

Poet of the Arab Sands

"The Home Letters of T. E. Lawrence and His Brothers," edited by M. R. Lawrence (Macmillan, 731 pp. \$10), is a collection of letters written home by the accomplished and enigmatic Briton and two of his brothers over almost three decades.

By Lewis Vogler

IF the T. E. Lawrence legend has not actually been diminished by the events of the twenty years since his death, it has at least been allowed to gather a little of their dust. The scheduled publication next year of "The Mint," his carefully withheld autobiography, should do much to revive discussion of that accomplished and enigmatic man whose life was so rare in its combination of adventure and rejected honors. An interesting fore-runner is "The Home Letters of T. E. Lawrence and His Brothers," written over a period of nearly thirty years.

An insight into Lawrence's family life, one of solidarity and mutual pride, can be gained from the fact that his letters were preserved—and so well worth preserving. Letters obviously served Lawrence, even more than in the case of many other writers, as literary exercise; the detailed nature of his enthusiasms is apparent from the beginning. The long letters from France in the summer of 1908 when he was twenty and still at Oxford are full of measurements and drawings of castles, ruins, cathedrals, written with an unmistakable air of authority and in full confidence of home interest.

More interesting—almost dramatically so, considering our present knowledge of Lawrence—are those describing his first impressions of Syria. It was inevitable that Lawrence's interest in the Crusades should have drawn him to the Levant; it was perhaps equally so that his imagination should have been seized and held by it. Vivid with the cries of the markets, the flash of rare birds, the roar of historic rivers, the harsh poetry of the desert and of Arab life ("Here one learns an economy of beauty which is wonderful") his letters of 1909-1911 already show him a worthy follower of such countrymen as Burton, Kinglake, and particularly Doughty.

Lawrence's interests found a natural focus in archeology. Perhaps the most

impressive of all his letters were written from Carchemish, near Jebail, where he spent the better parts of three years (1911-1914) excavating in the company of such men as Hogarth, Woolley, and Flinders Petrie. During one of the summers he made an 1,100-mile walking trip through Northern Mesopotamia. He notes his widening reputation—"But all Syria has heard of me;—and of us"; reveals his growing knowledge of Arabic, his increasing skill with firearms, animals, and men, his collector's passion for all the artifacts of the "digs," for rugs and animal skins—especially where they could be used in binding books. His preoccupation with books remained intense. His reading at Carchemish included Rabelais ("more thoughtful than Shakespeare"), "Spenser, Catullus, Marot, the Koran, Simonides, and Meleager." He urged William Morris's "Sigurd" onto friends and family, and was an avid admirer of Baedeker—"What a catalog of talents! I wish I had them."

Drawn into the war, possibly to give "an archeological color to a political job," Lawrence's own talents were, of course, to meet—and to make—some extraordinary occasions. His letters from 1915 reveal little, naturally, of his actual military operations—described for posterity in "Seven Pillars of Wisdom"; he apologizes often for his "monomania" on the one subject about



—Portrait by McBey.

Lawrence—"most exceptional man."

which he was just then unable to write. In one he says wearily, "The job is too big for me." In July 1916, he writes, "It is so good to have helped a bit in making a new nation."

FEW details of Lawrence's disillusionment are given in his postwar letters, but the undertone is unmistakable. As Aircraftman T. E. Shaw, living at Cloud's Hill in Dorset—from 1925, he is increasingly fameworn and somehow spiritually maimed. At work, much later, on his translation of the *Odyssey* (a work he had always considered second-rate) he makes the curious statement that he would never again attempt anything original. "It is not good for man to make things." An almost equally revealing comment is:

"It's odd you know," he writes in one of his latest letters, "how impossible it is to be altogether alone. It's the only experience that humanity has never really worked towards: and I'm quite sure we can only manage it in a crowded place. The difficulty is to keep oneself untouched in a crowd: so many people try to speak to you or touch you: and your [sic] like electricity in that one touch discharges all the virtue you have stored up. However, these things don't really matter."

T. E. (Ned to his family) was only one—the second—of five accomplished brothers who reminded Sir Ernest Barker of a "nest of young eagles." All the others seem to have been more devoutly athletic, though still intellectual, more influenced perhaps by Christian precept than Lawrence. All, obviously, were strongly under the influence of a remarkable mother who as Lawrence says elsewhere encouraged little female companionship. The letters of W. G. (Will) and F. H. (Frank) Lawrence, both of whom were killed in France in 1915, have also been included in this volume. Both may have had "the promise of greatness which we saw fulfilled in T. E.," but it seems clear that only he had the extra intensity and idiosyncrasy which may have amounted to genius.

Tempting as it is to find in Lawrence a prophetic symbol—the spiritual adventurer recoiling from the military achievement he has found morally indefensible, seeking to lower himself to the tinkering anonymity of the herd—it is still not easy. He was indeed an "exasperatingly complex personality," and a most exceptional man. It is difficult to read even a few of these letters without an awareness of his sharpness of spirit, without taking in some of the air of the altitudes at which he lived. Whatever may be made of his other achievements, he was, as a writer, almost incapable of dullness—even in his letters home.

Best-Seller Making

"Novel in the Making," by Mary O'Hara (David McKay, 244 pp. \$3), is a frank account of precisely how the author wrote her bestselling novel, "The Son of Adam Wyngate." Here it is reviewed by Stanley Vestal, who under his workaday name of W. S. Campbell is director of the courses in professional writing at the University of Oklahoma.

By Stanley Vestal

EVER since Edgar Allan Poe penned his plausible explanation of how he wrote "The Raven" we have been favored with more or less honest accounts of the ordeals and methods of writers. Among the best and most convincing are, of course, the notebooks of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Somerset Maugham's "The Summing Up," the diaries of Chekhov and Tolstoy, and the more recent "I Wanted to Write," by Kenneth Roberts. Most of these, however, are largely biographical or summary. Here we have a frank and detailed account of how one best-seller, "The Son of Adam Wyngate," by Mary O'Hara, was created.

She learned to write in (of all places) Hollywood—notoriously the writer's graveyard. There she worked as a play doctor of sick films, cutting and pasting and writing titles. Thus she acquired the professional attitude and point of view, doubly fortunate in that she worked under the direction of a disciple of Winchell Smith, who learned his craft in George Pierce Baker's famous 47 Workshop at Yale.

She feels that books are written to be read, that her first loyalty is to her reader. She admits that self-expression may be therapeutic and agreeable, but considers talking to oneself rather peculiar. She tells delicious anecdotes of writers who, being quite unable to extricate their hero from his predicaments, decided on a tragic ending as being "more artistic." Though in her work, as in that of all professionals, there is much "planning and plugging," she knows the inspiration which comes to the writer who is excited by his subject and project.

READED in the home of a Protestant parson, she early became a "soul-searcher," and declares that love is her panacea, mysticism her passion, and the theme of her novel the conflict of sacred and profane love, illustrated by the problem of a spiritual parson with

an habitually unfaithful wife. She calls her novels fables with a message, and says she is incapable of writing a book which does not make a point.

Methodically, she states in advance her locale, point of view, body of thought, subject, theme, and protagonist. She also prepares a scenario in advance and, like Poe, then writes the climactic scenes first, building the others towards that peak. She still follows the Hollywood use of scissors and Scotch tape, trying her paragraphs in different arrangements.

It is refreshing to find her as frank about her triumphs as she is about her disappointments and discouragements, yet she gladly gives credit to others who have advised her, notably Whit Burnett. She nevertheless listens to her "warning bell," which rings when she is off the trail. She makes it a rule never to count the cost of work, time, effort, or even health provided she is building the book. Like most ex-screen writers, she revels in the freedom of personal expression, for on the screen it was impossible to speak out in her own voice. Therefore one of her great agonies has been the necessary murder of these darlings in the final draft.

This book will prove a provocative and instructive one for the fiction writer, presenting as it does so many of his own problems, along with a range of possible solutions and much sound sense on the relations of author to publishers and critics. It is also convincing evidence how much more a skilled professional writer knows about the nature of writers and writing—about literature, in short—than any mere scholar or critic can know.



—Culver Service.

Wilde—"much of the child."

Paternal Shadow

"Son of Oscar Wilde," by Vyvyan Holland (E. P. Dutton, 237 pp. \$3.75), is an account by the son of the talented playwright of his life with father and of the manner in which the cause célèbre of the Nineties affected his own career. Hollis Alpert, who reviews it below, is a member of the staff of The New Yorker.

By Hollis Alpert

WHEN the trial of Oscar Wilde took place in 1895 the British public sanctimoniously watched the destruction of its most popular playwright. The two-year jail sentence was the severest that could be administered by law. Wilde's books were removed from bookshops and libraries, his plays (among them "The Importance of Being Earnest") were withdrawn, and editorial writers throughout the nation made a mockery of his name. Prostitutes outside the courtroom danced in the street when the verdict was announced. Midway in his jail term he was hauled before another court to undergo bankruptcy proceedings. His home in Tite Street was looted by vandals and souvenir hunters, and his family—a wife and two children—felt a backlash of the public fury. Now his son, Vyvyan Holland, has come forward to tell that part of the story, what happened to him, his mother, and brother after Wilde was brought to trial.

It is mainly a memoir of his early upbringing and schooling that Mr. Holland relates in "Son of Oscar Wilde," and there is little he has to add to what we already know of his father, a subject hardly neglected by biographers. The son's memories of Wilde are scanty. He recalls that he adored him, that Wilde was a wonderful companion to the sons, that he mended their toys and romped with them in the nursery. "He had so much of the child in his nature," Mr. Holland writes, "that he delighted in playing our games. He would go down on all fours on the nursery floor, being in turn a lion, a wolf, a horse, caring nothing for his immaculate appearance . . . When he grew tired of playing he would keep us quiet by telling us fairy stories, or tales of adventure, of which he had a never-ending supply." This picture of a devoted father makes a pleasant contrast to the sides of Wilde's nature that are usually stressed. When the blow struck, Vyvyan was kept un-