

# A Troubled & Uncomfortable Life

MY ISLAND HOME. By James Norman Hall. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 374 pp. \$4.

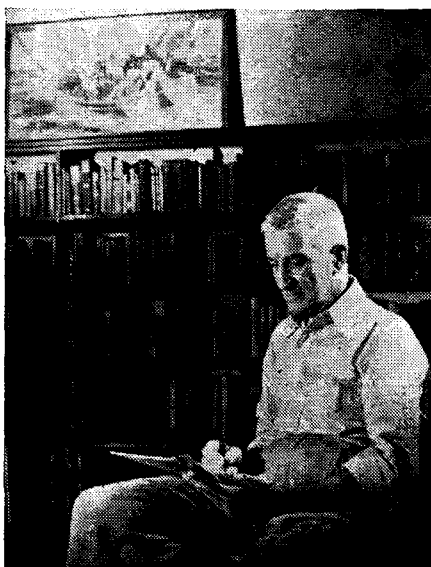
By ROBERT PAYNE

IN nearly all of James Norman Hall's work we are faced with a curious remoteness, a sense of incompleteness and an almost terrifying mask. Somehow, somewhere, something had gone wrong. He was the expatriate in *ex-celsis*, the man of great gifts who never succeeded in using them to the full, wandering from Iceland to Tahiti in search of the terrestrial paradise; but paradise never came up to his expectations, and his own gifts mocked him. His best work lies in the short stories collected posthumously this year under the title "The Forgotten One," where he describes in sharp, integral portraits the lives of those uncanny beachcombers who made their way to the islands of the South Seas, went mad, and died, having been blinded by the sun-glare, happy to die because they were weary of the misery of their loneliness among the islands. In "The Forgotten One" the characters stand out against the sun. In "My Island Home" the sunlight is only rarely allowed to enter in.

Hall's autobiography gives every appearance of having been written against the grain, without caring. He had escaped to Tahiti to forget himself, and it must have seemed the highest indecency to resurrect the ghosts of the past. They were not friendly ghosts. His childhood suffered from the awful emptiness of so many Midwestern childhoods. He wrote poetry, most of it incredibly bad, in the secrecy of the woodshed, and forever afterwards he regarded himself as "the woodshed poet." He wanted excitement, but the only excitement he knew was to run away from school when he heard the train whistling round a curve, and then he would hurry to the railway station, huddle against the stove and listen in a transport of delight to the train as it came shuddering past. For the rest there was the woodshed, bread-baking, the smell of snow-wet mittens drying on the nicked top of a hard-coal stove, the long winters when the railways spurs were so deeply covered in snow that the miners could not go to work, and the long agony of working in a store. It was a life of poverty and undeclared

rebellion, with no way out, and he writes of these days with no particular affection, and no horror either. In the end, when he could bear it no longer, a few days after being offered a job in a large clothing store, he made his way to Grinnell College with enough money for tuition and only a few dollars for living expenses. He had a feeling that he might be able to escape through poetry—by reading all the poetry in the world.

While peeling potatoes for a living, he came under the influence of Matthew Arnold. The remarkable eye of Professor Charles Payne sought him out, and it was explained that Arnold's bad lines were as bad as bad lines can be. Hall was not so sure. The attempt to wean him from too great an addiction to Arnold's world-weary romanticism failed; Arnold's influence remained—it is in the rhythms of his sentences and in the modulations of his mind to the end. Thoreau, Whitman, a host of other influences worked on him, but none bit so deep into his soul. When Hall left college he became of all things a social worker in the Boston branch of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. He was sent to investigate the slums, the quarreling parents, the undernourished children. He tells the story of Mrs. Moriarty whose husband had left her with three healthy, hungry boys to support. Every night she scrubbed the floors of the courthouse to earn a living, and when she returned to her slum, all the slum-dwellers were up in arms against her for neglecting her children. Worse still, they accused her of having an affair with an Italian image-vendor. Hall tells the story wonderfully well.



J. N. Hall—"man against darkness."

Mrs. Moriarty, full-blooded, Irish, standing at the head of the stairs with her arms akimbo, rejoicing even when her arch-enemy cuts the strings of her own washing lines and deposits the washing on the muddy courtyard below, is of the stuff of legend, the most living of all his remembered characters. It is as though for a brief interval a gust of warm human sympathy came from his heart. Afterwards there is only heartache, the long loneliness which led him by a circuitous route to Tahiti.

Talking one day to Professor Charles Payne, Hall explained that he had discovered in himself a complete lack of social consciousness. He had decided to give up social work and become a shepherd in Montana. He wanted loneliness, quiet, a woodshed where he could write his appalling poetry. In the end he decided to become a writer, and collected enough money to spend some months in England, promising himself the keen enjoyment of a visit to Conrad, but when he reached Conrad's door a fit of diffidence seized him; he turned and fled. The war came just in time. He joined Kitchener's Army, though he had no experience of soldiering and no liking for it. His loneliness vanished, and at the bloody battles of Loos he discovered the comradeship he had wanted all his life. There was comradeship of a kind later, when he joined the Lafayette Escadrille, but the warmth had left him, and he tells the stories of his air-battles as though they had happened to someone else, in another country and at another time. When he met Charles Nordhoff in Paris, he took an instant dislike to him. Though they became close friends, Hall makes it clear that he was never entirely at ease with Nordhoff during the years of their association. Rich, impudent, lazy, with a bright Californian cynicism and a fine cutting-edge to his mind, Nordhoff was all that Hall was not. He had the aristocrat's temper and the aristocrat's disdain for trifles, and when Hall kept harking back to his Iowa childhood, Nordhoff was out of patience. Once, in a surprising dialogue, Hall calls Nordhoff "father," and perhaps he found in Nordhoff the father he had hardly known in life. Yet we are never quite sure. The springs are murky. There seems to have been a thorn in the flesh, and as you read the book you are conscious of a man battling against darkness, but without the strength to light a lightning-bolt. He might have become another Melville. Instead he will be remembered as one of the authors of "Mutiny on the Bounty," and this is a pity.

Robert Payne has written fiction, political comment, and biographies.

## Millionaire Mission

**THE SHAPE OF SUNDAY:** *An Intimate Biography of Lloyd C. Douglas.* By Virginia Douglas Dawson and Betty Douglas Wilson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 372 pp. \$3.50.

By CARL BODE

**D**URING the last twenty-odd years Lloyd Douglas was our most prominent—almost our only—practitioner of an extremely disreputable literary form, the didactic novel. Critics clearly prefer pleasure to instruction from our novelists, and this is all the more true if the instruction is badly handled. Since Douglas was guilty on both counts, it is no surprise that the critics mauled him. From a belletristic point of view he has, in fact, no significance for us; from a social point of view he does.

The lasting importance of his best-sellers will lie in the way they help to explain some of the needs and cravings of the American public in the 1930's and '40's. His books managed to satisfy these, as they changed, almost by accident. It took the coming of the Great Depression to make his first novel sell its hundreds of thousands of copies. Its message, jauntily delivered and cheaply embellished, was that if you did good to someone and did not let it be known, you thereupon acquired a thing called "personal power." Your personality would become radiant and all sorts of rewards would be yours. That was what Douglas preached in "Magnificent Obsession" and his eight succeeding novels of the Depression period. But with the onset of World War II he abandoned the naive materialism of his original message and in "The Robe" wrote a novel with the Crucifixion as its center. The hero and heroine of "The Robe" choose to die a martyr's death; the rewards are no longer of this world but the next. In "The Big Fisherman," his final novel, Douglas's preachment was "Give up your worldly goods and follow Christ." Both books sold even more remarkably than the ones written before.

"The Robe" and "The Big Fisherman" matched the altered temper of the times. One of the questions that confronts a student of a culture like ours is just how an enormously pop-

ular writer such as Douglas manages to win his mass market, and keep it. Certainly the war affected him as it did most of us. But his daughters' biography shows plainly that Douglas's personal life played an important role in reshaping what he had to say. The authors give a picture of a devoted, closely-knit family which found the material rewards of writing best-sellers rich but later discovered that they counted little when weighed against sickness or death. For Douglas and his family, illness became almost a constant companion. By the time he finished his last novel, his wife had died and he himself was invalidated.

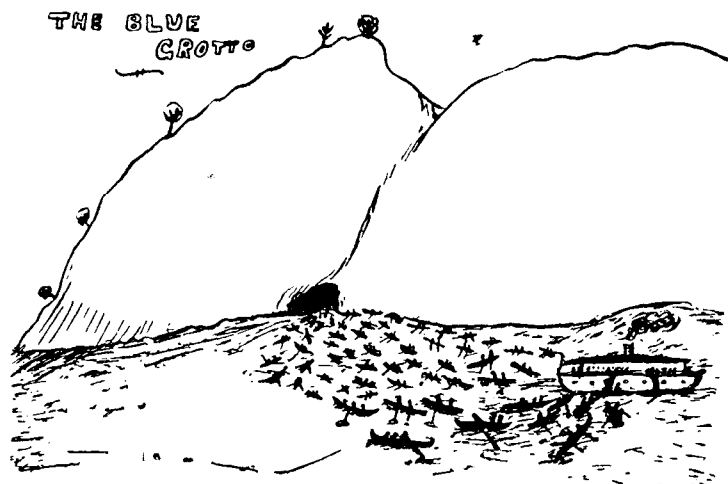
The best thing about "The Shape of Sunday" is the warm yet not mawkish account of Douglas's family life. The perils and severe limitations that go with any biography by relatives are of course well known. With allowance for them, "The Shape of Sunday" is a fair enough job. Starting with his first pastorate, the Douglas girls retraced their father's career faithfully. They went back to the communities where he and they had lived; they talked with people who had known him; and they checked local newspapers and books for references. They added a great deal of family anecdote and in the last few chapters drew heavily on his correspondence. The result might have been impossibly saccharine. It is a tribute to them that it is not. In general they looked at their father with the loving but discerning eyes that good daughters often have. When it comes to dealing with the fact that no literary critic ever saw much to praise in him as a writer, they are uncomfortable but they do not make a scene about it. The book is not sticky nor is its tone annoying. It gives us the necessary complement to Douglas's own volume of memoirs on his early life.

## Notes

**INFIRM GENIUSES:** There is a curious game sometimes played by graduate students of literature who are cramming for their comprehensive exams. It goes like this: What writer was insane? epileptic? hunchbacked? club-footed? dyspeptic? and so on. The connection between the infirmities of geniuses and the writings of (in these cases) Smart, Swinburne, Pope, Byron, and Carlyle is useful when it serves for insights or qualifications. But it becomes a mockery of literature and of biography when the infirmity is assumed to be the most important part of the genius and his work. Yet that is how W. R. Bett goes about his fifteen brief essays in "The Infirmities of Genius" (Philosophical Library, \$4.75). He is aware of their writings and biographies, to be sure, and sketches them in with an amateur, gushy style, along with what he considers of paramount importance—their infirmities.

The idea of genius being inseparable from infirmity is not at all new; Edmund Wilson's "The Wound and the Bow" explored it through the legend of Philoctetes. But such a study must be done with far more subtlety and knowledge than Mr. Bett brings to it. If he wants to continue on the same track, he can add some other writers to his literary infirmary: for blindness Milton and Joyce, for insanity Swift and Collins, for melancholia Johnson, for inversion Proust and Gide, and so on. But it is only a game; cross-word puzzles are more rewarding because they are less pretentious. —ROBERT HALSBAND.

**SAM CLEMENS'S PARADISE:** A fantasy of what happens in the heavenly Paradise can be neat satire on our mundane realities. And if the visitor there is an honest and plain thinker (Continued on page 41)



—By Lloyd C. Douglas from "The Shape of Sunday."

Carl Bode, professor of English at the University of Maryland, has published articles on such American novelists as Lloyd C. Douglas and Peter B. Kyne.