

Josée followed by a private detective. At the party given by his patroness, Josée runs into another former lover. Brief retirement together to their hostess's bathroom. Josée tells Alan all about it. Scene and reconciliation. As Siné puts it, "Ouf!"

I have no doubt that Siné's ridicule is a healthy reaction, and it helps one bear the thought of the thousands of people who will buy this book just to live vicariously. It helps, too, when one thinks of how seriously Miss Sagan herself seemingly takes these characters and of how uncritical most of her critics have been. Yet, although the situations often appear unintentionally ludicrous, the characters wooden, and the language stilted, the book is nevertheless significant and interesting. Moreover, its flaws help make it so.

Françoise Sagan is still a very young writer, and the vision of the world she has is deep-dyed in that world-weariness that afflicts each new generation. Apparently humorless, cynical, obsessed by self, sex, and the meaning of life, she projects, in each of her works, a mood that is eternally adolescent. Only a young person could see Alan and Josée as tragic figures, this weak and moping pair who, in spite of wealth, health, and beauty, find relief from *taedium vitae* only in mutual cruelty and sex. Only a young person could



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write such a beautifully sad statement of their lot on earth: "frail collections of bone, blood and gray matter that snatched little joys and little sorrows from one another before disappearing. . . ."

Miss Sagan has been considered a powerful spokesman for her age: Life can have no meaning lived under the threat of atom bombs. But she speaks more for her age-group than for the age in which she lives. Writers of other times—Chateaubriand, Benjamin Constant, Maurice Barrès—have recorded a precocious disabusal in brief novels of self-analysis alternating with lyrical effusions. Perhaps "The Wonderful Clouds" is not unworthy of being listed with these classics of the *mal du siècle*, which it resembles. Its ring is authentic, with even its naïvetés and gaucheries helping to make it a true expression of youth's view of life. And we can imagine what a parody Siné could have done on any one of its predecessors.

## USA

# Anti-Buncombe and Humbug

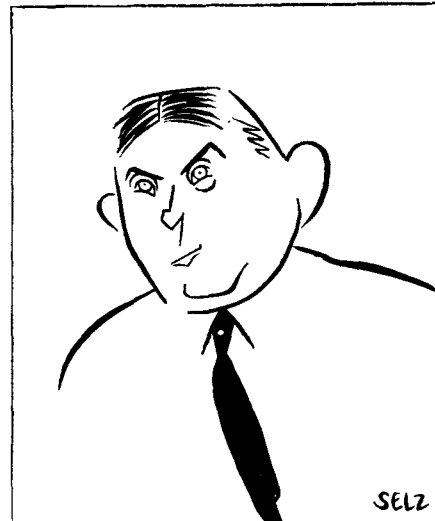
**"H. L. Mencken and the American Mercury Adventure,"** by M. K. Singleton (Duke University Press. 246 pp. \$6), chronicles the ten years during which the most famous of debunkers conducted his war against the "booboisie" in the pages of his own amazing magazine. SR Managing Editor Richard L. Tobin was a staff member of the New York Herald Tribune for nearly a quarter of a century.

By RICHARD L. TOBIN

THE FIRST issue of the fabulous *American Mercury* went to press early in December 1923 and was dispatched to 3,033 founder-subscribers. By Christmas, Henry Louis Mencken, its co-editor, could proudly see on almost any good newsstand the first of the 120 numbers he was to edit during the next decade. The *Mercury* sold at the high price of 50¢ a copy, or \$5 a year: a handsome, worth-while investment for any reader. Its Paris green cover, Elmer Adler's attractive marginal decorations in black, red, and blue, and the new sewn construction that allowed the magazine to open out flat like a book fixed its format for the remainder of Mencken's term. There were 128 pages in the first issue, and in all succeeding issues for the next twelve years.

By January 1924 the small staff was jubilant. Everywhere there were sell-outs and clamorings for more, and Mencken wrote happily to Philip Goodman: "We have word this morning that the subscription department is 670 subscribers behind—that is, behind in entering them up. Knopf has bought 30 new yellow neckties and has taken a place in Westchester County to breed Assyrian wolfhounds." A second, then a third printing were necessary to assuage thirsty readership, and about 15,000 first copies were sold. Eighteen months later the circulation of this remarkable publication was four times that of its initial issue. There it stayed through most of Mencken's long and fruitful editorship; the magazine dwindled to a cliché after he left.

M. K. Singleton's lively work appears to do justice to the Great Man and to the literary mouthpiece that is an ir-



H. L. Mencken—an Iron Chancellor.

revocable part of his legend. However, most un-Menckenlike mistakes occur. (Walter Lippmann's name is misspelled "Lippman" throughout; other editorial boo-boos involve such familiar snares as the "*Ladies' Home Journal*," and "harass" seems to be permanently fixed with two r's just a little bit north of South Carolina.) But over all there is excitement here, beautifully documented and well planned to explain to new generations precisely why the *Mercury* was the brightest star in the golden decade of debunkers. Partly because of Mencken's running attack on "wowzers," "Pecksniffs," and "snouters," and partly because of his amazingly vivid vocabulary, the co-editor and his opus were a smash from the start. Mr. Singleton is able to explain why in this rather brief volume—no mean feat a couple of sophisticated generations later.

Mencken was co-editor only until his bitter fight with George Jean Nathan, which ended with Nathan's demotion to the Siberia of "Contributing Editor" quite soon after the *Mercury* was launched. Mencken was intensely German, an editorial Iron Chancellor (he was related to Bismarck) who felt a magazine should be "a dictatorship . . . [It cannot] be run by a committee or a board of editors. A board of editors only means that [it] satisfies the least civilized on the board, generally a woman or a former minister."

While Mencken believed that the

*Mercury* should be general in nature, with its literary concerns subordinate to other interests, Nathan felt that any magazine worth its salt should forego editorial preoccupation with journalistic immediacy and "devote itself instead to those materials of art and life that are not necessarily bound strictly by the clock and that deepen, whether seriously or lightly, a reader's understanding of his surroundings, of himself, and of his fellows."

George Jean Nathan left and Mencken remained, now editor-without-adjective. He stayed on until the Depression (which he never understood and did not even comment on until 1931) and the coming of one-worldism (which

baffled and irritated him) drove him into his final obscurity.

As one looks back on an incredibly naïve and often tedious era of flappers, bathtub gin, and the Scopes trial, what value can one place on the *Mercury*? That Mencken was at his best a magnificent stylist and a discerning critic of worthy new writers cannot be denied; and that the magazine had profound influence on every writer and editor of his time is perfectly apparent in this highly readable book. But that Mencken was also a cold, often unnecessarily cruel editor few can doubt; though few can fail to admire him for his "Americana" and his devastating war against buncombe, "booboisie," and humbug.

## Our Face in the Questionnaire

**"American Credos," by Stuart Chase** (Harper, 202 pp. \$3.95), builds from a variety of recent polls a composite picture of what the average man thinks. D. W. Brogan's books include *"Citizenship Today: England-France-The United States"* and *"The American Character."*

By D. W. BROGAN

IN THE House of Commons it is a rule that members should "declare their interest" when they are taking part in a discussion of matters with which they are personally involved. So I shall begin by declaring my interest. I have a good deal of faith in polling, especially political polling. Indeed, I have recently been defending it against some ill-informed and not totally disinterested criticism in the columns of the most august of English newspapers, *The Times*. So I am in general in favor of Stuart Chase's bold enterprise. What he has undertaken in "American Credos" is to use a great range of recent polls on political, economic, social, and religious topics to build up a composite picture of what the representative American believes. This is done with Mr. Chase's usual intelligence and lively sense of social commitment, and it was well worth doing.

The author is a more devoted believer in the polling system than I am. In his opinion, the great refinement of polling techniques in the last twenty years or so has provided a very valuable instrument of what is sometimes called "social engineering." He cites the great utility of these polls in helping to frame

a rational economic policy during the war and in assessing the bases of Army morale. Since we in Britain had a far more complicated system of rationing and far more control of the economy, as well as far wider conscription (women were conscripted), we used polls far more and found them even more useful than the Americans did. And the most sophisticated of our pollsters, Dr. Mark Abrams, is a close friend of mine. So I hope it will not be taken as a proof of excessive skepticism if, in addition to recommending this fascinating and important book, I draw attention to some of the weaknesses in the polling system and to one or two instances in which I think Mr. Chase misuses his data.

On the whole, Mr. Chase's conclusions are on the optimistic side, justifiably so. There is not a great tidal wave of reaction sweeping across the country or across the campuses. Although, as many polls have shown, there is a high correlation between educational level and liberality of opinions, even at the lowest economic and educational level the principles of the Bill of Rights are accepted—if but barely. (This does not mean that all or most Americans know what the Bill of Rights is, or if it were put to the vote now, it would be reenacted. But there is no majority for repealing it.) Even where what might be termed obscurantist opinions are strongest, as in the South on the segregation question, there is a sizable liberal minority and, an encouraging point, the young are more liberal than their elders. We learn, for instance, that right at the height of the McCarthy boom most people were indifferent to the menace

of Communism, and to the great moral role of Chiang Kai-shek. But, of course, this may be a reflection of the political indifference—what the Greeks would have called the "idiocy"—of the average American, and not a proof of political wisdom.

Still, Mr. Chase is right in pointing out that the somewhat torpid consensus of American political life has its good side. The American is no longer isolationist, no longer defends (except in the South) racial segregation or differentiation, although Mr. Chase tells us, with his usual candor, that there is a good deal more anti-Semitism to be discovered beneath the surface than is revealed by polls. However, the polls have done a good and, on the whole, reassuring job. But—and there is a but. Mr. Chase is too sophisticated a handler of polls not to know that certain questions elicit answers of less than complete conviction. When a man tells you how he is going to vote or how he voted, he usually tells the truth. On general issues of public policy, like support for the United Nations, his affirmative answer has some value, if only as a reply to the more vociferous patriots in Congress, or in the neighborhood of Los Angeles. But when we are told that a majority of Americans support an international language, can we attach any meaning to this? Are they willing to learn one, or to have one taught to their children, or to pay for having it taught? When we are told that 97 per cent of Americans believe in God, there is ambiguity in "belief" and in "God." Is it Aristotle's God or Calvin's God? Since only 5 per cent of Americans now believe in hell, it is obviously not Calvin's God.

SOMETIMES Mr. Chase misrepresents his own data. We learn that majorities disagree that "science can solve our social problems." The author translates this into, "The vote on social science was close." But what evidence is there that the people polled thought of science as social science? Is it not highly probable that by "science" the respondents meant penicillin, sputniks, tranquilizers, new car lacquers, and of nothing that is peddled either by me or by Mr. Chase?

Then there is one last point. Polls are only indicators. They do not give orders. I can remember the sagacity of Sam Rayburn in telling me that political polls were very useful to politicians. He also told me that whether they were right or not often depended on whether the politicians believed them and acted on them. If they did, the pollster was right; if they didn't the pollster was wrong. There is no substitute for leadership. Lincoln took no polls.