

## First Novelists, Last Words

**F**AR FROM being the struggling young beginner that he is usually thought to be, the American first novelist today is a relatively mature, highly educated, clean-shaven, well-established, and even well-heeled individual who is approaching middle age. If this astounds you, it is nevertheless one of several incontrovertible findings to emerge in a recently completed Ph.D. dissertation by Professor Hyman A. Enzer of Hofstra College, entitled *The American First Novelist. A Study of Commitment and the Literary Career*.

Professor Enzer, whose fields are sociology and anthropology and who therefore did considerable skull measuring on the "cohort," as he terms it, sent questionnaires to 118 authors whose first novels came out in 1958. As an indication that he also has one foot in the door of practical psychology, the professor included a "return envelope with a colorful commemorative stamp." Whether for this or some other reason all 118 eventually replied, although not necessarily to all of the questions. Personal interviews were conducted with some of the authors, and most of the novels were read in part. Then, in 1962, Enzer sent a follow-up questionnaire to ascertain the subsequent novel-writing activity of the group—pardon, the cohort.

One of the objects of the study was to discover just who writes first novels and why. In the 1958 sample eighty-eight of the total were men, thirty were women, and none of them were very young, 62 per cent being over thirty-five. The largest number—twenty-nine—fell in the forty to forty-four age group. And as for income, we can quit worrying about first novelists starving. Of the 60 per cent who replied to this question, two-thirds noted that they were making between \$11,000 and \$30,000 a year and over, although, needless to say, not from their novels. (The great majority reported that less than 10 per cent of their earnings came from this source.)

"The immaturity of the first novelist," Professor Enzer reports in the summary of his dissertation, "turned out to be a myth. Most of the 1958 writers were well established at least ten or fifteen years before their 'first' appeared. The majority . . . were in professions associated with writing—newspapering, advertising, public relations, magazine

editing, and radio-TV-film writing. Only a handful—about fifteen individuals—were in full or part-time teaching." For these men and women, he points out, the writing of novels is in the nature of a side bet. "The lack of monetary return . . . may nevertheless reinforce the author's belief that, in a success-oriented society, artistic values ascend as financial ones decline. In this way he has at least one-half of the cake of success."

Sometimes, too, the novelist gets the whole cake. Enzer quotes one respondent who wrote: "The turning point came when the chairman at [the] university said: 'Look here, you'll never win academic advancement until you get a book out.' . . . Publication gave me academic promotion, tenure, a Guggenheim, a year in Europe. I don't have to go to MLA to look for jobs any more, but just for kicks."

**A**LTHOUGH much of the study satisfies the needs of sociology, rather than of letters, Professor Enzer's breakdown of four "types" of first novelists seems to fit an observable literary pattern. He found (1) a "dedicated" or highly committed group of "writers" (as opposed to other occupational types who look upon creative writing as a sideline), all of whom have produced at least one other novel since their first. For these people fiction is exclusively the major writing interest. They are attached to art values and they tend to be the younger men and women. Next down the scale of commitment is (2) the "persistent" type, composed predominantly of journalists and others in the commercial writing field. More than half had written only one novel, although about two-fifths had contracts for new novels.

The two bottom types, who seem to be holding up the totem poll, are (3) the "casuals"—primarily older individuals, of whom only one-fifth had produced a second novel; and (4) the "indifferents" who, having published once, have more or less gracefully retired from the battle. It is worth noting that the largest group in Professor Enzer's sample are "persistent" (about 32 per cent), although the smaller "dedicated" group (13 per cent) has turned out almost twice as many novels per writer over the four-year period.

Since Professor Enzer believes that it is from the "dedicated" writer that "the so-called 'distinctive' qualities of American fiction become generalized," it is worth having a closer look at him. Here is the profile:

J. Scrivener, under 35, relies primarily upon income from free-lance writing of fiction as well as non-fiction. His first novel sold about 2,500 copies and brought him a modest return through paperback and foreign reprint rights. His second, written under the pressure of his new reputation, was a comparative failure. He also teaches a writing course or two, and he has an advance on his third novel, which is already in draft form. Economic support also comes through an advance on a magazine piece, his wife's income, and the sale of a story which publication of his novel had facilitated. He is also . . . making a play from his first novel.

J. Scrivener may well be writing the Great American Novel, but if so it is not likely to recall *The Grapes of Wrath*, let us say, or *The Titan*. As a group, the "dedicated" tend to avoid social themes in their novels; those who do use them (about 25 per cent) showed the lowest productivity in subsequent years of writing. Given their middle-class, professional background, and the prosperity of our times, perhaps this is not surprising. At any rate, our most energetic young novelists today are not being driven by the need to convey a burning social message. As Professor Enzer puts it, they are committed to "self" rather than "society."

**B**UT the most disturbing conclusion to emerge from the study is that for a majority of the authors, their first novel is also their last. ". . . the process that brings the novelist to public notice is more terminal than transitory," Professor Enzer comments, adding that, "Once the book is published, or the dybbuk exorcised, the individual seems to be able to move into a calmer, clearer avenue of career activity." But he notes, too, that "the literary institution exercises negative sanctions on the novelistic career," which is a way of saying that (1) it is difficult to get a novel published, and (2) it is harder to make novel writing pay.

This is a trend that is getting worse, not better. Fifty years ago there were about eight novels published for every book of nonfiction. Today the ratio is almost exactly the reverse. One result, borne out by the study, is that the attrition rate among young writers is extremely high. If 1958 was a typical year, the future of novel writing as a profession is clouded indeed.

—DAVID DEMPSEY.

## Counterpoint to Conquest

*Eagles of the Andes: South American Struggles for Independence*, by Carleton Beals (Chilton, 363 pp. \$7.95), and *The Conquistadors: First-Person Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico*, edited and translated by Patricia de Fuentes (Orion, 245 pp. \$8.95), chronicle respectively the throwing off and the imposition of Spanish domination over the countries to the south. John A. Crow is the author of "Spain: The Root and the Flower" and of several books on Latin America.

By JOHN A. CROW

CARLETON BEALS has to his credit over three dozen works, most of them on some aspect of Latin American life. He has tramped all over every country of Hispanic America, has witnessed dozens of revolutions, knows at firsthand the aspirations and realities of the nations to our south. He is, in a word, the Richard

Harding Davis of the present generation. His *Crime of Cuba*, which came out many years ago, is still a classic of courageous analysis and reporting, and explains well the economic and political festers that made Castro's Cuba possible. Beals's *Mexican Maze* is an excellent portrait of that fascinating country, with many colorful details on everyday life. His *Fire on the Andes* is an equally impressive insight into the problems of another region. In his many other books Beals has written about almost every country and every epoch of Latin America.

In *Eagles of the Andes* he has produced a fast-moving and dramatic history of the important personalities who emerged in South America's wars for independence. He concludes that independence was the only boon that resulted from this long and violent conflict. A generation of native tyrants soon replaced the old Spanish and Portuguese aristocrats, and neither economic nor political freedom had a ghost of a chance in the newly established states. The unremitting battle for human rights has continued ever since,

and indeed is stronger than ever today.

In this book Beals is not directly concerned with present-day problems, but at every step he points out how the present is linked to the past, and how vast are the differences between the reality and the dream. *Eagles of the Andes* might be called Act I of this great human drama. It is fine background reading for anyone who has a serious interest in the southern republics.

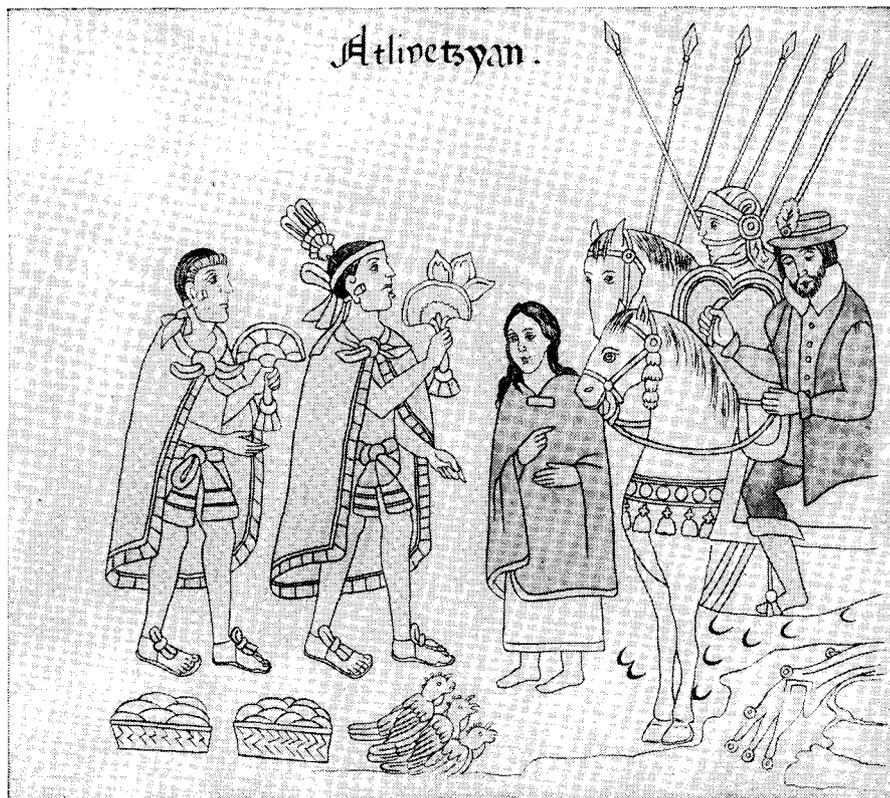
The book's principal burden is the detailed stories of Miranda, Bolívar, San Martín, Sucre, Santander, O'Leary, Paéz, O'Higgins, and many other figures who played a decisive role in the wars for independence. Beals gives an accurate, shrewd, well-balanced account of them all, with considerable insight into their private lives. He is at his very best when relating, with plenty of relish and a dry humor, the amorous affairs of some of the above figures. His pages on Manuela Saenz (Mrs. Thorne), who was Bolívar's mistress and confidante for many years, are particularly graphic, and provide many a salty anecdote about the relationship.

The Liberator himself, Simón Bolívar, is presented as a neurotic genius and hero. Beals recalls his early visit to France, where Bolívar "paced up and down the garden like a caged creature, tearing at twigs and flowers, snatching fruits from the boughs, biting into them and tossing them away . . . In the house he yanked at the curtains, tore books to pieces. He could not sit still for ten minutes without ruining something. He had a mania of movement. He plunged into everything with excess."

Later he set out for Italy, accompanied by the tutor of his boyhood. They slept in farm wagons, in haystacks, in country inns, meeting and talking with the poor. In Rome the Spanish ambassador took him to see the Pope. Bolívar refused to kiss the Papal slipper; the ambassador was shocked and apologetic. The Pontiff smiled: "Let the young Indian do as he pleases," he said. Outside, Bolívar exploded. "The Pope seems to hold the Cross in little esteem, for he wears it on his foot; even the proudest kings set it on their heads."

All Rome chuckled over the encounter.

In his thinking Bolívar was a child of the age, the perfect romantic in the political arena. An example was his appointment of Simón Rodríguez, his old tutor and lifelong friend, as minister of education in the newly established republic of Bolivia. Beals writes of this man: "He had wandered all over the world and tried his hand at everything, translating in Jamaica, setting type in



—American Museum of Natural History.

Cortes makes peace with the Tlaxcalans at Atlixetzyan. (From *Antiquedades Mexicanas*, 1892).