

The Last Gasps

THE LITTLE EMPERORS. By Alfred Duggan. New York: Coward-McCann. 255 pp. \$3.

By EDMUND FULLER

MR. DUGGAN belongs to that select group of scholarly historical novelists who write for a relatively small audience. It's a pity that mass acceptance is not to be looked for (if any book can be said to have true "mass" response), but the fact remains that "The Little Emperors," an absorbing book of considerable distinction, makes definite demands upon the reader.

For one thing, it requires him to know something, instead of supplying everything he will need to know within the frame of the book itself. No time is wasted explaining words or allusions. Among the things Mr. Duggan risks asking of his reader are some sort of working knowledge of the parlous state of the Roman Empire at the beginning of the fifth century, familiarity with a few key names involved, a moderate Latin vocabulary, and a reasonable interest in the administrative processes of Roman Britain.

If you bring these minimum requirements, or the kind of genuine intellectual curiosity and response that waives all such requirements, you will find yourself reading an unusual piece of work. Blending intelligent conjecture with known fact, as he explains in an historical note, Mr. Duggan tells of how, in A.D. 406, Britain found itself under the rule of four different Emperors within the span of a very few months. The equivocal position of Christianity in

this phase of the Empire is one of the more interesting aspects.

When the Sueves and Vandals crossed the Rhine once for all, Britain was effectively cut off from Milan (then the seat of Empire), so that the power of Emperor Honorius was nullified. The army in Britain named an Emperor of their own, one Marcus. He was put out of the way, swiftly, by Gratianus, a Briton. He, in turn, was murdered soon by Constantinus, another Briton, who was of greater stature and led an army to Europe in a major bid for the Empire as a whole. The book reflects, on both large and petty scales, the continual wars of attrition on the "marches" which Toynbee says characterize the decline of civilizations.

We see these events chiefly from the point of view of C. Sempronius Felix, Praeses (or one might say "President") of the province of Britannia Prima (including the city of Londinium). A North African, he considers himself essentially the true Roman, by contrast to the Britons. He is the typical colonial administrator and civil servant of his times. As the "little emperors" appear, Felix's position becomes precarious, hanging partly by the thread of his administrative usefulness, and partly by the fact that he is married to Maria, daughter of Gratianus.

Maria is one of the most quietly sinister characterizations that I have encountered in a long time, as she discovers the pleasures to be had from wielding a knife point upon the persons of shackled slaves.

This novel has historical insight, sophistication, and wit, all of which it employs to effect a brilliant picture of the corruptions and vices which accompany the horribly swift relapse of a culture into barbarism.

Once a Dog . . .

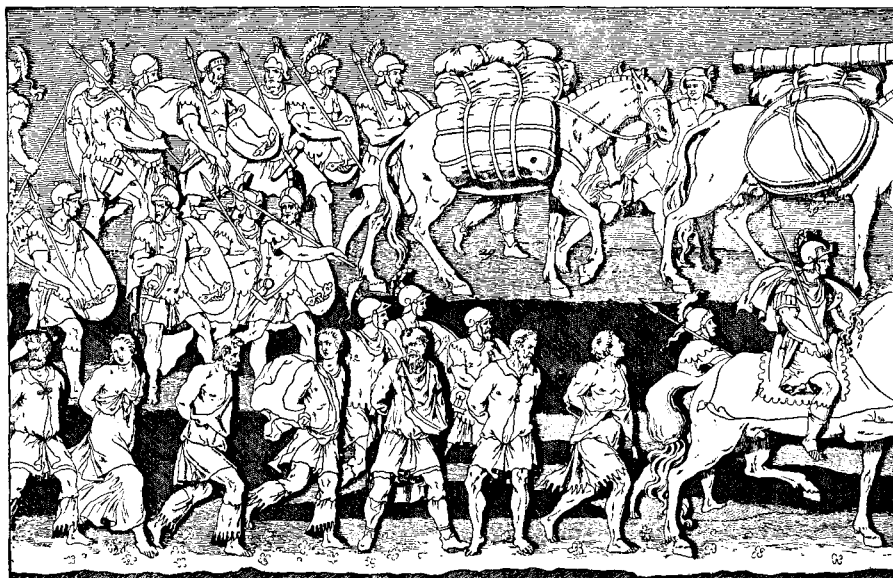
A DOG'S HEAD. By Jean Dutourd. Translated by Robin Chancellor. New York: Simon & Schuster. 149 pp. \$3.

By HENRI PEYRE

STORIES of metamorphoses of gods or men into beasts or of hybrid monsters, human only in part, held great fascination for ancient and primitive races. Indeed, Ovid's "Metamorphoses" have charmed generations of readers and "The Golden Ass" continues to entertain naive and sophisticated moderns. There is a recurrence of interest for such themes today, treated either tragically as in Kafka's Gregor changed into a loathsome bug or humorously as in David Garnett's "Lady Into Fox."

Jean Dutourd is a very promising Frenchman in his early thirties. He expounds no message of nihilism, no doctrine of political involvement, grinds no ax of any size and seems equally unconcerned in reviling or in ennobling man. He was a member of the Resistance movement, was sentenced to death by the Germans, witnessed the disillusion of the post-war years. But his cheerfulness, tinted with some healthy cynicism, has stood unimpaired. His recent novel, "Au Bon Beurre," is about a prosaic but entertaining butter-and-eggs merchant, whose fortunes rise and ebb like those of the famed Balzacian perfumer. Earlier, he had composed an amusing manual for the modern seducer, "Le petit Don Juan." In it, he voiced a Gallic protest against the gloom with which the pseudo-science of sex and the verbiage about sado-masochism, inversion, and the traumatic experience of love have shrouded what to our simpler ancestors used to appear as enjoyable fun. Dutourd is in the tradition of Voltaire. He reveres clarity, conciseness, piquancy, and irony.

An honest and pedestrian French middle-class couple had a son born with a dog's head. To her husband's irate questioning, the wife replies meekly that she has never even thought of a dog during her pregnancy. If only the infant would not survive! Alas! At eighteen months, he begins to talk articulately and thus reveals he has a man's soul. His father lectures to him about French honor and the dignity of man, in order to keep him away from dogs and make him study Greek, Latin, and French literature with the required conviction. Dog-headed Edmund, otherwise normal, goes through a healthy adolescence, with dreams



Triumphal procession of prisoners of Emperor Theodosius—A.D. 401.

—Culver.

of a literary career, ambitions of feminine conquest, and a crisis of religious mysticism. His great sorrow comes during his term of military service, when the top-sergeant torments him for having a seemingly disrespectful head and his initiation to venal love is sordid and mournful.

Edmund returns to civilian life. His parents, who had been relieved to be rid of him, send him off to find a job and live on his own. He has difficulty in securing a position, in spite of his law diplomas. He buys a beautiful dog, but is soon deserted by the only creature from whom he had expected friendship. He ends up as a teller in a bank, where a pretty and soulless secretary mocks him publicly after encouraging his advances. Suicide is the only recourse left, when Edmund decides first to try the common precept about money contributing to happiness.

He gambles on the Stock Exchange and, through the elementary device of buying low and selling high, soon piles up a fortune. He now can afford servants who respect him, an artistic country house in Louveciennes with statuettes of Barye and a superb picture of a sheepdog by Rosa Bonheur. Friends flock to him, for he provides good cognac and entertaining conversation. Women curry his favors, since he has money and they imagine him to be more animal than other lovers. He even fights a duel with one of the husbands he has cuckolded. But his heart is incurably lonely, for how can he be sure of ever being loved for himself?

Finally, a tall, slender, beautiful, and refined young widow, Anne, smothers him with passionate love. Edmund is incredibly happy. But his peace of mind is short-lived. He suspects Anne to be mad. She was indeed living a strange fairy tale. She was convinced that Edmund was a Prince Charming momentarily concealed under a furry dog's head, who would only be restored to his earlier condition if he were loved by a woman to the point of distraction. Edmund spends his fortune in trying vainly to have her cured of her gentle madness. Disabused, he ends up as a game-keeper in central France, half-exiled from men. Anne, impoverished, in tatters, still beautiful, remains submissively in love with her husband with a dog's head.

There is no moral to the fable other than the obvious and implicit one, no forced symbolic message. The cruelty and complacency of the human race are flayed with Swiftian irony. The tale is told briefly, with an economy of means not too frequent in modern fiction. The story,

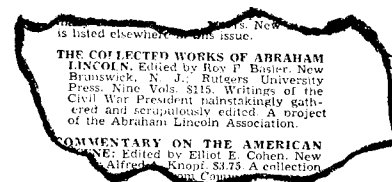
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BEHIND THE BOOK

"THE Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln," a nine-volume set which went on sale February 12 for \$115, is at once the catch-all of Lincoln's own contributions to *Lincolniana* and the end-product of twenty-nine years of dedication. (There are thousands of other contributions: between 1830 and 1939, for example, no less than 3,958 books and pamphlets about Lincoln were published in the United States alone.) "The Works" are, as a Lincoln man recently put it, "indeed the works"; they encompass an advertisement for a lost horse Lincoln put in the *Sangamo Journal* on March 26, 1836, an address he delivered at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863, and just about everything else before, between, and after. In all there are 6,870 speeches, letters, memoranda, recommendations, endorsements, and the like included (99 per cent of all known Lincoln autograph papers), 3,312 of which have never been collected before. These were discovered by one form of detective work or another, carried out by both a part-time and full-time editorial staff headed by Roy P. Basler, until recently the executive-secretary of the Abraham Lincoln Association in Springfield, Ill. Its *raison d'être* was "The Works," a *raison d'être* that eventually went through more than \$100,000. More than half that sum was contributed by the Rockefeller Foundation.

It was an enormous job. "At the beginning, Roy, Paul Angle, Jim Randall, Gib Bunn, and I sat down together and worked out a general plan," Benjamin P. Thomas, author of the recently published "Abraham Lincoln," recalled the other day, "but many unanticipated problems came up as work went forward. I know that many a time Roy would spend an entire day or even longer tracking down a name or an incident or something else that came out merely as one short sentence in a footnote. But when you look at the finished product, what a stupendous amount of information it contains, and what a tremendous job of searching, unraveling, and elucidation it represents!"

Possibly the best index of just



how much more Lincoln there is in "The Works" than originally estimated is found in an old letter of the Association's; it confidently predicts publication in five volumes in 1948, a year after the opening of the Robert Todd Lincoln papers. The fact is, however, no one had any idea of exactly how many stray bits and pieces of Lincoln's work there were, or, for that matter, where they were. Archives were consulted; catalogues searched; not a possibility was bypassed. One discovery led to another, though quite a few proprietors of Lincoln odds-and-ends had to be wooed for a couple of years before they permitted a close-up of their possessions. Some refused to relent at all, the result being that "The Works" omit about 1 per cent of Lincoln's minor known works. Basler, haunted by the history of Lincoln forgeries (a good business, still), held out wherever possible for original sources; in 75 per cent of the cases, he or a member of the staff saw the real thing. Precisely because of their exhaustive, encyclopedic approach, a considerable number of fresh Lincoln letters were turned up, mostly of the Civil War period. Though there is nothing among them of Gettysburg Address stature, there are items will make Lincoln scholars happy.

Even in the non-editorial end of the project, a major hurdle had to be surmounted. It had to do with geography. The editor, the publisher, and the printer were located in different parts of the country—the Association in Springfield; Rutgers University Press at New Brunswick, N. J., 882 miles away; and H. Wolff in New York, thirty-eight miles from Rutgers. So, it wouldn't be fair to exclude the role of the Post Office Department in "The Works." Some 13,500 pages of manuscript and 8,500 galleys were mailed in hundreds of packages from Springfield to New Brunswick to New York to New Brunswick to Springfield. Anyway, one day late in 1952, the final package was delivered, and the publication date was at last set, 144 years to the day after Lincoln was born.

—BERNARD KALB.