

and what's de Gaulle eating. The column will be written from the woman's point of view and, if God's with me, funny."

Miss Bracken cocked a suspicious eyebrow at my notes as I prepared to leave the Frederick Loewe shrine. "You make something out of this interview and they'll double your page rate. That's the sign of a good writer. I'm quotable but dull."

And I'm still getting the same page rate.

**We all know** that book publishing costs, along with practically everything else, have been steadily rising. But for a clue to how quickly and how much consider *Great Houses of Europe*, edited by Sacheverell Sitwell, which will be making its second appearance in American bookstores come October. An extremely handsome volume, it contains fifty-four color plates and more than 400 monochromes. In the fall of 1961 G. P. Putnam's Sons first imported the book from Europe, where it was printed. Geared for the Christmas market, the book carried the price tag of \$19.95 until January 1, 1962, \$22.50 thereafter. The quick sell-out of those copies of three years ago has prompted the second appearance this fall. Price? Until January 1, 1965, \$22.50, \$25 thereafter. If you're ever going to buy the book, I'd plan on doing it this year. The next time around it might be cheaper to buy one of the great houses.

**The latest twist** on the old Pyramid Club, chain letter, or whatever you call it in your neck of the woods (remember when you sent quarters, dollar bills, or U.S. Savings Bonds to complete strangers in the hope that a little bread cast on the water would bring back a fortune on the next tide—but it never did?) involves books and the pre-school set. The letter going around now reads as follows:

In two days make six copies of this letter, omitting the top name and adding yours to the bottom.

Send a 29¢ Little Golden Book to the top name. Two five-cent stamps will cover the postage for the book. In two weeks you will receive thirty-six books.

Please do not drop out. This is not a chain letter, but a Child's Book Club. If you do not follow through, please let my mommy know.

A check with the two mommies I know who got suckered into this baby bunko game reveals that they have yet to see anything arrive in their morning mails other than the monthly bills. I imagine the picture over at Golden Press is a brighter one.

—HASKEL FRANKEL.

## Spirals of Reason and Fancy

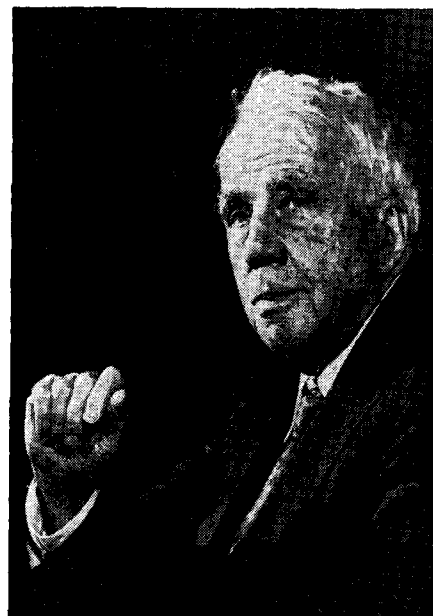
*Selected Letters of Robert Frost, edited by Lawrance Thompson (Holt, Rinehart & Winston. 645 pp. \$10), invites the reader to "roll his own" biography of the great American poet from the potpourri of correspondence offered therein. Leon Edel himself read thousands of letters in writing his Pulitzer Prize biography of Henry James.*

By LEON EDEL

**A** POET'S voice falls silent; the thousand threads connecting him to the world are cut; yet he can enter sometimes upon a strange posthumous life. There will be no more poems; but letters, written at forgotten moments, remain. They come tumbling out of attics (or filing cabinets), and the old voice continues to be heard, saying now in public what it hitherto said in private. With great wisdom, the common law has given to heirs—in perpetuity—discretion over a man's private utterances. But indiscretions occur; along with the finer things, scraps and leavings find their way into print: perfunctory letters, personal ephemera. A curious notion seems to exist that an unpublished letter is an affront to posterity; that every word set down by a genius or talent must be published—even in variant versions. This may be true for the men of long ago; they left so little that we cherish their every word. But the moderns leave millions of words, entire archives, whole libraries.

Their documents are not only words on paper: there are tapes, kinescopes, photographs, notes set down by their students or their Boswells, records of their doings in the nation's press. There is even salvaging from the wastebaskets. In the very nature of things, a rigorous, discriminating hand is needed to select the genuine from the spurious. Letters, at their finest—we have the example of Keats—add to the sum and glory of literature. The shavings and scribbles, when they survive, belong to the private papers: they are raw material, by-products of genius; and like by-products they need processing.

These reflections are prompted by the appearance of Lawrance Thompson's selection of Robert Frost's letters. Only eighteen months have passed since Frost died; yet this is the third volume



—Karsh, Ottawa.

**Robert Frost—a "contrived rustic."**

of his correspondence to be published. The first contained Frost's letters to Louis Untermeyer, and it was clear at once that in the poet we had a master of epistolary prose. Untermeyer challenged Frost on professional grounds, on questions of the day, on the problems of their life of poetry, and Frost responded with the full vigor of his restless mind. The second collection, Frost's letters to his long-ago pupil John T. Bartlett, testified to his genius for friendship. Now Thompson, Frost's designated Boswell, who wrote *Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost*, has brought out the first miscellaneous collection; it duplicates about 100 letters printed in the Bartlett and Untermeyer volumes, and offers another hundred from assorted correspondents to or about Frost. There are only 370 new Frost letters, chosen from some 1,500 that were available.

The volume suffers from being a curious mixture of the transcendent and the trivial; it has been planned in terms of biography rather than of epistolary art, but there is enough of that art present to give us the sense of Frost's qualities. He wrote letters as if they were a running soliloquy, or a series of informal monologues. He talks always to an audience, as he did for so long in public. The manner is characteristically salty, with a kind of intellectual euphoria, the sentences building up into spirals of rea-

son and fancy. The poet is a master of badinage: he toys with ideas, life, the world—chuckling all the while. His most winning mask is that of the contrived rustic, the rural curmudgeon, offering the wisdom of the soil. The rhythm of poetry is in his sentences, and they often have a wry twist in their tails, an extra beat, an echo of what he has just said: he would “touch earthy things and come as near to them in words as words would come.” Or he offers us the well-made line, “I never saw New England as clearly as when I was in Old England.” The rhythms were there even in school-boy Robert, aged twelve or thirteen, scribbling to a schoolgirl in his classroom, “I like you because I cant help myself and when I get mad at you I feel mad at myself too.” The letters make us feel the vitality of the man, and the richness of his inner being. And they are often at their best when, as Thompson says, Frost “acknowledges his limitations as human being and as artist.” One sees indeed that behind the boastfulness and the vanity there could be self-doubt and pain, and yet with it an unquenchable thirst for *gloire*, in the fullest sense of the French term.

The biographical side of the book suffers from the absence of early letters, so that we are plunged almost at once into Frost’s adult life. Thompson shows us the poet’s beginnings as teacher and farmer, the famous journey to Georgian London, the sudden publication of a slim volume in England, and the recognition of this new American voice on both sides of the sea. After that we journey with Frost through his personal tragedies and public triumphs—death, madness, suicide in his family, on the one hand, the adulation of a nation on the other. The worldly heights are constantly scaled: but there are recurrent plunges into the depths. Increasingly the dual personality emerges: the man who could say that a poem “begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a lovesickness,” but who also announces, “I am become my own salesman.” He was to have all the honors many times over: some forty-five honorary degrees, four Pulitzer Prizes, Congressional applause, the laureateship of the Kennedy Inaugural; he was to be emissary of the State Department and the voice of American letters in academies and learned bodies. Only the bounty of Sweden was withheld; but he was even there in good company with Mark Twain and Henry James. Year after year he simply acted, indeed helped to create—longevity aiding—his personal legend.

The tragic side of Frost’s life is somehow overshadowed in these pages by the exuberance of the public Frost. It is difficult to know whether the disproportion is due to lack of material or the

rationale of selection. The editing of a poet’s letters so soon after his death militates against a rounded volume: many letters are still in private hands. And then there are restrictions invisible to the public: the need to show respect for the living as well as the dead; testamentary stipulations; the safeguarding of privacies; the hazards of libel. One seems to discern also the pitfalls that exist for the modern Boswell. Lawrance Thompson began as Frost’s official biographer; he became one of his intimates. He is clearly “involved” with his subject, has been perhaps too close to it for too long, and is still in search of “distance.” He tries very hard to be objective, and with utmost candor draws our attention to the poet’s weaknesses, a formidable list: arrogance, gloom, jealousy; he is resentful, sulky, vindictive, given to violent temper and rages.

A striking instance of the problems of a Boswell is brought out in this book. Frost was clearly troubled that Thompson would make him out to be more religious than he was. “I grow curious about my soul,” he teases Thompson, “out of sympathy for you in your quest for it.” One suspects Frost may have been right: documents here given show only a pronounced ambivalence, but Thompson dismisses his blasphemies and says that he never rejected faith for long. Comparing him to Job, he overlooks the fact that Job never wavered, while Frost was inclined to skepticism and mockery. The editor prints a letter from the poet to himself commenting on Thompson’s book on Melville’s “quarrel” with God: “You do take away from Melville’s stature a little in making him bother to believe in a God he hates.”

As one turns the pages of this volume, one is struck by the artificiality of many of the documents: there are too many letters to manuscript collectors, too much importance is given to autograph hunters and the bibliophilic marketplace. We are exposed also to routine

letters from college presidents proffering degrees, business letters from the White House, banal everyday telegrams—all sorts of material that would look fine under glass in an exhibition of “Frostiana” but which hardly belongs in this kind of book. Such materials can be summarized in a few sentences and footnotes.

There are other anomalies; the annotation is sparse, books and persons are not identified, useful dates are missing. More serious still, the editor allows certain ungenerous things said by Frost about persons still living to stand in the text. There will be, one feels, needless hurt—hurt never intended by Frost, for he was speaking in private. Finally there is a strange self-indulgent index, “enriched” says the editor by its topical headings; but impoverished, we must add, by its failure to do what indexes usually do—record the names of many persons occurring in the letters. One would never know from it that T. S. Eliot is mentioned, or Shakespeare; or that Edna St. Vincent Millay is characterized.

In his introduction, Thompson invites “the thoughtful and imaginative reader” to play a game: he proposes to him a kind of “do it yourself” biography of Frost, or, as he puts it, this kind of reader can “roll his own” biography from the “makings” offered here. Biographies are not as easily rolled as cigarettes, especially from such ill-assorted makings. The enigmas of life are not answered by a handful of letters, some telegrams, a list of honorary degrees, a genealogy, and a topical index. Thompson too easily believes that he has furnished enough material to permit the writing of Frost’s life; and he assumes that a biography can be written by amateurs. Thoughtful and imaginative readers will prefer to enjoy as much of the epistolary Frost as is available here and leave to Thompson his appointed task of resolving the biographical paradoxes of a great American poet.

Letter dated 27 December, 1896, from Frost to Miss Susan Hayes Ward.



# A Thistledown Personality

*The Diary of Alice James, edited by Leon Edel (Dodd, Mead. 241 pp. \$5), written by the brilliant invalid sister of Henry and William, reveals her courage and irony in the face of approaching death. Gay Wilson Allen, professor of English at New York University, is working on a biography of William James.*

By GAY WILSON ALLEN

AFTER nearly three-quarters of a century the *Diary* of Alice James, the invalid sister of William the philosopher-psychologist and Henry the novelist, has finally been published in a complete and accurate text, to which the famous biographer of Henry James, Leon Edel, has contributed a "portrait" which may be called the first biography of Alice James. Both achievements, text and biography, are of major importance, for this *Diary* is one of the neglected masterpieces of American literature. It is similar in some ways to Emily Dickinson's poems, both in its transmutation of pain into art and in the posthumous bungling of its first editor.

As Edel says, "Alice James's record is a particular page of personal history, in an otherwise obscure life, as well as a page in the annals of a family of intellectuals. There are few such documents in American or English literature. Its 'facts,' as Henry James warned us, are suspect; it is filled with gossip and exaggerations; it seems to be, at times, little more than a series of exclamations. Yet it is an intensely human document."

It is well known that the family which produced the philosopher and the novelist was as eccentric as it was brilliant. The father, Henry James, Sr., had suffered a traumatic accident in childhood when he lost a leg as a result of a fire. But a handsome annuity from his father's three-million-dollar estate enabled him to lead a life of independent study and travel. He also wrote numerous books on his Swedenborg-oriented philosophy, which the Swedenborgians disowned and scarcely anyone else could read. He regarded the education of his children as his major purpose in life, but moved them around so often and tried so many experiments that he frustrated all of them except Henry, Jr., who at an early age spun a protective literary cocoon for himself and crawled into it. William was



Alice James—a little girl in her craved attention.

barely saved from crippling neuroses by a lucky marriage, while the lives of the two younger sons were wrecked by drink, Civil War wounds, and erratic judgment.

But it was Alice, the youngest child, who paid the heaviest penalty for her father's eccentric genius. And part of her misfortune lay in having a mind as brilliant as those of her two older brothers, who always overshadowed her. All four brothers spoke and wrote to her in the most adoring terms, but the undertone of irony, intended for innocent teasing, tortured her. Before she was fifteen she suffered fits of hysteria, and before she was twenty she realized that it was a fight to the death between her body and her will.

In her *Diary* Alice attempted to analyze her condition: "Owing to some physical weakness, excess of nervous susceptibility, the moral power *pauses*, as it were for a moment, and refuses to maintain muscular sanity, worn out with the strain of its constabulary functions." Only her will kept her from throwing herself out the window, or "knocking off the head of the benignant pater as he sat with his silver locks, writing at his table, it used to seem to me that the only difference between me and the insane was that I had not only all the horrors and suffering of insanity but the duties of doctor, nurse, and strait jacket imposed upon me, too."

In her late thirties, after the death of both parents, Alice James found satisfying companionship with a healthy, vig-

orous young woman named Katharine Loring. William James's wife, also named Alice, seemed to suspect lesbianism, but Professor Edel never mentions this term, and it would suggest an oversimplification. Edel's explanation is that, "Beyond the normal need for friendship, a little girl lurking in Alice out of the earlier years craved individual attention as well as the center of the stage." A crisis came when Miss Loring had to take her ailing sister to Europe, but Alice went, too, and eventually won the complete possession of Katharine. However, this did not work a cure. In fact, as Henry observed, when Katharine came back to her after an absence, "Alice takes to her bed." This comment, incidentally, does not mean that Henry was unsympathetic. He knew that her suffering was real, even if the doctors could find no organic cause. As he expressed it, "tragic health was in a manner the only solution for her of the practical problem of life."

Alice James began keeping her *Diary* on May 31, 1889, before she knew how really "tragic" her health was. Her intention, much like Emily Dickinson's in writing her poems, was to provide "an outlet to that geyser of emotions, sensations, speculations and reflections which ferments perpetually within my poor old carcass for its sins. . ." The earlier pages are chiefly interesting for her satirical comments on British life and character, which she knew, as she often reminded herself, only through her servants and the British newspapers. It was the time of Irish agitation for "Home Rule," and her Gaelic blood made her fiercely partisan. She could also laugh at Henry's innocence and William's restlessness, but most of all at herself for her inconvenient ailments that baffled medical science.

It was almost a relief, therefore, when a distinguished physician finally discovered that Alice James had cancer of the breast and had only a few months to live. Her courage in facing death and rationally analyzing her sensations add a dramatic suspense to the last six months of her diary. This bravery was not a perverted pleasure, nor was it based on a compensatory fantasy of a life after death—she was too agnostic for that; it was a half objective, half ironical view of her own pathos. She wondered whether it was "an entire absence or an excess of humor in Destiny to construct such an elaborate exit" for her "thistle-down personality." At times she regretted not being able to attend her funeral: "Having been denied baptism by my parents, marriage by obtuse and imperceptive man, it seems too bad not to assist myself at this first and last ceremony. . ." But it was without irony that she declared, "All the pain and discomfort seem a slender price to pay for all the happiness and

(Continued on page 28)