

HOW ALFRED KNOPF SAW HIS AUTHORS

Reminiscing on Film with a Famous American Publisher

By MARGARET R. WEISS



Joseph Conrad (with Mrs. Alfred Knopf)—“He was known to roll breadballs and spin them across the table at other people’s plates.”

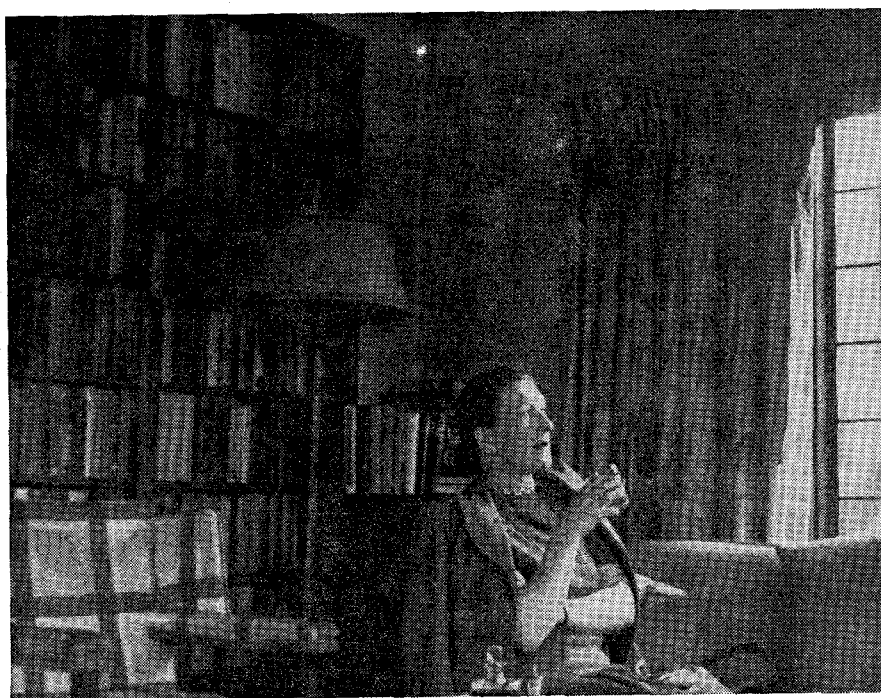
AS audiences of ETV and club programs well know, it is not unusual in today’s sphere of audio-visual communications for a corporation to produce a documentary film marking a noteworthy milestone in its history. What is unique about *Dialogue*—the 16mm sound movie shortly to be released in observance of the fiftieth anniversary of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.—is the fact that the “stills” it sets in motion are the personal camerawork of the company’s founder and president.

For even more years than he has been a publisher, Alfred A. Knopf has been using a camera to record his impressions of people. A man of diverse interests—music, theater, history, conservation, haute cuisine, viniculture—he has been able to capture informal portraits of his many friends in those worlds. But most often his subjects have been the personalities who people the special literary world of the Borzoi colophon.

Documenting the decades spanning Galsworthy and Grau, several thousand Knopf prints and negatives now fill the picture file in his office. It is from these that producer-director Jules Victor



Jules Victor—“He made his own wines. . . .”



Elizabeth Bowen—“. . . knows well ahead what most people are thinking.”



John Galsworthy (with Mrs. Galsworthy in Devonshire)—“It was at this overnight visit [1912] to the Galsworthys that I first heard of W. H. Hudson. . . .”



André Gide—" . . . little known in the days when we made our first contract with him (1921)."



Shirley Ann Grau—"With her last novel, *The Keepers of the House*, we feel that she's in the major league."



Albert Camus—"In 1946 Camus made one grand tour of North America and fell in love with it."



Charles Beard—"My interest in historians goes back to my undergraduate days at Columbia. . . ."



Paul Gallico—"Movies, book clubs, enormous English sales, etc. . . . And one of the best sellers that we had was, and is, *The Snow Goose*, of which we sold over 220,000 copies to date."



John Updike—"He makes the others look like slouches in terms of sheer writing volume."



Jean-Paul Sartre's hands—" . . . Glenway Wescott sitting on the floor . . . and always addressing him as *cher maître*."



William Humphrey—" . . . *Home From the Hills* is the best novel that has ever come out of Texas. . . ."



John Hersey—"... the kind of a fellow that a woman like Willa Cather was."



Raymond Chandler—"... a writer as well as a storyteller, and a fine one."

Schwerin made his selection for the footage of *Dialogue*.

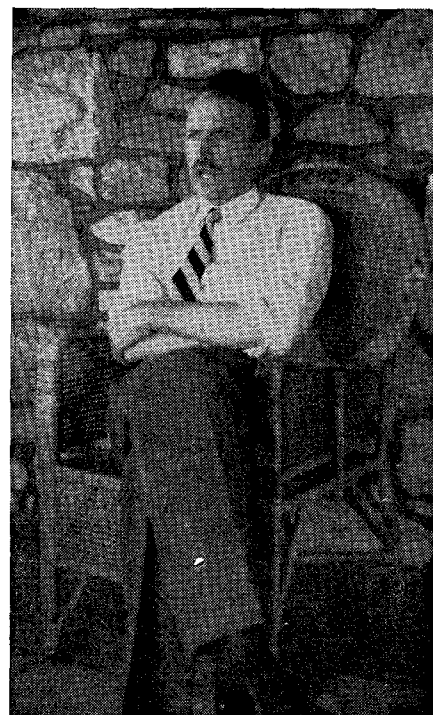
The film's title seems especially fitting. The soundtrack is not only a conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Knopf, pinpointing the larger dialogue that comprises the author-publisher relationship. There is evidence also of another dialogue—the one that exists between a man and his camera.



Wallace Stevens—"Carl Van Vechten or Witter Bynner brought his work to my attention. . . . I don't pretend to know anything about poetry, even though I enjoy much of it."



Robert Nathan—"My great respect for Robert is that he is a writer who writes."



Conrad Richter—"One of the small handful of early discoverers of the Southwest."

Plutarch

By KENNETH REXROTH

IT WOULD BE EASY to write abusively about Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. They could be called "The Myth of the Ruling Class Dramatized," or "The Social Lie Personified." More perhaps even than Plato, Plutarch is the founding father of the notion of a heroic elite. His great Greeks and Romans, with few exceptions, do not only seek power, they assume responsibility. As he compares them, from Romulus and Theseus to Mark Antony and Demetrius, he judges them always according to the degree they successfully assumed, as leaders, unlimited liability for the commoner men they led.

Although succeeding ages have believed Plutarch, it is doubtful indeed if human affairs are put together or if political morality functions as Plutarch conceived it, or even if nobility can be found at all among generals and politicians—Greek, Roman, Russian, American, or Chinese, then or now. Yet, like the Bible and Shakespeare, *Parallel Lives* is a desert island book. Classical literature contains a good many greater works of art, and many truer pictures of the ways of men. But Plutarch never palls. He is always engaging, interesting, and above all else—to use a word that will provoke smiles today—elevating. Men are like the quarreling chiefs of a predatory war band as they are described in Homer's *Iliad*. They are like the neurotics who destroy each other in Euripides, but they are not like the heroes of Plutarch. Some men may be noble—John Woolman or Martin Buber or Albert Einstein or Martin Luther King. Our common sense tells us that men who came out on top of political systems far more corrupt than those of Kansas City, New Jersey, Memphis, or Chicago in their heyday, and at least as merciless as Moscow, may have been heroic in a sense but they were not noble by either Plutarch's definition or ours. They were not great and good men as judged by Greek, Christian, or Jewish standards. They were not by the standards of Plutarch's Romanized Stoicism.

It has been said that Plutarch was simply a propagandist for the truculent Roman Senatorial caste and for their traditional ancestors, the Athenian partisans of the Spartan despotism. It could be said, too, that out of the legendary materials provided by Plutarch we still

construct the legendary idols of our own rulers—Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Douglas MacArthur, Dwight Eisenhower.

It doesn't make Plutarch any the less absorbing. Nobody has ever been so foolish as to believe society would ever be ruled by the wise, the philosopher-statesmen of Plato's *Republic*. We hope of the human social structure that somewhere, far away, long ago, or ages to come, it may rise at its summits into regions of nobility. Society would not be better if its masters were like Plutarch's heroes. It would certainly be more satisfying. This is the great secret. His characters may be bloodthirsty, lustful, treacherous, but they are never trivial. They are always purposive. Plutarch's is a world in which men do not live at random, as we learn in our hearts that, in fact, they do.

The *Parallel Lives* are lives of adults of the kind we all thought we would meet when we grew up, which we never did and which we have ceased to ever expect to encounter. Or have we? Perhaps we always hope that we will meet nobility and responsibility walking together just around the corner. We can accept sin in our fellows and even learn to forgive it but it is a bitter and endless chore. We never really learn to accept gratuitous meanness, least of all in our masters. Plutarch compels us to believe of his characters that they are masterful because they are never mean. Although this is diametrically opposed to the facts, it is not a falsehood. It is the kind of truth that, like "The School of Athens," the *Jupiter Symphony*, or the *St. Matthew Passion*, provides life with meaning that it does not in the least deserve. It is obvious why Plutarch gave Shakespeare some of his greatest characters. They had similar life attitudes. Even Bottom is not mean. Coriolanus was an arrogant traitor. Mark Antony was a

bloody demagogue infatuated with an aging nymphomaniac. There is nothing whatever trivial about them.

Plutarch's book is a kind of antonym to Petronius's *Satyricon*. Petronius knew power. His hands were on the levers of decision until they were cuffed away by the fasces of Nero's lictors. His view of human motivation was dim and bawdy. Plutarch did not know power but only honors and so he believed that the wielders of power were men of honor. I think he really believed it, as certainly many of the Stoic mythographers—Seneca for instance, of Greek and Roman upper-class morality—did not. He is nothing if not persuasive. There are few more convincing narrators in all literature.

WE need to be persuaded. If we accept the fiction that society is put together this way, we are likely to find ourselves perpetually duped, but it is good for us to believe that even if we aren't noble we can hope that we ourselves might possibly be so put back together. If we accept the testimony of experience with too much pessimism we demean ourselves. Alas, that pessimism continuously forces itself upon us and we need such reassurance as Plutarch provides. It may lead to role playing—Roger Casement or his caricature, T. E. Lawrence, or our own tedious adulteries elevated to the barge of Cleopatra—but role-playing is better than nothing. In acting out there is hope. In the words of Gabriel Marcel, "Without hope, nobility is impossible."

No modern translations of Plutarch's *Lives* compare with North's Elizabethan version, from which Shakespeare transcribed almost verbatim great sections of his Roman plays. If North's English is too strange for your taste, Dryden's in the plain but elevated style of the late seventeenth century seems today much more like our own speech as well as more like Plutarch's Greek. This is complete in the Modern Library Giant and is to be preferred to any of the many paperbacks of selections. Get the complete *Parallel Lives*. They are endlessly satisfying. Sooner or later you will read them all, and, besides, you never know when you might find yourself on a desert island.

