even when it starved the esthetic. which I failed to follow; so dismayed was I at having, by my idiot's question, set his mind working at such a pitch of concentration on a topic indifferent to me"). Some are imaginary: a dialogue with George Moore: a fictional recreation of a day in Voltaire's life at Ferney ("Save me from my friends, O God, and I will deal with my enemies myself!"); and an intensely moving dream-encounter between the author of "Pilgrim's Progress" and one who left the Way to dwell in the house of Mr. Common Sense, not far from the Booths of Vanity Fair.

The Book Booths of Vanity Fair had no customer in Sir Desmond. He joined in no fashionable cheers for "a poet emerging from a header into his subconsciousness, glistening and triumphant with an old boot or fruitcan in his hand" or novelists "who have found out that it is a great deal easier to pour forth what may pass as a plausible stream of ideas going through an imaginary person's head than to make that person behave in a convincing and interesting manner." For him, psychology's place in fiction was subordinate to moral interest. He was no foe of literary experiment, no stodgy dragon guarding the gates of literature against the ambitious young (indeed, he provided young writers with critical encouragement and even financial assistance). But in a period when "a sense of the importance in art of qualities of intellect and feeling which we call by ethical names, magnanimity, nobility, disinterestedness, has become dim or confused" he worked steadily and brilliantly to clarify that sense.

When I look up and see the line of his books, the thought that it will grow no longer is not so distressing (he has expressed himself) as the thought that so many rare things in the world must now go without an appreciator, so many fine vibrations of life lose themselves in vacancy. (The closing words of this review are his, too—the last paragraph of his portrait of Henry James.)

Prodigal Son

By Witter Bynner

WHAT was given
Me by birth
Was not heaven,
It was earth.

Though some other House be fine, Strange old father, This is mine.

Ideas in Our Time

"The Writer and His Craft" (University of Michigan Press, 297 pp. 83), a volume that brings together the lectures delivered at the University of Michigan at the time of the annual awarding of Avery Hopwood prizes, offers a survey of the main trends in our literary life during the past two decades. Here it is reviewed by Maxwell Geismar, literary historian and critic, author of "Rebels and Ancestors" and other volumes.

By Maxwell Geisman

USUALLY approach volumes like I "The Writer and His Craft: The Hopwood Lectures, 1932-1952" with a kind of morbid suspiciousness, only too often justified. But this collection is a distinct relief from others of its type; it is not only readable and useful, it is illuminating and valuable. The Avery Hopwood awards for creative writing at the University of Michigan are notable exceptions to the usual run of academic fellowships, as these lectures indicate. Among the recipients of the prizes have been Arthur Miller, John Ciardi, Maritta Wolff, and Betty Smith. Among the speakers at the yearly ceremonies, the emphasis has been on professional writers who take their craft seriously.

The result is that one gets from this volume an interesting survey of the main trends in our intellectual life during the last two decades. Robert Morss Lovett opens the series of talks with an eloquent plea for communication in the arts. Saying that "shared experience is the greatest of human goods," he combines John Dewey's pragmatism and Santayana's argument for animal faith in life. Max Eastman-the early Eastman, voluble but vital-stresses scientific method while he abuses the New Humanists of the 1930's and berates the "cult of unintelligibility" among the modernists. Henry Hazlitt adds an acute appraisal of what was to become the opposite pole of critical thought in a troubled decade: the Marxist critics and the propaganda novels.

The critics have long since recanted; the novels now seem wooden. Yet this decade of the 1930's, so much abused on every side today, was still a fruitful one for the main stream of our

literature, which never succumbed to the polar violence that surrounded it. The early novels of Thomas Wolfe and John Steinbeck—a far cry from "Sweet Thursday"—and the high period of William Faulkner's work are mentioned in many of the Hopwood lectures. Again, Henry Seidel Canby stresses the democratic, equalitarian, and individualistic nature of our national literature. Even in the 1940's, when the New Critics, conservative, formalistic, authoritarian, took over the literary battleground in a revised version of the New Humanism, there were dissenting opinions. Among the others, Louise Bogan has always been a favorite critic of mine, perhaps because she is one of the modern poets in whom I feel a common strain of humanity. It is appropriate that the F. O. Matthiessen essay, written soon before his death in 1950, should stress the rise of a "new scholasticism" in modern criticism, and a "thin-lipped" textual analysis which omitted "the big questions about man in society."

MR. MATTHIESSEN is hardly urging a literature of political problems or even of social reform. He wants art that concerns itself with the whole range of contemporary life, and not just the obsessions or the foibles of a literary elite-or, in Auden's phrase, of "intellectuals without love." This is also. as it happens, the central and recurrent demand of all major literary criticism. But it is not often that a collection of very diverse essays is contained within such a solid framework of sensible ideas. Nor have I had time to mention interesting contributions to these Hopwood lectures by Christopher Morley, Carl Van Doren, John Crowe Ransom, and Norman Cousins. among others.



Americans from Norseland

"Modern Sagas: The Story of the Icelanders in North America," by Thorstina Walters (North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, Fargo, N. D. 250 pp. \$3.75), reports of the settlements of a hardy people on this continent and also gives some account of their origin in a rugged, northern land. Here it is reviewed by the distinguished explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson.

By Vilhjalmur Stefansson

"IN THIS graphically written and admirably organized volume," as Thorstina Walters's "Modern Sagas" is characterized by Allan Nevins, we have the story of the Icelanders on the mainland of North America through ten centuries, from the late tenth to the middle twentieth. The author does not play up what was the contention of our State Department, during the Administrations of Lincoln and Johnson under Seward, that Iceland itself "belongs to the Western hemisphere and is an insular dependency of the North American continent." Instead, she speaks as if Iceland were in Europe, as indeed many Icelanders contend it is.

"Modern Sagas" is in the main the story of Icelandic pioneering in the nineteenth-century development of the North American Middle West, but its first chapter reviews the first three centuries of contact, from 982 to 1342, beginning with the well-known stories of the exploration and colonization of Greenland, led by Erik the Red, and continuing to the still better-known discovery of the North American mainland by Erik's son Leif (pronounced Lave, to rhyme with Dave) in 1000 and the less often mentioned three years' exploration, and colonizing attempt, by the Icelanders and Greenlanders under the leadership of Thorfinn in 1003-06 or perhaps 1004-07. Thereafter the contacts of Iceland with the mainland were chiefly indirect, through the Scandinavian Greenlanders who fetched their house-building and ship-building timber from Labrador. The last recorded contact was in 1342, when a Greenland ship, returning from Labrador with timber, was driven by gales to Iceland.

The nineteenth- and twentieth-century relations between Iceland and North America, which are the main concern of Mrs. Walters, do not begin till the 1850's; for the Icelanders, who had been the first of all the Scandinavians to visit North America in the old days were, in the new, the last to become immigrants. The trailbreakers this time were not converts to Roman Christianity, as Leif was when he sailed from Norway with two missionaries for the conversion of the Greenlanders and found Wine Land; these were, instead, converts to Mormon Christianity who accompanied some Danish Mormons from Copenhagen in 1855 to join Brigham Young's march to Utah, the Icelanders settling at Spanish Fork. This Mormon phase is considered to have been over by 1860; and when the main westward movement started, a decade later, the Lutherans were the influential church and the migration, first to Wisconsin and Nova Scotia, turned in the main eventually toward Minnesota-Dakota in the States and toward Manitoba in Canada.

Two important figures of North American history were concerned in the Icelandic re-beginnings of which Mrs. Walters writes, Lord Dufferin as Governor General of Canada and General Grant as President of the United States. Dufferin led himself into it: Grant was led.

Dufferin's belief that Icelanders would make good colonists for the treeless prairie rested on what he had seen in treeless Iceland during 1856, as told in his best seller, "Letters from High Latitudes"; so, as Governor General, he took a hand in steering Icelanders toward Manitoba. Grant, bewildered over a number of things during a troubled Administration, had on his hands the problem of what to do with Seward's Folly, as the Democrats called Russian America that had been purchased by the Republicans under Johnson. He was receptive, accordingly, when an Icelandic super-salesman named Jon Olafsson called to suggest that colonization by his landsmen could perhaps change Alaska from a liability to an asset. So, with Olafsson for leader, a committee of three visited Alaska aboard a warship. Despite a favorable report, the Government took no action.



-By Francis Jaques, for "Snowshoe Country" (Univ. of Minnesota Press).

The Icelanders who have since been to Alaska appear to have done well, on the average, but no better than the rest of the Scandinavians. They have shown no special fitness for treeless country, failing, in that, Dufferin's expectation and Grant's hope. So far at least as Mrs. Walters's showing goes, they have fulfilled better the implied prophecy of James Bryce, author of a respected book on the United States, "The American Commonwealth," who wrote of Iceland in another of his works, that of the three great literatures of pre-Renaissance Europe, the Icelandic ranks in quality above the Roman though below the Greek. The Icelanders were, when they copied down the eddas and wrote and composed the sagas, the most bookish of the Scandinavians, and this bent seems at least a plausible key to the success stories that Mrs. Walters, like nearly all writers on immigrants, tells in "Modern Sagas." For she can report on only one or two notable inventors, and the like with millionaires. Her success tales are chiefly of professors and scientists, of writers and politicians, of lawyers and judges. Only in the third and fourth generation are the Icelanders being Americanized into businessmen and baseball

As Mr. Nevins implies in his introduction, "Modern Sagas" has a special interest among works on immigrants and immigration through dealing with considerably the smallest group that has its own distinct language. The Icelanders are so few that you feel as if a laboratory type of study were feasible—there are only about 150,000 of them in the Old Country and less than half that many in the United States and Canada.