

## Candor & Science

### THE COLLECTED EARLIER POEMS.

By William Carlos Williams. New York: New Directions. 482 pp. \$5.

By I. L. SALOMON

TO increase the prestige of William Carlos Williams, the winner of the National Book Award for Poetry (1950), his publishers have issued this collection of his earlier poems. It is a good thing they have done so, for in this book the work of thirty-three years stands exposed, revealing the importance of Dr. Williams as a poet even had he never written a line after 1939.

The essentiality of Dr. Williams lies in his approach to the poem, his union of idea and form, and his unceremonious insistence that the things seen spring alive imaginatively by the proper distillation of emotion into words. He has gathered sustenance from the arts, from music and painting, as well as from his environment, yet not solely from Rutherford, New Jersey, where he is a practising pediatrician. He brings to his poetry the candor of his science, and his themes are concerned with people and their customs in America in the large, and with the flora in the microcosm of the locality he lives in. He is constantly breaking the principles of his esthetic canons. A good old-fashioned romanticist in his earliest work, he becomes an anti-poetic primitive. An imagist with H. D. and Ezra Pound, he becomes an objectivist, the spare line and primary color being essential to his delineation of objects. In fine, the various sections contain enough first-rate work to prove he is a poet who has never stopped growing. That is his virtue, his prime distinction.

If the influence is drawn that Dr. Williams has preserved too much of his early work, the charge cannot be wholly denied. Yet in this book of approximately three hundred poems,

there are at least fifty that will appeal to the modern reader. His best poems are the crystallization of his principles of writing, change as these did. His lyrics in one of the earliest sections, "The Tempers," are among the finest that have appeared in our generation. They are cast in the traditional mold, yet note how the form, suggesting a variant idea of Matthew Arnold, does not impede the movement of the verse in this song from "The Birth of Venus":

Come with us and play!  
See, we have breasts as women!  
From your tents by the sea  
Come play with us: it is forbidden!

and how seventeenth century is this example from "The Fool's Song":

I tried to put a bird in a cage  
O fool that I am!  
For the bird was Truth.  
Sing merrily, Truth: I tried to put  
Truth in a cage!

In "Al Que Quiere" (To Him Who Wants It) Dr. Williams forsakes rhyme and again shows his mastery in a lyric, "Spring Song," that has the metaphysical quality of Donne:

there is something  
temptingly foreign  
some subtle difference,  
one last amour

to be divided for  
our death-necklaces, when  
I would merely lie  
hand in hand in the dirt with you.

To Dr. Williams form is all, whether it is measured in traditional rhythm and rhyme or bears its own cadence in free verse. There is a sardonic bitterness that shows his large humanity in "Impromptu: The Suckers," a poet's savage reaction to the Sacco-Vanzetti miscarriage of justice. There is a satirical and acidulous quality in "Tract," a poem that tears the sham of indecency that surrounds modern-day funerals, a poem that restores man to dignity in burial.

## Purrs of Normality

A SHORT WALK FROM THE STATION. By Phyllis McGinley. New York: Viking Press. 175 pp. \$2.75.

By ANNE FREMANTLE

WOMEN, alas, are rarely geniuses. In all recorded history there are only a handful: all the others are also-rans. Because, always, there was the housework or the running of the house; there were often children to bear, oftener to bear with; and always, most of all, there was, and is, and ever will be, the inner certainty, implicit in heredity as in environment, that Milton was inspired, and was stating an eternal verity when he wrote: he for God only, she for God in him.

Moon-like, moon-lit, woman has sung, as Sappho did, or has painted, as Marie Laurencin does, admirably—for a woman. But when she overreaches herself, the failure is more than dismal: it is in fact, nearly always, grotesque. George Eliot was good in "Adam Bede," very good in "Middlemarch"; she was absurd in "Felix Holt" or "Daniel Deronda." "The Sonnets from the Portuguese" or Emily Brontë's mystical verse are magnificent, but they are not the war: nor of Troy, nor of "From Here to Eternity." It is not possible to compare anything any woman has ever written with "Hamlet" or "Faust" or "War and Peace" or "Remembrance of Things Past."

And, curiously, it is only women who hug their harness, who are reconciled to that state of life to which it has pleased God to call them, who truly succeed.

Phyllis McGinley fairly purrs her normality through all her pages: In verse or in prose she is content: she loves her life, and really enjoys being feminine, even being female, and she is both, exquisitely. Her verse is not only light, it is also lively, intelligent,

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—Illustrations by Roberta MacDonald for "A Short Walk from the Station."

# The Further Adventures of Little Willie

DOROTHY RICKARD

EDITOR'S NOTE: Eight years ago Dorothy Rickard's article "Do You Remember Little Willie?" let loose an avalanche of letters to The Saturday Review recounting many additional adventures of this wily brat. Some of the correspondence was printed; most of it was forwarded to the author. SR has asked Mrs. Rickard to report on the subsequent developments of the Little Willie saga as it has burgeoned during the intervening years.

"DO You Remember Little Willie?" concerned the life and lively times of that literary character who committed patricide as off-handedly as:

Willie poisoned father's tea.

Father died in agony.

Mother looked extremely vexed.

"Really Will," she said, "what next?"

The reader response to this unassuming little feature, tucked into the back of the issue, was tremendous. Subscribers, writing to the LETTERS TO THE EDITOR department, submitted enough Little Willies for at least three additional articles.

Among them came:

Little Willie on the track

Heard the engine squeal.

Now the engine's coming back

Scraping Willie off the wheel.

A man from Halifax, Nova Scotia, contributed:

Willie poured some scalding water

Down the neck of a neighbor's daughter.

His mother thought this rather crude,  
And said, "Willie, don't be rude."

And a man from Syracuse, New York, lifted this from Franklyn P. Adams's "Conning Tower" in the old *New York World* to send along:

Little Willie wrote a book.

Woman was the theme he took.

Woman was his only text.

Ain't he cute? He's over-sexed.

This was an Adams-ization of an original Little Willie verse that went:



Willie saw a buzz-saw buzz  
Like a bike and thought it was.  
Now his corpse is full of nicks—  
Ain't he cute? He's only six.

The Willie contributions continued through several issues of *The Saturday Review* and, in the final copy to carry the verses, Will finally attained the pearly gates:

Little Willie

Pair of skates

Hole in ice

Golden gates.

Mail from the huge following of Little Willie-ites, who had sprung from the earth, confronted the editor with the possibility of having "to move out [of his office] to make room for the correspondence." And the effect of Little Willie upon the waiting world was still further reaching.

One of the pocket-sized, reprint magazines asked and received permission to run the article. Little Willie's appearance in *SR* had its effect on the newspapers, too, many of them publishing editorials on him.

Among them was one in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* referring to the flurry among bibliophiles Will had created, and concluding with this:

Little Willie's neighbors said

They would rather he were dead.

So, with whiskey as a lure,

They caught and drowned him in the sewer.

(Though this rhyme seems worse than silly,

It's a fitting end to Little Willie.)

A period of quiescence followed the small hurricane created by William. But five years later the lovers of innocent merriment had another field day with the publication in *Pageant* of another Little Willie feature. It, too, brought its results.

A none-too-Puritan father from Boston, Mass., wrote:

Little Willie, mad as hell,

Threw his sister down the well.

Mother said, when drawing water,

"It's so hard to raise a daughter."

A Reno, Nevada, lawyer wrote saying that he had been the editor of the *Stanford Chaparral* when the original Little Willie epidemic had broken out among college humor magazines after the turn of the century. He enclosed the following:

Little Willie drove his airplane

High into a fleecy cloud,

There six cylinders exploded—

Gently dropped him in the crowd.

Mother said, while watching,  
waiting,

With a very knowing frown,

"In everything poor Willie's tackled,  
He has always fallen down."

The raft of mail which poured in on the *Pageant* editor's desk convinced him that a second Little Willie article would be in order. It appeared in the October 1950 issue of that magazine. In the meantime still another piece on Little Willie came to light in *MacLean's* and was soon collecting Little Willies from our Canadian cousins. Among them came this one:

Little Willie, in a fit insane,

Thrust his head beneath a train.

We were all surprised to find

How it broadened Willie's mind.

There is an indefinable something about Little Willie that has always made people want to write about him. That's how he got his start. That's why May Lamberton Becker, after asking a single, simple question about him in her "Reader's Guide" column in the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* section, received a mail response that outnumbered anything the column had run in a long time.

That's why I have always been delighted with every new letter regarding him—even though today, with seventy different Little Willie verses swelling my collection, and many of them in several forms, some of my incoming Willie mail duplicates poems I already have. But whether it's a different version of a familiar Little Willie, or an entirely new verse, for me it means another adventure with Little Willie.