

An Intellectual Odyssey

SO LONG TO LEARN. By John Masefield. New York: The Macmillan Co. 181 pp. \$3.

BY LOUIS SIMPSON

JOHN MASEFIELD, Poet Laureate of England, is one of the few Grand Old Men who still grace the English literary scene. Mr. Masefield, white-haired, trim, regards the far distance from the book-jacket as though scanning the seas he sailed as a youth. There is integrity in his stance, and, one suspects, a certain contempt for changes of the weather. Reading in "So Long to Learn," the story of his apprenticeship in art, one comes to understand that the man and his appearance are not divided. So it was with Thomas Hardy and Bernard Shaw; so it is today with Mr. Masefield and his fellow sailor, H. M. Tomlinson. For them literature is life.

Mr. Masefield is perhaps best known as a poet for his "Salt-Water Ballads," "The Everlasting Mercy," and "Reynard the Fox;" as a writer of prose for his "Gallipoli" or the novel "Dead Ned." His play "Tragedy of Nan" has been successfully performed on both sides of the Atlantic. In all, his works number some sixty odd. To these desk labors must be added years spent in bringing poetry to the public, by the organizing of competitive recitals. Between the boyhood in which he had intimations of immortality, and the young manhood in which he began to practise his art, there were years of vigorous and often painful experience before the mast. In this interlude, also, he suffered from the loss of the imagining faculty which had delighted his childhood. This was, for the poet, a time of doubt and depression. Americans may be flattered to learn of the circumstances in which he recovered himself:

"I was in New York City, in summer time, when I suddenly found that the faculty of mental story-telling had returned to me. . . . I was walking in an uptown part of the East Side when a story suddenly became bright in my mind, in the way that I had known of old. . . . This resurrection of my inner life was a gladness. New York City in herself was a gladness, that romantic, beautiful, exciting city, the Queen of all romantic cities, with such sparkle in her air and in her people."

"So Long to Learn" is, for the most

part, the record of his creative childhood and manhood. In Herefordshire the child escaped from the ever-watchful and misunderstanding adults to wander in meadows; to stand on the old docks of Ledbury where coal, scattered by vanished sailors, was overgrown with grass, to follow the old canals; to read the talented verses in the churchyard. Then, too, he obtained ghost stories and stories of violent happenings, which inflamed his mind. Like Wordsworth, he was haunted by the sounding cataract, but Masefield's existed in a dream country he had never seen:

"I knew also that it was dangerous to go into land above the fall, because there I might be hunted by people who used dogs, or by dogs without the people." A strange anticipation!

The care with which the later poet turned his couplets, the aggressively strong health of the ballads ("... the bloody fun of it is, they're drowned!") and the sentimentality which was to be labeled and accused by later generations, were, we may surmise, in part undertaken to exorcise childhood terrors.

The reader of more recent poetry will scarcely accept the strong critical opinions of Mr. Masefield. It is the author's privilege to express a devotion to the painting and literature of William Morris and Rossetti; but, to include the varieties of present-day art in the term modern, and to define the modern as marring of walls and searching in gutters, is almost peevish. "Modern" critical methods, with all their faults, have at least taught us to take the work of art on its own terms, before taking it on our own. E. M. Forster once remarked of Joseph Conrad that he had no creed, only opinions, "and the right to throw them overboard when facts make them look absurd." The point seems to be applicable here. Is this a characteristic of Grand Old Men?

Not the least informative pages of this chronicle are those concerning William Butler Yeats. Here is a portrait of the poet as a young man, and a view of the room in which he held his famous Monday Evenings. Mr. Masefield, with his lively interest in the theatre, and in folk story telling, is also able to give us a real sense of the personal force of John Synge, and his mission as a folk artist. Tributes to literary greatness are common enough, but some men even in praising seem to suggest that they are superior to the dead. Mr. Masefield speaks of the great as living presences, and is, therefore, in their company.



Orville Prescott—"flair for phrase-making."

Canons of Criticism

IN MY OPINION. An Inquiry Into the Contemporary Novel. By Orville Prescott. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co. 259 pp. \$3.

By MAXWELL GEISMAR

THE TITLE and subtitle of Mr. Prescott's book are quite correct. He has written a straightforward account of the books and authors he has liked or disliked during the last decade, from the vantage point of the daily book reviewer for *The New York Times*. He has asked certain questions about prevailing trends in modern fiction without really answering them. This is on the whole fortunate, I think, since Mr. Prescott's primary function—and his first impulse—is to be open and receptive to all kinds of books.

What I missed in the opening sections of the present study—on the "squandered talents" of Sinclair Lewis, John Steinbeck, and Ernest Hemingway—was something of Mr. Prescott's usual zest, verve, and flair for phrase-making. He is probably too solemn about Thomas Mann and William Faulkner among the circles of the "eminently obscure" whom he knows he should like even when he doesn't. He prefers Willard Motley to Richard Wright (which is dubious) and the young novelist Maritta Wolff to either of them, which is, in my opinion, wrong.

Mr. Prescott is sound in his belief that the social and political ideas of

Maxwell Geismar is the author of "Writers in Crisis" and "The Last of the Provincials," part of a long critical study of the novel in America.

Louis Simpson is the author of "Arivist Poems, 1940-1948."

a novelist, however admirable, have nothing necessarily to do with the final achievement of his craft, as in the case of George Orwell or Arthur Koestler. But he tends to take the assertions of the ex-Communists too seriously (in the discussion of the political novels of the 1940's) that they, as Koestler said, "are the only people on your side who know what it is all about." Are they? And whose side? Perhaps the defense of democratic values is too important to be left in the hands of those writers who still regard them as a second choice, or necessary evil.

"In My Opinion" really comes to life, however, in its discussion of the "Comrades of the Coterie." Mr. Prescott is more relaxed here, often entertaining and sharp in his judgments of English writers like Henry Green or those characters in Ivy Compton-Burnett who all talk with the polysyllabic majesty of Samuel Johnson. "Brutally frank and nakedly inhibited, wise with the brittle wisdom of cynicism and the weary wisdom of suffering," Mr. Prescott says about Miss Compton-Burnett's satire — "it makes for exhausting reading." Though stressing the issue of sexual inversion and moral decadence somewhat strongly, he is essentially right, too, on the younger (and even more brittle) American counterparts—Capote, Bowles, Buechner—of the coterie writers.

Tennessee Williams, who is the most serious figure in this group, comes in for less attention than he deserves, and almost invariably Mr. Prescott is sharper and more illuminating on writers who are not of major stature. But where I must confess he completely surprised me—and broke all his own implicit canons of good taste—was in his spirited defense of both Norman Mailer's "The Naked and the Dead" and James Jones's "From Here to Eternity." Against the background of all the new novels mentioned here, these two books are still among the best we have had—and it is much to Mr. Prescott's credit that he felt and accepted their power. In his *Times* column he even defended their purpose—if not always their expression—against the imaginary strictures of that horrible female—the young American girl—also imaginary, and represented as usual by an irate father.

Mr. Prescott likes John Hersey's "The Wall"; he omits William Styron's "Lie Down in Darkness." There is a good section on James Gould Cozzens and an appreciative account of Joyce Cary—who has, incidentally, refuted the truisms that Mr. Prescott still quotes about the "ponderous

(Continued on page 32)

Music. *Only within the last century have composers of music bothered to write books about the problems of their art and craft. Richard Wagner set the style, and his eight volumes of collected prose works are still unsurpassed—at least in bulk. In the intervening years many other composers have set down their thoughts about music between the covers of books. The latest is Paul Hindemith's "A Composer's World" (see page 19), which our reviewer calls "a unique contribution." An excerpt from it was published in SR Dec. 29. One of the matters with which Hindemith deals is the power of music to convey specific emotional or intellectual content. This is the burden also, of Sidney Finkelstein's "How Music Expresses Ideas" (page 21), a Marxist analysis. . . . Gilbert and Sullivan fans will not want to miss the two volumes reviewed below; for the ragtime to be-bop contingent, the same applies to Barry Ulanov's "A History of Jazz in America" (page 20)*

Collaborators in Strange Potpourri

THE GILBERT AND SULLIVAN BOOK. By Leslie Baily. New York: British Book Center. 443 pp. \$9.

SIR ARTHUR SULLIVAN: His Life, Letters, and Diaries. By Herbert Sullivan and Newman Flower. New York: British Book Center. 306 pp. \$3.

BY NEWMAN LEVY

LESLIE BAILY'S "The Gilbert and Sullivan Book" is well named. This is not just another book about Gilbert and Sullivan; it is—and of this there is no possible doubt whatever—the Gilbert and Sullivan book. It contains everything that the most devoted Savoyard can want. There are detailed, authoritative biographies, histories of the operettas, their origins and productions. There is entertaining social background, contemporary reviews and criticisms. And there is an abundance of delightful anecdote.

With all this there are ten beautiful color plates (including costume and scenic designs), and four hundred black-and-white reproductions including photographs, drawings, and

facsimiles of letters, music scores, programs, and press clippings.

"This book," Mr. Baily tells us, "has grown out of a series of radio programs, first broadcast by the BBC and since repeated in many parts of the world, telling the story of the partnership of Sir William S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan. As author of the radio-biography I was fortunate to obtain access to sources of documentary evidence—diaries, letters, notebooks, etc.—which had never been systematically and thoroughly examined and compared."

If you are interested in studying the creative process in action you will find a detailed account of the development of "Iolanthe" from its genesis, through its variations in W. S. Gilbert's "plot book," through its rehearsals, including the text of lyrics that were dropped out of the show, and a facsimile of pages from Gilbert's prompt book, down through the opening performance and the rave reviews the next day.

If you want to know about the banning of "The Mikado" by the Lord Chamberlain in 1907, together with Gilbert's acrid comments on censorship, you can read about it here. Also Mr. Gilbert's equally pungent remarks in defense of the censorship of plays before the Joint Parliamentary Committee in 1909.

You can read the details of Sullivan's discovery of the lost Schubert symphonies; of the production in Hollywood of the motion picture version of "The Mikado," with Martyn Green



Newman Levy, a devoted Savoyard, is author of "Opera Guyed" and other light volumes.