

# A Major Life

*"An Autobiography," by Edwin Muir (William Sloane Assoc. 288 pp. \$5), is the personal history of a boy from the Orkney Islands who achieved distinction as a translator, poet, and essayist. W. T. Scott, our reviewer, is the former book editor of the Providence [Rhode Island] Journal.*

By W. T. Scott

CHILDHOOD is always a lost world. One has to live only forty or fifty years to regard one's childhood as remote and romantic. This occurs by the changes in oneself, of course, but also in combination with the changes in history and society; and though no doubt civilized man has always felt this experience, one cannot help believing it has been sharpened, aggravated by the almost unassimilable accelerations of the past half century. Edwin Muir's childhood is even especially far away, for it was simple in the rural ways that had endured for generations and it was really remote. He was born, in 1887, in the Orkney Islands off the coast of Scotland, and he lived there until he was fourteen. His father was a tenant farmer.

In an "Autobiography" which is for the most part distinguished work, Muir writes of that childhood with particular beauty. The islands themselves are imbued with centuries of Scottish legend, far back in it even the Vikings whose names and stone cairns still mark that landscape. "The language we spoke," he recalls, "was a mixture of Norse, Scots, and Irish." It was a childhood lived close to the soil, intermingled with the lives and deaths of animals. There the adult world was attentive always to the rhythms of the seasons. And some of those adults are in "An Autobiography" with a quick liveliness: among them the storytelling father, the gentle mother, the hypochondriac and superstitious Aunt Maggie, the lecherous Cousin Sutherland, who "looked thirty-five all the time," had great charm, and always asked women "the subtle question 'Why not?'"

Yet it was Muir's very generation that felt the pull of the larger world. His older brothers sought jobs on the mainland. The family disintegrated, scattered. Presently the parents followed. Within two years of settling in Glasgow there were four deaths in the family: both parents and two of the brothers. The son Edwin was by sixteen out on his own.

Edwin Muir's name is beginning to be known as it deserves to be in this

country. For years it appeared here chiefly as half of a husband-and-wife team of fine translators: Edwin and Willa Muir. But his own work, his critical essays and more notably still his poems, have only recently been given their merited attention. The first two-thirds of this "Autobiography" was published in England in 1940 as "The Story and the Fable"; and, truth to tell, I think this enlarged, up-to-date version descends somewhat from creation to chronicle as Muir runs over his recent years of teaching in Scotland and in Europe. It is never badly written and some of it, in particular the sad account of the Muirs' return to a ruined Prague, is memorable; but the deep richness of the book—and its firm design—exist in the (here revised) first two-thirds. In any case, we are lucky to have the "Autobiography"; it belongs certainly among Edwin Muir's major efforts and it presents us quite honestly with the substance of a life that had to struggle for existence and sanity as it was wrenched from that ancient world of the Orkney Islands into the chaos of the twentieth century.

In other words it is, as a good autobiography should be, both a physical and an intellectual account.

Altogether it reveals a complex and yet modest, decent man. One may say of Edwin Muir what he says of an impoverished, attractive Junker he knew in Hellerau: "I cannot remember that he had any 'views'; I think he had only devotions."

## Notes

**WORDSWORTH AND HIS SISTER:** "Wordsworth has been the subject of too much bardolatry and too little criticism," states F. W. Bateson in the preface to his vigorously written "Wordsworth. A Re-Interpretation" (Longmans, Green, \$3.50), and he plunges in to set the balance right. His book has aroused sharp controversy in England, for he comes up with the theory that for several years before his marriage Wordsworth suffered from a guilty incestuous passion for his sister, and though he thrust it out of his mind it remained in his subconscious and reappeared in his poetry, particularly the Lucy poems and Book I of "The Prelude." The warm affection shared by William and Dorothy has of course long been known, and their friends saw nothing peculiar in it; but Mr. Bateson shrewdly focuses his thesis with extracts from the sister's journal and the brother's poems. The flaw lies in the nature of his evidence: Dorothy's journal mirrors only her own exaggerated feelings, while William's

poetry can only be interpreted obliquely, and Mr. Bateson deflects it in the direction of his thesis.

But there is no harm in this game, really, since Mr. Bateson keeps his eye on the poetry, and subjects it to very keen scrutiny. With so introspective a poet as Wordsworth he is in the main successful as biographical sleuth and literary critic. One of his main tasks is to explain why Wordsworth sang with "two voices"—the noble sublime and the bathetic ridiculous—often in the same poem. His arguments and criticism are so fresh that they will at least persuade the reader to reread, and perhaps to reinterpret, Wordsworth's poetry.

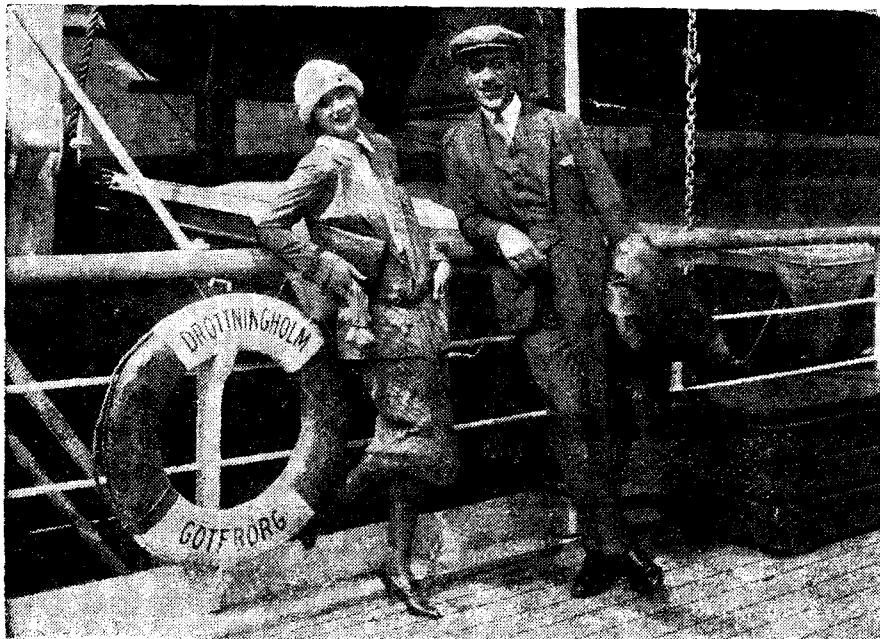
—ROBERT HALSBAND.

**LITERATURE IN OUTLINE:** The relation between literature and literary history is often misunderstood by people who find it easier to memorize the gossip about writers and books than to read the books. They know all about literature, and this peripheral, ersatz knowledge can serve in examinations or culture-fests. How much easier to bone up with an outline or concise handbook than to spend time reading books! This sad comment is stimulated by a newly published handbook, A. C. Ward's "Illustrated History of English Literature, Vol. II" (Longmans, Green, \$5.50). From Ben Jonson to Samuel Johnson states the title-page, at once setting the tone for its style—pithy and pungent phrases, easy to remember. In the span of 236 pages Mr. Ward polishes off two centuries of all forms of English writing. Thus many writers get no more than dates and a sentence or two. Occasionally the important ones are poorly balanced, as when Pope's later and great satires are omitted. And the stringent handbook categories make for chronological trouble, as when "Hudibras" (1663) is discussed after Defoe, Swift, Addison, Steele, Pope.

There already exist recent comprehensive, compact histories of English literature: Moody and Lovett revised by Millett, Legouis, and Cazamian; the "Concise CHEL"; and within the last seven years one edited by Hardin Craig (Oxford) and one by Albert C. Baugh (Appleton-Century-Crofts)—the last the most useful of all because of its full scope and detailed bibliographies. Mr. Ward's volume does contain a new feature, excellent illustrations chosen by Elizabeth Williams; but they hardly disguise the futile text.

—R. H.





Arriving in America for the first time, with Mauritz Stiller  
—"strange formative power [of] the great Swedish director."

—Culver.

## The Divine Greta

*"Garbo," by John Bainbridge (Doubleday. 256 pp. \$4), is a biography of the greatest legend the motion picture has created.*

By Arthur Knight

NOT long ago a small New York art theatre revived the 1937 Garbo film "Camille." To everyone's astonishment, it played to the best business the house had ever known, convincing M-G-M to reissue the picture nationally. Apparently, even though it is now almost fifteen years since Garbo made her last film, her name is still potent, her special magic still alive.

Another indication of the timeless hold that Garbo has upon her fans is the appearance, at this late date, of John Bainbridge's conscientious, sympathetic biography. A talented profile writer for *The New Yorker*, Bainbridge pursues his subject with the inexhaustible enthusiasm and painstaking search for detail that generally characterize such pieces. His pursuit, according to the jacket, carried him to Hollywood, New York,

Stockholm, Paris, and London. He checked documents, interviewed friends and acquaintances of Garbo, quotes extensively from earlier articles and books. There is no indication that he received either the slightest help or encouragement from the subject herself. Chances are, in fact, that she threw every possible obstacle in his way. Garbo's friends are either as close-mouthed as she—or they don't remain Garbo's friends.

As a consequence, Bainbridge wisely confines himself for the most part to the surface facts of Garbo's extraordinary career, a career that began when Garbo was barely sixteen. Five years later, in 1926, she was already an M-G-M star, the *femme fatale* in the first of the series of wild melodramas and satiny romances that were to serve as Garbo vehicles for the next fifteen years. Indeed, as Bainbridge points out, rarely has a great career been cut from such shoddy material. Perhaps half a dozen of her stories could be considered really worthy of her. Not one of her films can properly be called great. Nevertheless, in all of them Garbo invested her roles with an eloquence of gesture,

a grace of movement, a sincerity that invariably rose above the most inane and banal of stories. "She knew just what she had to do and how she expected to do it," Bainbridge quotes her favorite director, Clarence Brown, as saying. It is possible that she actually believed in her characters. But, more important, she had the ability to make her audiences believe in them—at least as long as she was on the screen.

Inevitably the question arises, how was this half-educated daughter of a Swedish laborer able to create such memorable portraits of luxurious, love-hungry sirens? Here Bainbridge is of little help. To say that she had genius is scarcely enough, although undoubtedly it's true. Nor is it enough to state that she "was guided by a secret, sublime, infallible instinct to do the right thing in the right way." Such an answer begs the question. It ignores her years of intensive training at the Royal Dramatic Academy in Stockholm. But, more than that, it minimizes the strange, formative power that the great Swedish director Mauritz Stiller held over the young Garbo. It was Stiller who discovered and gave Garbo her first important screen role. In her he sensed the potentialities of a true star, and he molded her to his preconceived image. When Louis B. Mayer brought Stiller to this country it was Stiller who insisted that Garbo also be given a contract. He coached her through her first two Hollywood films.

Himself a failure in the American studios, Stiller returned to Sweden alone. Bainbridge reports Garbo's emotion as she saw her mentor leave. Soon after Stiller died; while Garbo,



—Acme.

Pre-American acting—"timeless hold."