

## Scuffle with Expediency

**"The Private Diary of a Public Servant,"** by **Martin Merson** (Macmillan. (171 pp. \$3), is a record of five months in 1953, when Senator McCarthy and his aides were waging war with the United States Information Service; it is the work of an administrative aide to the USIS's director. Our reviewer, James M. Minifie, covers the Washington scene for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

By James M. Minifie

MARTIN MERSON'S "The Private Diary of a Public Servant" documents a frightening phase of domestic politics. It tells in detail the daily fluctuations of the struggle to get the American story to the world. It focuses on the "battle of the books" in 1953 and on the desperate effort to make American information services abroad reflect the true face of America rather than the expedient façade. It is a record of some of the disasters which resulted when expediency was placed above principle.

Specifically the book tells the story of the effort of Dr. Robert L. Johnson, resident of Temple University, to save the Information Service from being snuffed out by the combined strength of penny-pinchers, Senator McCarthy, and the disciples of expediency at the White House and in the State Department.

Mr. Merson, who was brought in by Dr. Johnson as special consultant, chronicled the progress of the scuffle in diary form from February 18, 1953 to July 31, 1953, when they gave the resident an account of their stewardship and said goodbye. Thinking it over two years later Mr. Merson concludes: "I believe it was the first time anyone in the Eisenhower Administration had faced up to the fact that you cannot compromise with what you consider evil and retain your self-respect, and furthermore had proved that it was not only bad morals but bad politics to do so."

Political atmosphere in the United States changes fast. It is already a little hard to believe the hysteria which dominated those days. It is hard to believe that "one minor Senator and a few fanatical aides intimidated even the President of the United States."

It has yet to be shown, however, that the weak streak in high places which made such compromises possible has been eliminated.

Dr. Johnson addressed himself to the immediate task of restoring the International Information Agency, as the creature's latest incarnation had been ticketed, to its function as a conduit between the source of news and the thirsty world. There is more than a suggestion that the springs themselves were contaminated, but it was not his mission to investigate or do anything about that. Mr. Merson notes that somewhere along the line the terms of Dr. Johnson's mission were changed without his knowledge and in violation of an express commitment. It was an ominous beginning.

THE book recites briefly the unhappy details of the Reed Harris case, the "book-burning" flounder, and David Schine's little list. It tells how it was ultimately possible to write the liberating policy statement which directed that a book must be judged by its content rather than by the political views or security rating of its author. Dr. Johnson and Mr. Merson felt a pride which they considered

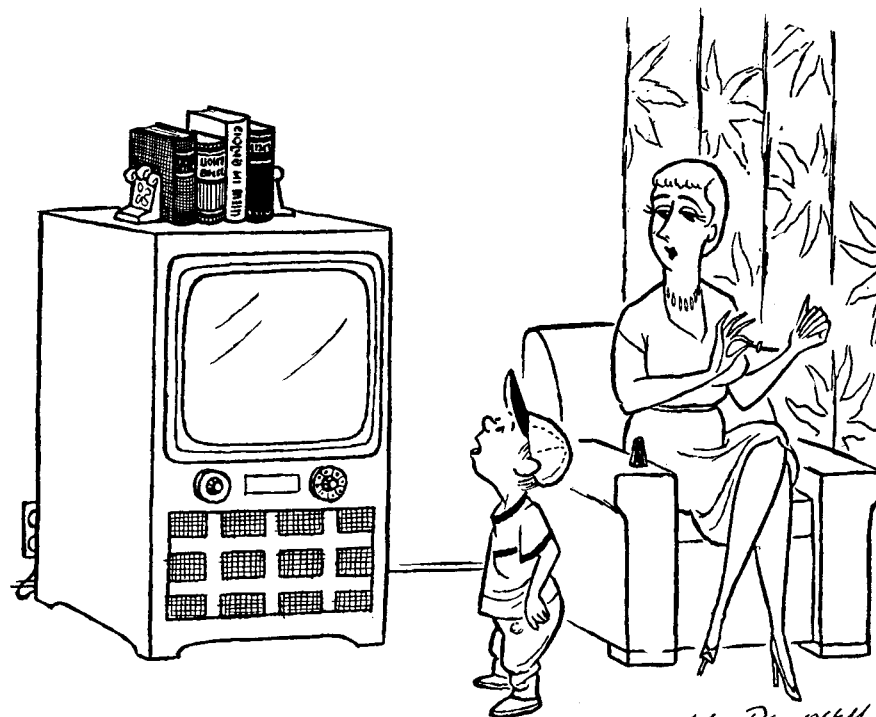
justified in that they had cleared and cleansed the conduit.

It was not the complete solution to the problem of presenting the American story to the world. But it may lead the reader to consider the residual crisis.

It is this: Every reporter in Washington is aware that the sources of news are drying up. The unofficial sources are hesitant. The official ones are scared to death. The fight to restore news sources now being waged is as important as the battle for integrity waged by Johnson and Merson.

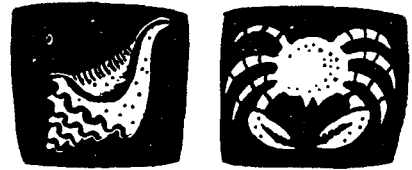
They revitalized their agency. But its gravest current handicap is that the facts are not available. This can be documented. It was not the American agency but the Japanese who published the chemical analysis of the elements in the fall-out of the superbomb exploded at Bikini March 1, 1954. It was not the Atomic Energy Commission but private scientists working on the Japanese data who first revealed that lethal fall-out might contaminate some 7,000 square miles for weeks, months, or even years. Detailed pictures of American military aircraft which could not be given to American readers were printed in Japanese magazines. The list could be extended. It is a long one, and growing.

It would perhaps be too much to ask Dr. Johnson and Mr. Merson to come back and strike the rock. But the propaganda service they revived is fainting again from lack of facts.



"What's that—a new kind of antenna?"

## A Tidy, Natural Taste



*"Birthdays from the Ocean," by Isabella Gardner (Houghton Mifflin, 43 pp. \$3), is the latest work of a poet of rare natural ability.*

By Edith Sitwell

**I**SABELLA GARDNER is a very accomplished natural poet. Her poems have much charm; her technique is polished as well as natural, and is inherent in the uses to which she puts it and in the material it shapes. There is no flopping, no untidy hanging about, none of that unfortunate mincing and teetering that is to be found in so many poems written by women.

The poems in her new book, "Birthdays from the Ocean," are full of a delightful and natural fancy. "Nothing is so atrocious as fancy without taste," said Goethe. I imagine he referred to that incrusting fancy (a kind of debased rhetoric) put at random on a poem as shells are gummed on to a box. But Miss Gardner's poems are devoid of little tricks and trinkets. The poems arise from her personality. They have taste, and they have considerable grace.

"Poetry should always be running upon pleasant feet, sometimes swift, sometimes slow," as Puttenham wrote in 1589 ("The Art of English Poesie"). And that is true of Miss Gardner's poems. They run naturally, and they fly naturally, "a covey of poetic partridges, with whirring wings of music," unlike Coleridge's lamented

"metaphysical bustard, winging its slow, laborious, earth-skimming flight over dreary and level wastes." The metaphysical bustard is admired in some circles. But Miss Gardner will have none of him.

I read recently the following quotation from Georges Rouault: "Anyone can revolt; it is more difficult silently to obey our own interior promptings, and to spend our lives finding sincere and fitting means to expression for our temperament and gifts. Is it not better to be a Chardin than a pale and unhappy reflection of the great Florentine?"

It is indeed. And Miss Gardner is one of those happy poets who understands, perfectly, in what direction her own gifts lie.

One of the best poems in the book is "Of Flesh and Bone." These lines may be given as an example of her accomplishment:

Child and girl each morning summer  
winter or dismay  
my eyes saw waterfalls my ears  
heard madrigals I tasted  
strawberries touched moss smelt hay  
and roses, and  
through the blue  
the bright sky I with my first and  
once-love flew.  
Willow-boned sun-marrowed and  
air-skinned,  
sea-water in my veins, I drank wine  
and the southwest wind.

Here the opening and closing movement brought about by the external and internal rhymes makes a sound like fanning air, and is lovely.

Take the following poem, "Fall in Massachusetts":

I saw the tall bush burn.  
(Nineteen times a gallows-tree . . .  
The tongue of fire muted by our  
guilt. There cannot be  
a voice for deaf New Englanders  
vowed never to be healed.)  
I saw where a manna of flame had  
unfallowed the starving field  
where a witch charred  
where her bones roared  
where each of the good-wives took  
her choice of holiday or skewer'd  
house  
and the mewling children barked  
another name  
to their elders gathering apple-  
wood boughs  
and the sweet, the kindling fern  
while cinders blew; and sharr

This strong and controlled poem is least as good as "Of Flesh and Bone." How exact are her observations as the sound embodying that observation in the third line of this passage from "Children Are Game"—

Now in a grove of auburn bon  
the spindling skeletons of summer  
flowers,  
I hear the soft snow hiss through  
fir and spruce."

(the dissonant "hiss" and "spruce"—the latter word sharper, more embodied—give a strange effect)—as in the beautiful line "Listen, the greenness whistles" from "It Rains Last Night."

The poems have a quiet wisdom:

Behold the fire and the wood but  
where is the lamb  
for the burnt offering?" said little  
Isaac trembling.  
"God will provide" said Abraham.  
Fathers of Isaacs cease  
dissembling.  
Will every thicket yield a ram?

"Charm," wrote Jean Cocteau in "Le Coq et L'Arlequin" ("Rappel l'Ordre"), "needs a profound talent. One must cling to the edge of fancy. Nearly all graceful artists lean over the edge. Rossini, Tchaikovsky, Weber, Gounod, Chabrier . . . lean over, but do not fall. They have deep root, and this allows them to lean very far."

Miss Gardner's poems do not seem the work of any of these composers. But she too has a deep root. The charm of her poems is in danger, and is entirely delightful.

