

The Saturday Review



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Our Times and the *Mercury*

THIS year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of *The American Mercury* by H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan, editors, and Alfred A. Knopf, publisher.

In the first issue the new editors made it clear that their business was to deal with America as it was, not as it was supposed to be. The American people, they wrote, "entertain themselves with a vast number of ideas and enterprises, many of them of unprecedented and astounding nature... Our annual production of messiahs is greater than that of all Asia. A single session of Congress produces more utopian legislation than Europe has seen since the first meeting of the *witenagemot*. To explore the great complex of inspirations, to isolate the individual prophets from the herd and examine their proposals, to follow the ponderous evolution of the mass mind—in brief, to attempt a realistic presentation of the whole gaudy, gorgeous American scene—this will be the principle enterprise of *The American Mercury*."

Characteristically, the lead article of the first issue was a debunking piece about Lincoln which denounced as pure myth the popular image of Lincoln as a man of humble and obscure origins, asserting that he came from a background of substance and prominence. As a war leader and administrator, Lincoln was far from the superman pictured in the history books, the article declared. In fact, the *Mercury* said that if the North had lost at Gettysburg "Lincoln would be remembered today as Hamlet is."

In the first issue appeared a department that was to gain international

fame, or at least notoriety. Titled "Americana," it reported various items under the names of the states, with only a laconic line or two of comment, as for example:—

ILLINOIS—*Making the bride an honest woman in Chicago, as described by the local newspapers:*

The Chicago meatpacking industry and University of Chicago, long rival attractions shown to visitors as examples of the city's industrial and cultural activities, are to be united. Meatpacking is to take its place in the curriculum of the University, along with Latin, economics, psychology, and the rest.

MISSOURI—*Calling out the Landsturm against the devil in Kansas City, as reported by the United Press:*

A world's record for Bible class attendance was set here yesterday by the men's class at the First Baptist Church, when 17,833 men jammed Convention Hall. The Baptist Church here is in a contest with a businessmen's class in Long Beach, California. The Long Beach class, according to messages received here, had 9,756 yesterday.

VIRGINIA—*Examples of neo-Confederate English from examination papers submitted by Virginia schoolteachers attending the summer school at the University of Virginia:*

He run me down the street, but it was too late to caught him...

I like James Witcomb Rily because he is not dead, and writes poems in the papers that one can see all right...

The flames shot into the sky a few foot above the house...

It must not be supposed that the entire issue consisted of nothing but deflationary devices for the stuffed shirts of the pompous and pious. The *Mercury* was nothing if not elegant in its literary attire: four poems by Theodore Dreiser; an article by Ernest Boyd on intellectualism in the mid-Twenties; an evaluation of Stephen Crane by Carl Van Doren; a short story by Ruth Suckow; a fresh appraisal of James Gibbon Huneker by James Gibbon Huneker; a still-pertinent and highly timely article, "The Communist Hoax," by James Oneal; and a wideranging book-review department with Mr. Mencken sitting in total judgment on books dealing with history, music, economics, anthropology, and Constitutional law.

In all, a magazine with a high literary shine for the literarily fastidious; but a magazine, basically, that was out to raise welts on the seemingly silken skin of the age—which it did with cool precision and warm effect.

The questions naturally arise: what happened to the old *Mercury*? Why couldn't it sustain itself in its original mold? The reason these questions cannot be completely answered is because of the economics of magazine publishing. Keeping a serious magazine alive at any time is a feat comparable to brain surgery in the dark; but to do it during hard times calls for the ministrations of angels—literally.

But a small part, at least, of the answer may have rested with the *Mercury* itself. There was something wrong with its basic diagnosis. America was not the home of the fools and the land of the boobs they thought it was. There was plenty of surface stuff that made us look silly, but there was also solid stuff far more significant that had to be recognized. The items that appeared in the *Mercury's* Americana were part of the froth and not of the essence. The self-anointed among the pious were easy marks, but that didn't mean that all those who had faith had been taken in by religious clowns. The pulsebeat of historical America failed to come through in the *Mercury*. In debunking the national heroes the *Mercury* was obviously seeking a shock-effect, but beyond the shock itself the *Mercury* had nothing to offer. It had disdain for the do-gooder, but it never recognized that the American community could not exist without him. The *Mercury* was brilliant, but it was cold. It would have been fine for a static civilization; but the world that lay just ahead was one of movement, upheavals, and ideas. To be totally without respect for the mechanism of hope in man as were the editors of the *Mercury* was to live in the wrong century.

—N. C.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

PLAN FOR PUBLISHING POETRY

THE ACADEMY OF AMERICAN POETS IS extending an invitation to all publishers of books of poetry to participate in a new and unusual project which it is sponsoring "for the discovery and encouragement of new poetic genius." Its plan is as follows:

Each publisher may submit one unpublished manuscript in a contest for the publication of a book of poetry to be designated as "The Lamont Poetry Selection."

The manuscripts must be of original poetry in English by a living American poet and should not exceed average poetry-book length. Preference will be given in the following order: one, to poets who have never had a book published; secondly, to those with not more than one, or at most two, published books of poetry.

The Academy of American Poets agrees to purchase for distribution to its membership one thousand copies of the published winning manuscript at a 40 per cent discount from the retail price, but not exceeding \$1.50 per copy or \$1,500 in the aggregate.

The publisher agrees to publish the winning manuscript within fifteen months after the announcement of the judge's decision, and to pay to the author a royalty of not less than 10 per cent of the retail price, with an immediate advance of such royalty on the 1,000 copies purchased by the Academy. References in the published book, or on the jacket, to the Academy, the contest, or the Lamont Poetry Selection must be approved by the Academy.

The closing date for the contest is July 1, 1954, and publishers should mail or deliver manuscripts to The Academy of American Poets, Inc., 1030 Fifth Avenue, New York 28, N. Y., on or prior to such date, together with the entry blank. The Academy will make every effort to expedite the decision of the judges and hopes that it will be rendered by October 1. A panel of judges has been selected consisting of Louise Bogan, Rolfe Humphries, Randall Jarrell, May Sarton, and Mark Van Doren.

The Academy assumes no responsibility for the loss of manuscripts but will return all manuscripts promptly, providing a proper return envelope and postage is enclosed by the sender.

Any entry not complying with the above rules will be automatically excluded from the contest.

MARIE BULLOCK,
President.

New York, N. Y.

LIVABLE LIBRARY

OVER A YEAR AGO I sent a plea to *SR* for help in arranging my library, which had gotten out of hand.

The letter was published [*SR* Dec. 27, 1952] and readers responded generously. Unfortunately, most of the suggestions involved complicated indexing systems.



"Men—may I have a few moments of your time?"

As my library is my recreation, these did not appeal to me, especially since my work involves gigantic indexes containing millions of names.

However, the Editor suggested culling my library and giving away volumes I did not expect to read again, a suggestion spurned by several who wrote me.

Finding an outlet for this overflow was a problem until I heard from a professor in a nearby small college. The Drama Department accepted my collection of plays. Other departments and the college library took several hundred more.

Throughout the year I have been scattering books across the land—to students I learn of, even to my own plant library, which could use the fiction.

The result: my library is now in almost livable proportions and I have enjoyed this year beyond any other in my life.

ROBERT E. BARCLAY.

Kansas City, Mo.

ROUNDING UP THE BOOKS

SR READERS, WHETHER THEY are book creditors or book debtors, should be sympathetic to the following editorial, which was published recently in the *Twin City Sentinel*, Winston-Salem, N. C.

"Bring Back the Books" is herewith suggested as a slogan for an annual campaign of one week to round up all the books we have borrowed and return them to the lender. It's also the week to get back all the books we have loaned.

Perhaps we already have too many "weeks" to observe. A Return-the-Books-Week could, however, be a real boon to harassed mankind. It

would relieve anxiety, lower high blood pressure, patch up broken friendships, cure stomach ulcers, and thus permit book owners to live to a ripe old age.

Many book lenders are reluctant to ask for their property. They may have practically forced the book on the borrower. Proud of it, they wanted to share it with their guest or friend. The borrower, unwillingly (but not wishing to be ungrateful) probably mumbled something admiringly about the book and promised to return it as soon as he had read it, probably within a week or two. Since the lender has thrust the book upon the borrower, it's a little awkward to launch a campaign to get it back.

A "Bring Back the Books" drive will solve this problem. Local, state, and national committees could be formed, to do the following things:

1. Have the President proclaim Return-the-Books-Week, and be photographed returning a volume he has borrowed. The same with Governors and Mayors.

2. Encourage every household to take inventory of its book shelves and return all books to the owners.

3. Send announcements cards to persons who have your books, asking them in a nice way to bring back your books. Name the title and the date it was borrowed. The sting of the request will be minimized because everyone will be doing it.

4. Appoint a "Miss Bring-Back-the-Books" dressed in some spectacular, preferably abbreviated, attire designed to represent some book.

Nothing but good (and a lot of books) would come, we believe, from such an effort.

GEORGE LARAMIE.
Winston-Salem, N. C.