

## Writers and Writing

*Continued from page 17*

violent and yet glorious old man—"the grand old Pagan" and "unsubduable old Roman," as Carlyle called him, whose style was "like the ring of Roman swords on the helmets of barbarians." But in his loftiest vein he, the unsubduable, subdued himself to an even nobler emotional restraint. There, as he himself said, "Passion and Imagination meet, the low banks of prose are overflowed, and molehill after molehill disappears." Then, above those flooding waters, his poems rise in calm and Olympian heights.

## Notes

**DISCOVERER OF TREASURE ISLAND:** Although G. B. Stern has addressed her biographical sketch "Robert Louis Stevenson" (Macmillan, \$2.75) to youthful readers, oldsters will also find much in it to charm and delight them. The zest, courage, and good humor of the nineteenth-century Scottish author are infectious. Miss Stern's graceful manner of presentation is a happy reminder to those already familiar with Stevenson's life and writings, and it is an invitation to those who have not yet made his acquaintance. The biographer has centered her attention on Stevenson's romantic appeal as a storyteller, essayist, and poet. She thinks of him, her subtitle suggests, as "The Man Who Wrote 'Treasure Island'." And she interweaves details of his life (not always with historic precision)—his boyish exploits, his cheerful refusal to bow to illness, his love affair with Fanny Osbourne, his ceaseless travels—as a complement to his literary side.

Stevenson's love of adventure and an instinctively rebellious nature made him the despair of his schoolmasters and Edinburgh University professors. Blessed with a tolerant if disappointed father, he was enabled to give up the study of engineering (his father's profession) and turn to the law. This was but a formal concession, for there was never any real question that he could be anything but a writer. Constantly in search of a climate favorable to his tubercular condition, Stevenson traveled widely in Europe, in America, and in the Pacific. One of the most fortunate circumstances of his brief life (he died in Samoa December 3, 1894, aged forty-four) was his marriage to Fanny, an American divorcee many years older than he. She nursed him through innumerable bouts of illness, and loyally suffered seasickness and tropical

discomforts to be with him. Although he had no children of his own, he lavished intuitive parental affection on his stepson Lloyd. He helped the boy manifest a talent for drawing, and dedicated to him "Treasure Island," which he wrote while he was ill in bed. Such other popular works as "A Child's Garden of Verses" and "Kidnapped" were likewise the products of many bedridden hours. Wherever Stevenson went he made lasting friendships, ranging from Sydney Colvin, W. E. Henley, and J. M. Barrie to Pacific chieftains. There is perhaps no greater monument to the loyalty and love which he inspired than the mourning of the Samoan natives at the time of his death.

—EDWARD A. BLOOM.

**BRITISH HUMOUR:** "Wit of the first order," according to Ernest Newman, "is like lightning—it strikes swiftly and unexpectedly, regardless of the innocence or guilt of its victims, and it never strikes twice in the same way." There are many grave definitions of this glittering, frequently painful intellectual play; but the sharply individualized quality which marks it frustrates satisfactory definition. Wit in action, however, is another matter; and once experienced it is not likely to be soon forgotten. "English Wits" (Macmillan, \$2.50), edited by Leonard Russell of the London *Sunday Times* and now in its fourth edition since 1940, is a pleasurable reminder of this principle. The fourteen essays comprising the volumes are from the pens of such witty essayists as Newman, Gerard Hopkins, D. B. Wyndham Lewis, Robert Lynd, Desmond McCarthy, Dilys Powell, and others.

The range of their celebrated English (and one American) subjects is broad—from the abusive waspishness of Pope, the magisterial snortings of Dr. Johnson, and the unbridled prankishness of John Wilkes, to the rapier thrusts of Wilde, Whistler, Sydney Smith, and Shaw. In between are the witticisms, in varying degrees of effectiveness, of Theodore Hook, Lamb, Sheridan, Henry Lebouchere, Beerbohm, "Saki," and Mary Russell Mitford. Each subject has his particular mode of wit, and the reviewer should be excused from the hazards of stating preferences that will enrage partial readers. It is, however, gratifying to report that many of the contributing essayists are fair matches for their subjects in urbanity and verbal dexterity.

Cumulatively, "English Wits" is splendid entertainment, and one gladly forgives even Mr. Russell for succumbing to an inevitable *finis* line, "Wit's End."

—E. A. B.



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## WORLD TRAVEL CALENDAR

PHOTO CONTEST PRIZE PRINTS

The Saturday Review—January 1

# Toynbee and Other Everests

Continued from page 10

in 1954. Perhaps it would have turned anyway, as tides have a way of doing. What is certain is that the turn began after the publication of this book by a respected and courageously plainspoken Indianan—a book that, by remaining on the best-seller lists ever since its appearance early in the year, was a constant reminder of a fact that we and the world seemed almost to have forgotten: we *were* born free and most of us intended to stay that way. The same reminder was placed in a general context by Henry Steele Commager's "Freedom, Loyalty, and Dissent" and in a particular one by Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam's "I Protest."

Our increasing interest in Asian affairs (a life-and-death interest) was reflected in books of many categories. The late, if not latent, war in Korea was written about by two generals, William Dean ("General Dean's Story") and Mark Clark ("From the Danube to the Yalu"), and two correspondents, John Dille ("Substitute for Victory") and Keyes Beech ("Tokyo and Points East"). Uneasy India was the subject of Chester Bowles's "Ambassador's Report" and Saunders Redding's disturbed report "An American in India." Several of the worlds Pearl Buck described so vividly in her warm and wise autobiography, "My Several Worlds," were Asian. Southeast Asia's jungle warfare flared through several novels, the best of which were Norman Lewis's "A Single Pilgrim" and Pierre Boulee's "The Bridge Over the River Kwai." The Cambridge University Press issued a handsome introductory volume in a projected series by Joseph Needham on "Science and Civilization in China." As for Japan, James Michener produced a sio-sio novel about a modern Cio-Cio San ("Sayonara") and a superbly designed and enthusiastic treatise on Japanese prints ("The Floating World").

One Asian problem that had been magnificently solved a year before was the subject of what sometimes seemed like an interminable string of books. The most notable of these was, of course, Sir John Hunt's own account of "The Conquest of Everest," but they all had their virtues, and, if the successful British excelled in prose, the unsuccessful Swiss were victorious in the matter of mountain photography.

**N**OT many peaks were scaled in 1954's fiction. The highest altitude record made by a member of the American expedition was probably that of William Faulkner in "A Fable," but no real statistics are available, since most of the critics who tried to follow him failed to complete the ascent, complaining that their oxygen had given out and expressing a wistful desire to be back in Yoknapatawpha County.

Hemingway, at long last, won the Nobel Prize. A novel by William March ("The Bad Seed") at long last made the best-seller lists, but that inexplicably neglected author had died soon after the book's publication. Steinbeck coasted with a farcical successor to "Cannery Row." Dos Passos's "Most Likely to Succeed" was, by all odds, the most unprophectic title of the year, as Douglas Wallop's "The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant" was the most devilishly prophetic. Marquand was represented only by an uneven collection of short stories ("Thirty Years"). Long absent authors made welcome returns—Harriette Arnow ("The Dollmaker"), Anne Parrish ("And Not for Love"), Hamilton Basso ("The View from Pompey's Head"), Dawn Powell ("The Wicked Pavilion") Raymond Chandler ("The Long Goodbye")—with works that brought a deservedly enthusiastic response. First novelists were few, but among their number were names to remember: William Gibson ("The Cobweb"), Evan Hunter ("The Blackboard Jungle"), Davis Grubb ("The Night of the Hunter").

England gave us L. P. Hartley's "The Go-Between," a craft-wise and compelling novel about a boy's first shattering encounter with the Facts of Life; William Plomer's comedy of Edwardian and Georgian humours, "Museum Pieces"; Sylvia Townsend Warner's careful reconstruction of a fairly grim corner of the Victorian world, "The Flint Anchor"; and Angus Wilson's barbed but affectionate

glance at the foolish Twenties, "For Whom the Cloche Tolls." There was, too, J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Fellowship of the Ring," first volume in a trilogy about the wars of the free peoples of Middle-earth (elves, hobbits, and such) against evil enslavement by Sauron, Lord of Darkness. Every reviewer being entitled to at least one long-shot annually, I suggest that Mr. Tolkien's fantasy is one of those individual works mentioned at the opening of this summary that will mark 1954 as a historic year in publishing—not because adult critics have seriously compared it with "The Faerie Queene," but because it is bound to be seized upon by children as their own delighted discovery, and passed on in this fashion to generations yet to come.

Historical novels, as in other years, added solidity and strength to the whole fictional structure. In America Esther Forbes's enthralling re-creation of a vanished New England, "Rainbow on the Road," was one of that fine writer's finest works. Established authors like Anya Seton ("Katherine") and John Masters ("Bhowani Junction") had further successes; there were striking first novels by Milton Lott ("The Last Hunt") and Basil Burwell ("Our Brother the Sun"). From England there was a new Du Maurier ("Mary Anne"), a new Bryher ("Roman Wall") and a new Duggan ("Leopards and Lilies"). From Russia (via Canada) there was Igor Gouzenko's titanic "Fall of a Titan"; from France (via Italy) Marguerite Yourcenar's philosophical "Hadrian's Memoirs"; from Sweden Frans Bengtsson's witticrammed Viking saga, "The Long Ships."

The brightness of the literary landscape that we have journeyed through in 1954 is evident when we look back in almost any direction—new poems by Jeffers and Williams and MacLeish, adventurous travels in Tibet and Bafut and Lapland and the South Atlantic whaling grounds, golden literary reminiscences by Richard Garnett and Sean O'Casey and Van Wyck Brooks, the private diaries of Stendhal and Virginia Woolf, the humane wit of E. B. White and Jacques Barzun and the daffier variety of Fred Allen and Paul Jennings and Groucho (as quoted by his son), the common understanding of science enhanced by the works of Oppenheimer and Waksman and Carlton Coon and others.

Have we read any good books lately? If we haven't, it's our own fault.

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