. The late Mr. Watts-Dunton used to bring him there, see him to his chair, and or-

der his books for him; he would then bellow in his ear that he would return at one o'clock and take him out to lunch. This message had to be repeated several times before the old man could grasp it and by that time the reading room was aroused. Grave heads from every table turned to watch. Presently, after Mr. Watts-Dunton had gone, Swinburne would turn to his books. I know not what they were, but imagine that they were of a merry impropriety, for the old man used to roar with laughter over them and, being deaf, never knew what disturbance he was causing. An Anglican Bishop and an Abbot of the Roman Church haunted the same table and from time to time in that room a little, smiling, erect, cynical man, with a face which none could forget, would pass. This was Lenin, then studying, I believe, the psychology of revolution.

What had the appearance of being an anecdote fished out of memory is turned into a nearly perfect critical portrait; the clarity of vision which belongs to Masefield at his best is there; it is the same vision that sustains the softly spoken tone of his memories of youth on a training ship in the River Mersey and the months he spent as a factory hand in a carpet-weaving mill at Yonkers on the Hudson River in New York. If the story of his narrative poem "Dauber" no longer holds our attention as it once did, the clear, visionary gaze of its last two stanzas retains a quality of freshness, of renewed perception that seems inexhaustible:

Working aloft they saw the mountain tower,
Snow to the peak; they heard the launchmen shout;
And bright along the bay the lights came out.

And then the night fell dark, and all night long
The pointed mountain pointed at the stars,
Frozen, alert, austere; the eagle's song
Screamed from her desolate scree and splintered scars.
On her intense crags where the air is sparse
The stars looked down; their many golden eyes
Watched her and burned, burned out, and came to rise.

Silent the finger of the summit stood,
Icy in pure, thin air, glittering with snows.
Then the sun's coming turned the peak to blood,

And in the rest-house the muleteers arose.
And all day long, where only the eagle goes,
Stones, loosened by the sun, fall; the stones falling
Fill empty gorge on gorge with echoes calling.

It is gratuitous to mention the craftsmanship, the art that makes the power of this kind of descriptive writing possible, for I believe it to be true that Masefield is concerned (and in this his verse carries an analogy to Wordsworth's) with provinces beyond art and all the smaller aspects of artistic expression. Since the publication of his "Salt Water Ballads" in 1902, his way of writing has been to write, without revision in subsequent editions of his poems, as the impulse moved him. It is also the kind of writing that did not conceal the marks of Masefield's late Victorian heritage, the "influences" that he so candidly remarked sprang from his readings in Longfellow, Tennyson, D. G. Rossetti, Swinburne—and, as his "Salt Water Ballads" show so clearly, Kipling. Yet even in the early "Ballads" Masefield's contrast to Kipling is easy enough to find; Kipling's accent in verse is sharper and produces irony whereas the lighter "Ballads" of Masefield turn to the emotional release of humor, and the unexpected kind of humor revealed in Masefield is one of the rarest of his qualities:

"I'm a-weary of them there mermaids,"
Says old Bill's ghost to me;
"It ain't no place for a Christian
Below there—under sea.
For it's all blown sand and shipwrecks,
And old bones eaten bare,
And them cold fishy females
With long green weeds for hair."

This is humor that seems to come from a hidden source of an otherwise grave and melancholy temperament; its depth and lightness seem unwilling, unlooked for, and whenever it appears it is the natural complement of melodrama, overweighted sentiment, and bathos, and in Masefield it is the purge of overtly sweetened lines and accents.

Among Masefield's narratives "Reynard the Fox," which its early critics so blindly contrasted or compared with Chaucer, knowing well that Masefield had read Chaucer thorough-



ly, effects the same purge of Masefield's flaws. The rapid movement of its lines is half the meaning of the hunting of the fox, "quick with the energy" that Masefield at an earlier writing held before him as a necessary attribute in the making of poetry. One may read whatever one wishes into the meaning of the pursuit and eventual escape of the hunted fox, and quotation from the poem merely reduces the force of its true metaphor. My suggestion is that a literal reading of the poem may be pleasant enough, but that "Reynard the Fox" has the same external innocence which opens pitfalls for unwary readers of some of Masefield's prose. "Reynard the Fox" as a narrative in verse sustains a metaphorical relationship to life on earth; it is in vivid action and the situation it presents allows little time for conscious thought or contemplation. The escaped fox at the end of the poem bears an analogy to one aspect of the people Masefield described in Shakespeare's plays:

The people of the plays are alive and hearty. They lead a vigorous life and go to bed tired. They never forget that they are animals. [And beyond this the unfoxlike character of human beings is unveiled.] They never let anyone else forget that they are divine.

A rereading of "Reynard the Fox" with Masefield's "Shakespeare" is likely to remind one that whenever a writer of unusual gifts and a decided cast of mind writes on Shakespeare (and Dr. Johnson was certainly one of that company) one learns much of how that writer sees the world, and from "Reynard the Fox" there is but the shortest step to the latest and best of Masefield's comedies in verse, "A Tale of Country Things," in his new book, "On the Hill." Like "Reynard," the lately written narrative stands quite by itself in twentieth-century poetry; it is that rare thing in English verse, a brilliantly moving comic poem that has its true precedent only in Cowper's "The Diverting History of John Gilpin." In a volume that for the most part shows the gray years of England and its Laureate there is a sudden release of the genius by which Masefield's name is known; the pace of the narrative is swift and sure, and the story is of a forbidden Sunday boxing match which took place in 1829 in the Midland country not too far from Ledbury, where Masefield was born. The spirit of the poem lies in the comic balance struck between obeying law and openly defying it, of the balance of desires between strong drink, masculine pride, and love of women—and there one finds something that strikes an equation between Masefield's poem and

Cowper's story of the dilemma that Gilpin faced between the will of a strange horse and his respectability. Like the felicities of "Reynard the Fox," those of the new poem are not of a kind that can be repeated by any living poet.

In this book still another poem in an entirely different key speaks Masefield's mastery of the gift that brought him fame, the gift that was never quite adaptable to the Arthurian and Trojan stories he retold in verse, and yet moved with memorable simplicity in "They Closed Her Eyes," taken from the Spanish of Becquer. In spite of its verbal ease, there has been intractable quality concealed in Masefield's gift, as though the hidden sources of it had a will of their own, a dangerous will that so frequently drove their possessor to the edge of bathos. In that dangerous territory beyond the range of art a few of Masefield's shorter poems are secure and among them I would include this haunting lyric, "The Wind of the Sea," from his new book:

Three sailor-men from Bantry Bay
Ventured to sea on Christmas Day
It blows.
The wind of the sea torments us.

Out in the sea one found his grave
Although the others strove to save.

They strove as hard as men can do
But only saved their shipmate's shoe;
His shoe, his hat, his wooden fid,
And tinder-box with painted lid.
It blows.
The wind of the sea torments us.

His weeping Mother went to pray
At St. Anne's Church on Bantry Bay.
She prayed like many another one,
"O sweet Saint, give me back my Son."
Swiftly St. Anne made answer wise:—
"He waits for you in Paradise."
The Mother laughed and went her way
Back to her home and died that day.
It blows.
The wind of the sea torments us.

The voice heard here is the voice of Masefield's thoroughly intractable daemon; the note is authentic and cannot be questioned; in its presence all lesser poems of Masefield are forgotten and with them a number of poems written by other men. This gift has brought him many honors but more important than these has been the quality that places him even today beyond the patronage of praise or blame.

Horace Gregory, poet and critic, collaborated on "A History of American Poetry, 1900-1940." He is author of "The Shield of Achilles, Essays on Beliefs in Poetry" and other books.

My Library: Volume One.

By John Masefield

(I hope that my memory does not play me false. In memory, I crossed Greenwich Avenue from Christopher Street and entered Sixth Avenue by a road leading close to the eastern end of Jefferson Market. This road may have been Patchin Place; it was at least near it.—J. M.*)

FIFTY-FIVE years ago, as impulse led,
I crossed by Patchin Place, and turning thence,
Heard the loud railway roaring overhead,
And felt the City's kindling excellence.

Knowledge was what I sought; to inly know
All wisdom, truth, past, present and to be . . .
There, in Pratt's Store, was Knowledge, in a row.
Which, of those thousands, should enlighten me?

What spirit guided me to Volume One,
The Story of King Arthur? So it fell
That summer morning on Sixth Avenue.
I had gone shopping better than I knew,
Returning friend to Bors and Lionel,
Cousin to Tristan and Romance's son.

* Today you enter the Village Square from Christopher Street and the Jefferson Market is gone, though Jefferson Market Court with its minaret clock tower still stands. You would most directly cross the square to the Avenue of the Americas, or old Sixth Avenue, from which the trestle of the elevated railroad is now long gone. But by bearing left on Greenwich Avenue you could cross by Patchin Place along the extension of West Tenth Street, which runs back of, or west of, Jefferson Market Court. Patchin Place, companion to Milligan, here indents the western side of West Tenth. Another genius, Lafcadio Hearn, once lived further down West Tenth Street, and Theodore Dreiser, John Reed, and now Estlin Cummings have added renown to the century-old Place where grow the Trees of Heaven.—W.R.B.

Warm Cult, Cold Heart

An Estimate of William Wordsworth

F. V. MORLEY



—Elliott & Fry.

F. V. Morley

LAST April 23 was the centenary of the death of William Wordsworth. Pious chronologists find themselves here in trouble. April 23 is the accepted birthday for another William, William Shakespeare. In wider orbit, April 23 is also St. George's Day, and what was meant by "St. George for Merry England" is not even now to be forgotten. In an orbit which is wider still those who are acquainted with the work of Joseph Scaliger on "The Restoration of Chronology" (published in 1583) will recall that in his fifth book Scaliger calculates that April 23 was the day on which mankind was first created. Large as is the name of Wordsworth, it can scarcely hold Shakespeare, St. George, and all mankind in balance.

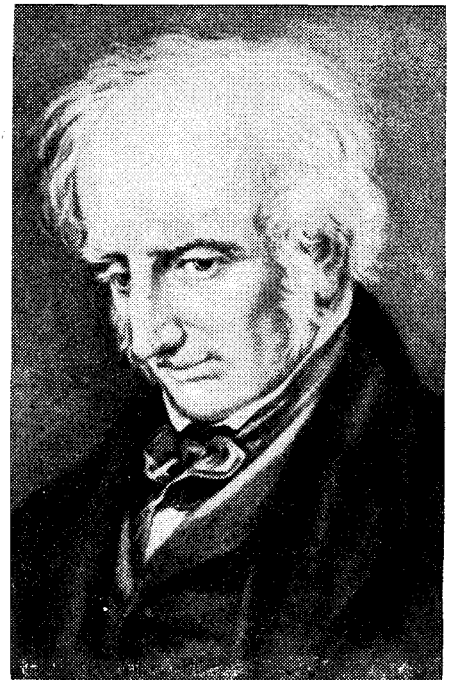
But if you do think of Wordsworth, what do you think of him? We've escaped from schools and colleges and we can read whatever we wish to read without external compulsion. Do we turn to Wordsworth's poetry for private pleasure? If so, can we describe the pleasure? Fair questions, which deserve fair answers, although perhaps such questions and answers are more suitable for conversation than for writing about.

I am not sure that even a century after Wordsworth's death we are far enough away in time to assert an accurate view of him. Nineteenth-century England presents us with a great confusion of religious feelings. Materialism versus Revealed Religion was a main war within which were innumerable skirmishes. Even the most intelligent rationalist (John Stuart Mill is an example from that time) cannot help but do something with his emotional equipment and for him, consciously, poetry is apt to be used as a lightning-rod. Less consciously, but with the same effect, poetry is apt to be misused that way by many who cannot claim equality of intellect with J. S. Mill. Wordsworth's

poetry was peculiarly suited to such misuse. We can observe how the poetry at the time of its emergence, at its fair seed-time, was as poetry not too well recognized, and we can watch the speed with which it was adopted when it became of value to a cult; remembering that a cult is still a cult even if it is a very widespread cult, and that in this connection what is of value is to recapture and return to the hive swarms of inarticulate feelings. Even today in contemplating Wordsworth it is not easy to clean the mind of cult. It isn't easy for us to regard Wordsworth's poetry as poetry and not as a substitute for religion.

There is, of course, a certain comedy in Wordsworth's own capitulation to the pressures of his time. It is easier to inveigh, as Wordsworth did, against a reading public's "degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation" when that thirst is being quenched at other fountains than it is to blame the same drinkers when they come to one's own. The pressure of the cult, to regard Wordsworth as a prophet and out of the poetry willy-nilly to extract a gospel, became irresistible, and who shall blame Daddy Wordsworth if he, too, became a convert? But all that overlay of feelings which has been stuck on to Wordsworth's poetry has to be removed if we are to see what it is in itself, and if we are to approach him with the same freedom with which we approach other great poets of the past.

Too many extraneous feelings come in when you try to consider poetry. For instance, I'm not sure that after a century we are yet far enough away in time to forget Wordsworth's personality. It wasn't amiable. Like Milton, whom he in many ways resembled (Hartley Coleridge pointed out that they had even, both of them, brothers named Christopher) — like Milton, Wordsworth was not a lovable man. But as to Milton comparatively few readers are impeded by that; as to Wordsworth a good many are, by biographical details. Possibly that is an opposite aspect of the cult I've mentioned — the aspect, irrelevant to poetry, of seeking feet of clay. In the period at which his poetry was at its



—Culver Service.

William Wordsworth—"cutting books with a buttery knife."

very best Wordsworth is too much remembered as a gaunt, not merely arrogant but rude young man, lounging in brown fustian jacket and striped pantaloons, cutting books with a buttery knife. And at the same time (though this to some has brought in a sneaking respect) the problem of Annette Vallon. Young Wordsworth is hard enough to take; the later Wordsworth is intolerable, when, under the public pressure I've spoken of, he was the hardened moralist of Rydal Mount, able to dish out criticism (of the conduct, if you please, of Coleridge and De Quincey) but unable to accept any breath of criticism of his own "Excursion." The women-folk had to smuggle the reviews in and out of the house: adverse criticism made him physically ill. Charles Lamb, and on this point nobody can disagree with Lamb, summed it up in a word. Lamb thought Wordsworth cold.

A HUNDRED years later we're still bothered too much with too much knowledge. Warm cult, cold heart. Notions of that kind ought not to come into an estimate of poetry. We need more distance.

It occurs to me to wonder how Wordsworth's poetry would seem to some old pagan suckled in a creed outworn. Suppose we pick on some engaging Roman, let's say Rufus Festus Avienus, of the fourth century A.D. Around Avienus everything, as now, was toppling into ruin, but here was his routine of life: "At dawn I pray to the gods, then I go over my estate with the servants and show