

# The Case for Lafayette

THE PEOPLE'S GENERAL. By David Loth. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 320 pp. \$3.50.

By LEO GERSHOY

LAFAYETTE'S life was packed with thrills and adventure. For more than half a century there was enough of war, revolution, romance, fierce political strife, travel, and prison to satisfy half a dozen ordinary individuals and to conform even to the most rigorous standards of Hollywood. Where it ceased being personal to become public, or vice versa, is hard to say, though David Loth indicates by his subtitle that he is dealing with "the personal story." For the greater part of the story there is ample and solid documentation.

It required considerable self-confidence and long experience with the blue pencil to attempt to pack these details into slightly more than 300 pages and not lose their excitement. Judging by the product before us the calculated literary risk was worth taking. Mr. Loth's latest biography has a lively, colorful style to commend it, a quick-paced narrative, and many moments of dramatic intensity. To the reader it gives most of what he needs by way of orientation together with an appraisal of Lafayette's personality and importance, which it is not likely all readers will accept in its entirety or with full approval.

On one point agreement should be general: that Lafayette is at long last treated as a real human being and not a papier-mâché hero. While the author does not exactly think ill of him, he remains happily well to this side of idolatry and succeeds in disposing effectively of the conventional picture of a wealthy young French aristocrat inspired by noble idealism and high altruism, sacrificing an assured future in his own country and rushing overseas to serve freedom and humanity under the leadership of General Washington. Dissatisfied, restless, and unhappy in France, Lafayette went abroad to court glory, and fame rushed out to embrace him.

Beginning with the American adventure, where Mr. Loth makes good use of the extensive researches of Professor Louis Gottschalk—an indebtedness that he handsomely acknowledges in his preface—the author traces Lafayette's long and exciting career on both sides of the Atlantic. In passing he does not omit that important part of the personal story which concerned Lafayette's romances.

Mr. Loth is at his best with the American story where he gives a vivid

account of the young Marquis's first exposure, under fire, to republicanism and sketches the beginning of Lafayette's fabulous friendship with George Washington. There his knowledge and command of the material are readily visible.

When he gets to Lafayette in the French Revolution his treatment is just as vivid as before, but his insights seem less sharp and his judgment less balanced, possibly because he is less familiar with the terrain or because his guides, who seem from the bibliographical note to be Carlyle and Madelin, are less trustworthy. Lafayette's revolutionary activities were merely suspended in 1789, for after playing an important or at least a dramatic part in the great Revolution he gave a kind of repeat performance forty years later, in 1830. In between he languished less than happily but with much fortitude in an Austrian prison, then displayed his courage again by refusing to get on the band wagon of the victorious Napoleon, who had effected his release, and for fifteen years more kept his faith with revolutionary idealism or its blurred memory by participating in the Parliamentary opposition to the returned Bourbons. In 1824, when he was in his sixty-seventh year, the indestructible old campaigner found the energy to make a final triumphal tour through all the states of his adopted country, receiving from the enthusiastic Americans a rousing and protracted welcome that should have exhausted a more robust and younger man. But Lafayette's devotion to liberty and his love of his second country, buttressed by an in-

satiable capacity for receiving adulation that time had not diminished, enabled him to surmount the handicaps of age and the exacting demands of his admirers. He died, so to speak, with his republican boots on, even though he had personally aborted a republic that might have been born in the revolution of 1830. For the last four years of his life he persevered in a kind of platonic republicanism that he voiced from the opposition benches in the Chamber of Deputies.

A few inaccuracies here and there in the text might have been caught by more careful proofreading, but there are no serious slips. On the whole Lafayette as a person receives excellent treatment from his biographer. But the evaluation of Lafayette's importance leaves a question or two in the reviewer's mind. In focusing on "the personal story of Lafayette" Mr. Loth presumably wishes to make clear that he is not writing an old-fashioned "life and times" biography. With that decision one can have no quarrel. But where the subject is isolated too much from his background the larger picture of developments becomes refracted and the account somewhat misleading. What Lafayette possessed was courage in a high degree. He had superb self-confidence. Life sobered him without dampening his exuberance. He kept faith with himself and his ideals, even when his actions were least understood. Those were admirable qualities; the case for Lafayette could rest on them.

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—New York Public Library Picture Collection.

"Lafayette the Prisoner Comforted by His Wife and Daughters."

## Mr. Radio

FIFTY FABULOUS YEARS: 1900-1950. By H. V. Kaltenborn. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 312 pp. \$3.50.

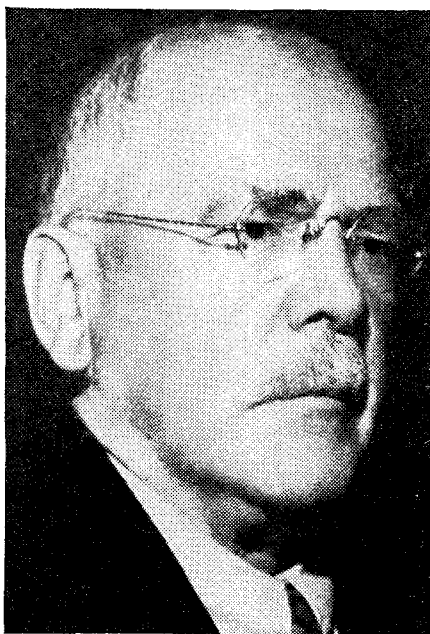
By JOHN T. WINTERICH

"EXTEMPERANEOUS speaking has always come far more easily to me than any kind of writing," says H. V. Kaltenborn early in these memoirs, and the memoirs bear him out. He has a good story to tell and he tells it matter-of-factly, at times stodgily, never vividly, always honestly. That story is best before radio comes into it, and in that earlier period there is considerable room for story. For it comes with something of a shock to learn that Mr. Kaltenborn is in his seventy-third year. Has anyone ever given him the label of Mr. Radio? It is time somebody did.

Kaltenborn opened his window on the world by serving in the Spanish-American War. By no fault of his he got no further than the late Confederate States, but that was another world than Wisconsin. He supplemented his Army pay by serving as correspondent for back-home papers. He then set out for the Paris Exposition of 1900, shipped on a cattle-boat (*de rigueur* for the penniless tourist in those times), saw France and Germany, and returned to Paris, where for several months he supported himself by selling stereoscopes and stereoscopic views from door to door. He missed wealth but learned fluent French. Back home again he got a job on the *Brooklyn Eagle* by submitting a poem. The *Eagle* was his life before radio claimed him and even after.

He got leave to go to Harvard, was inspired by "Copey," and became tutor to Vincent Astor, which involved him in further foreign travel—not on a cattle-boat. He returned to his desk at the *Eagle*, which in 1914 initiated a forum on world affairs. Kaltenborn began his career as an interpreter of current events without benefit of microphone. The Rev. Newel Dwight Hillis thundered from the pulpit of Plymouth Church that the *Eagle* should not have a war editor of German descent. The *Eagle* stood by Kaltenborn. When Roy Howard's premature armistice story broke Kaltenborn refused to credit or print it and thereby scooped the world.

The transition to radio is here recited with far too much casualness—one is in it, in fact, before one realizes it. Kaltenborn's picture of eolithic broadcasting days is pleasant and interesting, and one would like more of it. There was no stop-watch timing—



H. V. Kaltenborn — "a President of the United States was listening in."



—Lotte Jacobi.

James W. Gerard—"Tammany was a benevolent society."

one ran short or long and nobody minded. A cough or a sneeze didn't matter—on the contrary it rather humanized the program. If one wanted a studio door shut one yelled to somebody to shut it, and a rapt world heard all.

Since this is a thoroughly honest narrative there is a reference to President Truman's "excellent imitation" of Kaltenborn following the 1948 election. "Such a rare distinction was hardly deserved. One might think I was the only one who had predicted Mr. Truman's defeat." But at least he had had the satisfaction of knowing that a President of the United States was listening in.

## Of a Long Life

MY FIRST EIGHTY-THREE YEARS IN AMERICA. By James W. Gerard. New York: Doubleday & Co. 372 pp. \$3.50.

By ARTHUR S. LINK

WE HAVE been almost overcome with autobiographies by "fighting liberals," "fighting editors," and the like; but we have had few apologists for the Good Old Days, when ragamuffins became captains of industry and young men of modest means married heiresses. It is high time that some unashamed conservative should write a defense of the past.

Mr. Gerard's defense of the *status quo ante That Man* is, however, rarely eloquent and almost never convincing; and its failure to come off solves at least one minor historical problem—why it was that James W. Gerard never rose above the second level of importance, in spite of his immense wealth and considerable service to the Democratic Party and the people.

Few men have had greater privileges and rarer opportunities for public service than Gerard. Born in 1867 the scion of one of the most distinguished families of New York, he made his own considerable fortune all the more secure when he married the daughter of Marcus Daly, the "Silver King." He moved in the best circles; he did the proper thing by studying law and entering the ancestral law firm. And yet when the great progressive movement, which spawned such leaders as Theodore Roosevelt, Henry L. Stimson, and Franklin Roosevelt, overturned the politics of New York State Gerard was sitting on the sidelines.

The reason for his failure to seize upon one of the greatest political opportunities ever offered to an American is not hard to see after reading this volume. Gerard had no political philosophy that this reviewer can discern. He apparently was not motivated by any impelling desire to serve the people, much less to enter the battle in behalf of various submerged groups, as so many of his contemporaries were doing. As a lawyer and businessman he was undoubtedly conscientious, shrewd, and successful; but in politics he was a dilettante.

All this is evident from his own story. He became a dutiful member of the Tammany organization, a large contributor to its treasury, and in due time a confidant of Charles F. Murphy, its boss. To Gerard Tammany was a benevolent society and Murphy a patriotic and thoroughly honest benefactor. He supported Champ Clark for