

The Saturday Review



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Whose Is the Guilt?

IN America as well as Great Britain the untimely death of Dylan Thomas, perhaps the greatest lyric poet of his time, has shocked innumerable people who had never read his musical verses or listened in enchantment to the magic quality of his voice. And yet they were moved by an unknown name in a column on the obituary page of a newspaper, as if something rare and vital had vanished from the world. To many who had reason to know his value there came a sense of guilt. Why, they asked their conscience, had this Welshman died so young, as man's years count today, in a time when playwrights and philosophers live to a ripe old age?

Was it the poet's fault, or was the society in which he lived to blame? "Poetry is an occupational disease," said one man. "Did not Keats's life end at twenty-six, Shelley's at thirty, and Byron's at thirty-six?" That sense of hidden guilt or even of shame cannot be so easily removed, for Keats died in Rome of an illness which today would have been cured, Shelley was drowned at sea, and Byron died of malaria in Greece. In the next generation both Browning and Tennyson died of an incurable disease, old age.

Dylan Thomas came from a hardy race of long-lived people who through the centuries have learned how to make peace with rural poverty. He was a schoolteacher when he began to compose his rhythmical stanzas that enchant the ear and perhaps too often bemuse the senses. His total published output is astonishingly small to have gained so great a reputation. He rewrote and polished his poems assiduously and certainly threw away more of his work than ever reached the printer. To the

younger generation of British youths in college he became a legendary figure, the very voice and accent of a musical race, singing of nature and love and the strife of men, of man's hope and his despair.

He was a family man who loved his wife and children and his small house overlooking the ancient hills, as anyone must know who has read his tender and beautiful recital of a Christmas Eve at home. Once that was enough for the vast majority of mankind. And he had more than that! A poet may have a paunch and a bald head; Dylan Thomas was the poet incarnate. He was a genius, and he was given the voice and the looks to match his kingship. He believed in himself as a poet, and in poetry as necessary to life as the air we breathe. What more could man want from life, the ordinary man might ask as he goes about his worldly affairs?

IT IS said that he was "wild and generous, flamboyant, unpredictable, religious, ribald, and thirsty." Perhaps it was his exuberance, his thirst for life a Welsh cottage could not quench, which led him to London and New York, to pubs and bars and alien platforms from which he recited his poetry, and, of course, to radio and television and the theatre. But it is even more likely that there are few men of genius brought up in the country, living on meager fare, who can today resist the temptations that are offered them. Money, of course, is the root of all evil, or it used to be considered so. Was it pounds and dollars he sought, a knowledge of the outer world, or the flattery of foreign audiences? Time and his increasing fame would have brought him an income he could not

have imagined in his youth; he knew all a poet needs to know of human nature; he must have despised flattery and the shallow critical essays, naming him a symbolist, a surrealist, or an existentialist. Perhaps, today, only a few men of genius can escape the nets cast to trap them with gold and applause for bait. Now we are permitted to know that he drank too much, a common failing among too many gifted writers. But this one man should have escaped, for the world is poorer for his loss. Alas, this was not the way Dylan Thomas should have ended his life. Our society is guilty of his death; not the poet.

—H. S.

Frederick Lewis Allen

IN THE DEATH on February 13 of Frederick Lewis Allen the publishing world lost one of its most loved and respected editors and American letters a distinguished popular historian. A New Englander by birth, the son of a minister who had been an assistant of Phillips Brooks at the famous Trinity Church in Boston, Mr. Allen displayed throughout his career a profound and vivid concern with the morals, the mores, and the politics of his country. As an editor he had the all-essential quality of being able to gauge before the event the cause or subject that was to become of interest to the public with the result that he made *Harper's Magazine* not only the repository of good literature but a forum for discussion of ideas and affairs. A man of lively, if quiet, humor, of quick understanding, and of unaffected friendliness, he endeared to himself a long list of contributors. When he stepped out of the editorship of *Harper's* some months ago the affection and admiration in which he was held were given expression at a dinner in his honor at which Mr. Allen, himself on occasions the most delightful of masters of ceremony, responded in a speech setting forth his editorial aims and creed. To the general public he was known principally for his books, and especially for the trio "Only Yesterday," "Since Yesterday," and "The Big Change," in which he reviewed with exceeding deftness the recent annals of the country. Mr. Allen compressed into these volumes a vast mass of facts, but he gave them life by the vivacity of his style and meaning by weaving them into a coherent pattern of national attitudes and behavior. And though he never flinched in his portrayals from the less admirable aspects of recent American history he remained to the end an optimist. The general public as well as his friends will miss him sorely.

—A. L.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

REBELLIOUS RUSSIANS?

FRANK ROUNDS, JR., in reviewing "Our Secret Allies," by Eugene Lyons, states that "ever since the rebellion in the early seventeenth century the Russian people, in one way or another, have revolted against enslavement" [SR Feb. 6].

While I agree with Rounds that rebellions were nothing uncommon in Russia, it seems to me that he either uses "enslavement" in a different semantic way or that he should not have used the word at all. So far as I know Russian history, it appears to me that it was not serfdom the Russian peasant was revolting against time and again over a period of many centuries; for serfdom the peasant took for granted. It was the exploitation and the extreme misery, having built up enough pressure, that finally exploded. While the Russian peasant had his misery in common with his Western counterpart, he did not have the latter's perseverance, ambition, and intelligence (as, indeed, Russia was the last illiterate country in Europe) to cope with his problems efficiently.

HANS A. ILLING.

Los Angeles, Calif.

SABER-TOOTHED AUTOS

EVER SINCE I REPRESENTED the infant Christ in a Christmas pageant I have tried to imagine what the Master might think of our man-made environment of today—if He could but return to earth.

I am sure that He would be grieved to see motorcars bearing various puncture instruments and semi-knife-edge motifs used as radiator ornaments. Several years ago a writer in a national magazine, a policeman, condemned such ornaments as a demonstrated menace to pedestrians thrown up over the hoods of cars, but nothing, as far as I am aware, has been done toward removing these symbolic blights on human capacity to reason.

If we can save only fifty lives each year by removing dangerous radiator ornaments from cars this accomplishment is worthwhile. If only twelve lives are saved, twelve lives are worthwhile. We need all the sanity we can muster.

DONALD J. LUNDIN.

Hollywood, Calif.

ATLANTIC UNION'S STRENGTH

AS A MEMBER OF THE Atlantic Union Committee and a former director of the Washington office of the American Association for the United Nations, I wish to point out what appears to be a basic fallacy in the sixth of Grenville Clark's "Twelve Propositions for Reasonable Men" [SR Dec. 26].

Mr. Clark states that an Atlantic Union "would be of such great power as to overshadow the United Nations. It is hard to see how it would make for disarmament or lessened tension; and it would



THROUGH HISTORY WITH J. WESLEY SMITH

"It's a nice enough picture of a boy, Mr. Gainsborough—but that ghastly blue!"

tend, I believe, to confirm and perpetuate the chasm between East and West."

To argue that the increased power of an Atlantic Union would produce these results is to argue that any increase in the power and unity of the Atlantic democracies would produce the same results in lesser degree. Yet our policy since the start of the Cold War has been to increase the power and unity of these nations. As responsible officials have frequently pointed out, a "situation of strength" is necessary not only to deter aggression, but also to make possible a settlement with the Soviet Union. Unless this policy is unsound, hopes of eventual disarmament depend upon creating and maintaining such a "situation of strength."

An Atlantic Union would create a greater "situation of strength" than these nations can create separately, as Mr. Clark recognizes. Consequently, unless our Government's policy is unsound, such a Union would improve the prospects of an East-West settlement and eventual disarmament. The contention that an Atlantic Union would diminish such prospects could be valid only if achievement of these two goals could be promoted by Atlantic weakness and disunity.

LIVINGSTON HARTLEY.

Washington, D. C.

DREGS AND CURDLED BRAINS

MELVILLE CANE IS VALIANT and, one hopes, correct in his prediction that poetry will return to a warmer emotional, if lower intellectual, level ["Are Poets Returning to Lyricism?" SR Jan. 16].

People are already saturated with the concept of mental power. If intellect

spills over to coat emotions, as it so arrogantly does in much verse now, the result is a horrendous brew, dregs of feeling topped with curdled brains.

So magazine and newspaper editors remark with regret that no one wants to read poetry. One wishes that the august molders of public opinion might quit burying their talents, and mold. If they were brave, provided fresh verse that was simple and sweet, the public appetite for wholesome food might astound them.

Even if circulation does not mushroom because of it, and this is unlikely, periodicals that offer readers poetry, even verse, in tasty bits, gain virtue, strength.

HELEN FAULKNER.

San Mateo, Calif.

FULL-PRICE MAN

HERE'S A GRIPE ABOUT publishers: book advertisements that announce a certain price plus "a few pennies postage" or "a few cents packing and mailing charge." That sort of thing drives me away from a purchase of any kind. I buy quite a few books but mostly through my book dealer in Philadelphia, who—incidentally—never charges me any postage. However, occasionally I see an ad for something that I would send for except for those darned "few pennies." There is no reason why postage and handling charges can't be averaged and added in an open manner—Book \$3.75; Postage and Handling 25¢; total \$4.00. The pennies aren't a financial bother to anyone; it's just that the publishers seem to fear that the full price might kill a sale. I say Hooey! They kill more sales by not stating the full price.

LEWIS A. CONWELL.

Wayne, Pa.