

Personal History. *It is a curious truism of American journalism that the influence an editor exerts on his generation seldom is in direct proportion to the circulation of his publication. Margaret Fuller's Dial, C. E. Norton's North American Review, and W. L. Garrison's Liberator never had more than a few thousand buyers. No magazine editor of the Twenties stamped his personality more indelibly upon his time than H. L. Mencken, whose American Mercury's print order was never large. Mencken's managing editor, Charles Angoff, assesses his former boss and the literature about him in reviewing William Manchester's "Disturber of the Peace" (see below). In the same wise, William Allen White's Emporia Gazette was a local newspaper, but its editor was a national figure. Henry Beetle Hough writes of the joys and sorrows of an obscure yet influential country editor in "Once More the Thunderer," reviewed on page 16.*

H. L. Mencken—Joyous Iconoclast

DISTURBER OF THE PEACE: *The Life of H. L. Mencken. By William Manchester. New York: Harper & Bros. 336 pp. \$3.75.*

By CHARLES ANGOFF

IT HASN'T often happened in the history of American literature that a living author has occasioned so many works, in the smaller and in the larger form, about himself as has H. L. Mencken. In this regard he belongs to a select company. A half-dozen books have already been written about him, about as many masters' theses, and scores of articles. William Manchester's book is the latest in the list of full-length discussions. It is the longest so far and it is probably the most fully documented. It has more about Mencken's forbears, more about his parents (especially about his mother), more about his newspaper days than any of its predecessors. And the discussions of Mencken's career on *The Smart Set* and *The American Mercury* are done in greater detail than anywhere else. Finally, Mr. Manchester's remarks about at least two of Mr. Mencken's books, "Notes on Democracy" and "The Making of a President," display a refreshing critical independence.

While valuable, the book is not without its shortcomings. The writing is so Menckenic in style that it is sometimes embarrassing; carbon-copy Menckenesque is not easy to take. On the *Smart Set* Mencken and George Jean Nathan, it seems, "guarded their meager funds as a nun guards her chastity," and "the fifty dollars a week they theoretically got for their editing often remained *non est*." Mr. Manchester goes so far in his imita-

tion that he sometimes apes Mencken's occasional lapses into bad taste. He says of William Jennings Bryan's death: "A politician to the last, he had died on a Sunday, thus assuring a great play in the Monday papers. . . ."

More serious is Mr. Manchester's lack of a sense of critical proportion about his subject. In places he gushes

almost like the proverbial schoolgirl. One example: "His stupendous gift for invective had now reached heights so incredible, so breath-taking, so awe-inspiring, so terrible, that in its indictment of the national culture it wrung monthly gasps from sixty thousand readers and porcupined the hair of intellectuals, Army officers, bond salesmen."

Yet in the canon of the books about Mencken, Mr. Manchester's can quite well hold its own. While it has deficiencies, it has less than the others. Dr. Isaac Goldberg's massive work "The Man Mencken" is so uncritical and filled with so much of his own boyish philosophizing as to be of little value. Benjamin De Casseres's "Mencken and Shaw," besides being written in roundhouse prose, is generally a hymn of praise of Mencken as against Shaw. Ernest Boyd's "H. L. Mencken" merits mention for its worldly outlook and penetrating insights. Unfortunately it stops roughly with the establishment of *The American Mercury*; which is to say it deals only with about half of Mencken's career, for it was while on the *Mercury* that Mencken achieved his widest general appeal and most serious critical reception. "The Irreverent Mr. Mencken," by Edgar Kemler (published in the spring of



THE AUTHOR: When a professor at Amherst's Massachusetts State College some years ago suddenly launched into vituperation about "a man named Mencken" William Manchester decided one capable of inspiring such wrath must be worth reading. He sought out Mencken material at once in the college library. The fascination followed him into the Marine Corps and he read Mencken wherever he could. Wounded on Okinawa, hospitalized five months, finally discharged, he went to work as police reporter for the *Daily Oklahoman* in Oklahoma City. But within a year the Mencken-magnet

was pulling—and he was off to the University of Missouri's graduate school to be near the only complete file of the old *Smart Set* in the Kansas City library. He soon had questions only Mencken could answer and he wrote to him, an invitation to Baltimore forthcoming. When Mencken had read the graduate thesis that summer he gave official permission for the biography and suggested as well a berth on the *Baltimore Evening Sun*. There Manchester's reportorial range has included a campaign for better mental hospitals and the recent successful battle to defeat the antivivisectionists who would have kept Johns Hopkins and the U. of Maryland medical schools from using stray dogs in experiments. Meanwhile intensive interviews with Mencken, his friends, and his enemies went on. Once they covered a fire together—a church whose architecture Mencken had always abhorred. Their evident satisfaction almost landed them in jail as suspected arsonists. At twenty-eight Manchester has a seasoned biographer's creed. "My interest in Mencken is that of a biographer—not of a moralist, psychiatrist, or sociologist. The relationship at its best is unique. It is completely non-judgmental; it is as preposterous for a biographer to be offended by his subject as for a scientist to be indignant with bacteria under his microscope. Generally I approved of this extraordinary man; occasionally I was outraged by him. But I am always sympathetic with the man behind the behavior."

—K. S.

1950) is in some ways better than Manchester's since it is more objective and reveals more mature critical resources and a firmer understanding of the general period. Mr. Kemler, however, does not succeed wholly in getting on paper the full flavor of Mencken's personality.

Perhaps the chief value of Mr. Manchester's book lies in the fact that it will help right the balance in the recent views of Mencken. The general current of critical opinion has not been too favorable to him. Some have even maintained that future historians will probably allot to him no more than a longish footnote. If that turns out to be the case, it will be all the worse for the literary historians.

Not that Mencken is the Dr. Johnson or Dean Swift or Bernard Shaw of America, as Mr. Manchester seems to imply and as some commentators and critics assured us in the Twenties. Mencken belongs on a less exalted plane. His deficiencies as a literary figure are many and in some respects even more serious than his severest critics have yet noted. But it is also clear that his contributions to American literary and general cultural history are substantial. His period of glory as an editor was brief (on the *Mercury* it lasted less than five years), but in that time he achieved nothing less than a revolution in periodical journalism. He democratized it. Though he professed to despise the "booboisie" he was really very deeply attracted by them and was happy when associating with them and reading about them. Horse-thieves, bums, ladies of the evening, circus clowns, prisoners, waiters, East Side mothers, Chamber of Commerce bores, prostitutes, Elks, Eagles—he got them all into the pages of the *Mercury*.

It was probably Mencken, more than any other single editor of a national magazine appealing to a superior audience, who made it decent to discuss religious and political leaders (and also religion and politics) with park-bench realism. He tore away the virtual immunity that had hitherto protected these folk—especially the men of the cloth. It is true that he thus opened the door to mere gossip and adjective-slinging; it is true that some of his own political writings were uninformed and angry; but it is also true that he made it easier for Frank Kent to write his magnificent piece on President Coolidge in the *Mercury* and for Elmer Davis later to write his memorable article on the late Bishop Manning in *Harper's*.

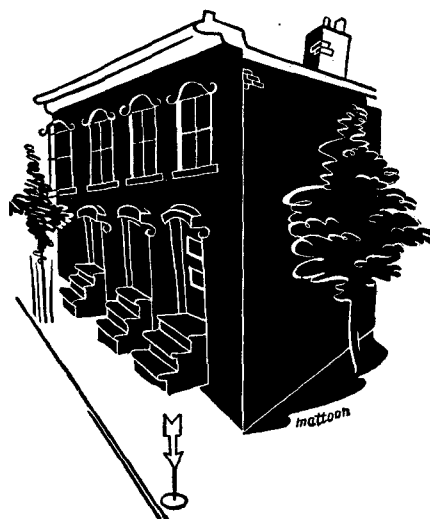
The *New Yorker* profiles of the not-so-well-known are justly famous, but few people seem to realize that the *Mercury* preceded *The New Yorker* in the publication of such articles.

Mencken found enormous amusement in, so to speak, second-drawer men and women, and it was largely in the portrayal of them that Henry Pringle and Stanley Walker and Herbert Asbury first made their mark. And who else was it if not Mencken who brought medicine and architecture and music and psychology and chemistry and biology to the attention of readers of the better magazines—not as news items but as intelligent, authoritative reports and discussions?

The Unapproachables who edited the ancient and respectable periodicals of Boston and New York did not trouble themselves publicly and vigorously to oppose the censors. But Mencken went to enormous trouble to do so. He did something historic in the celebrated case of Dreiser's "The Genius," and he did something of almost equal importance in the "Hatrack" case, as Mr. Manchester indicates. In both these cases Mencken dramatized the issue of artistic freedom from molestation by self-appointed policemen of public morals, and the victories he won, though partial, merit grateful remembrance.

Finally, he brought a salubrious excitement and a generosity of spirit to American literary life which it had probably not experienced since the days of Walt Whitman, and which in all truth it has not experienced again since Mencken, to his own misfortune, gave up writing about what he used to call "beautiful letters" and began to write about politics. What other literary man in the past thirty years has made the discussion of books so interesting? Who else made them so worth fighting over? What other man has given so freely of his time and encouragement to budding novelists and essayists and historians—yes, and even to poets, whom he publicly condemned as immature boys and girls, but whom he secretly admired?

Charles Angoff was managing editor on Mencken's American Mercury.



Homer Didn't Tell Lies

HENRY GROSS AND HIS DOWSING ROD. By Kenneth Roberts. New York: Doubleday & Co. 310 pp. \$3.

By ROBERT P. TRISTRAM COFFIN

I AM a poor man to review this book. I believe in everything Kenneth Roberts writes; I am, as I discovered years ago, a poet; and I am also, as I discovered just the other day, an amateur dowser. Yet with these handicaps on objectivity here goes for an honest opinion of a vivid book on water-locating, which has been in the militant making for some years now just to the southwestward of me in and around Arundel—or, as the shortsighted natives call it, Kennebunkport.

All my life long I have grown heartily sick of the thesis of the reliability of the so-called exact sciences and its corollary, the unreliability of folklore; I regard folklore as the one unchanging truth in a mutable world. Since I was in college the physicists and astronomers have flatly reversed themselves on the size, shape, and nature of the universe and have thrown Euclid out of the window with never a word of being sorry for astronomy's earlier mistakes. Three hurricanes not predicted by exquisite laboratory instruments have ripped the shingles off my barn. Yet radio weather reports, so exquisitely unreliable that we lost a great weapon against the German submarines by suppressing them during the war, go blatantly on and are trusted. As a poet I have had to fight for the right to trust more in my fishermen friends—living barometers and thermometers and anemometers evolved by man's coming home alive from three centuries of gales—rather than in laboratory forecasts of weather; I have had to fight for my thesis that Homer doesn't tell us such lies as astrophysicists and that ancient books that come from folk experience are still truthful, whereas all textbooks of science go out of date every decade.

So it warms my heart to see Kenneth Roberts catch Dr. Vannevar Bush believing in such crackpot hokum as that all eels originate in the Sargasso Sea when any Maine barefoot boy could tell him differently and show him millions of eels born in brooks and ponds here in Maine. But such catching of scientists out in inferior and dead measurements by instrument will do no quick good. It will take years before the scientist will believe in Kenneth Roberts's proposition that his friend Henry Gross can and does locate water with a rod. It