



Books

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LITERARY HORIZONS

The Best of Many Lives

ON JUNE 2, 1947, Gladys Billings married Van Wyck Brooks. In *If Strangers Meet* (Harcourt, Brace & World, \$6.95) Mrs. Brooks writes: "We were both vulnerable at that moment in time, our lives hanging between past and future while loneliness wrapped us each like some dull mist. He was alone because of Eleanor's death; I was alone in consequence of a recently and unhappily established divorce." (The first Mrs. Van Wyck Brooks had died in 1946.) Not long after the marriage *The Times of Melville and Whitman*, fourth volume of Brooks's history of the literary life in America, was published, and from then until 1952 he worked on the concluding volume, *The Confident Years*. Thereafter he wrote a number of shorter books, including sketches of John Sloan and Helen Keller, a biography of William Dean Howells, autobiographical volumes, and critical essays.

During the years of the marriage Mrs. Brooks, who was not young and who had already demonstrated a variety of talents, turned author, publishing *Three Wise Virgins*, studies of a trio of New England ladies of independent spirit and philanthropic inclination. It became clear that she was a born writer, and she went on writing. Her first autobiographical volume, *Gramercy Park* (1958), is a charming account of a girlhood in New York City near the turn of the century. Daughter of a prosperous doctor and a semi-invalid mother with broad cultural interests, Gladys saw more sides of life than most of her contemporaries, and looked carefully at all that she saw. Telling about her parents' disagreements with regard to the nature of the good life, she comments, "I knew I had to explore everything in order to find out which world was best."

Boston and Return (1962) describes some of her explorations, and describes them very well. After a rather informal education, partly conducted in Europe, Miss Rice, as she then was, decided to become a landscape gardener, and, with a friend, went to study at the Arnold

Arboretum in Boston under the famous and, so far as she was concerned, skeptical Professor Sargent. Her account of her experience will delight anyone who cares for trees and shrubs. Then there was Europe again and a meeting with Henry Adams, who enrolled her among his "nieces." Marrying John Saltonstall, she set up housekeeping, so to speak, on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston with six servants. She found the life of proper Boston society oppressive, but there were music and painting, trips to Europe, and eventually four children to occupy her attention. The period from 1890 to 1914 or perhaps 1917 was, I believe, a peculiarly pleasant time for a rather large number of privileged persons; certainly, though she had her problems, Gladys Rice Saltonstall enjoyed it.

Passing over a decade or two and a second marriage, Mrs. Brooks begins *If Strangers Meet* with an account of her first meeting with Van Wyck. "I saw a man of medium height," she writes, "of medium weight, dressed in a well-cut, discreet English suit with short jacket, handkerchief neatly folded in breast pocket, his thick black hair brushed back to stand straight up from his forehead, his color high in a face almost without lines and bearing the distinctive feature of a white mustache, which he wore clipped." As the description suggests, his manner was rather formal though always gracious, and the formality went along with a certain shyness. He was not lacking in self-assurance, nor did he underestimate his own powers, but he had never been one to thrust himself forward, and fame seemed to increase rather than diminish his reticence.

The marriage lasted for nearly sixteen years, until Brooks's death in 1963, in his seventy-eighth year. Mrs. Brooks has given a careful account of the later years of a distinguished man of letters. Always an extraordinarily hard worker, Brooks found it difficult to break the habit, even when his fame and his income, to say nothing of age and uncertain health, suggested a less stringent discipline. Al-

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though in 1952 he had finished his great work, the "Makers and Finders" series, and had laurels aplenty to rest on, he continued to spend many hours each day in his study. But of course there were interruptions—travels in this country and in Europe, increasingly frequent occasions when honors were bestowed upon him, and visits to and from friends of a long lifetime. Dozens of more or less eminent poets, novelists, critics, and artists of all sorts are mentioned in Mrs. Brooks's faithful record, and some of them are shown with admirable vividness. Because it is a conscientious account of the Brookses' activities, the book is less enjoyable than the more impressionistic *Boston and Return*; but surely it was Mrs. Brooks's primary duty to set down such a chronicle.

The years described in the book were those in which Van Wyck Brooks found public recognition for a lifetime of devotion to American literature; but they were also years in which, to his dismay, he was repudiated by many gifted members of a younger generation. To begin with, he had been highly regarded as a rebel, a leader of the attack on Philistinism and the values of a business civiliza-

tion, but, after the popular success of *The Flowering of New England* (1936), he was regarded with suspicion by many of the advance guard. When, in *The Opinions of Oliver Allston* (1941), he denounced what he called "coterie literature" and lamented the fact that young Americans were being led astray by such decadents as James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Marcel Proust, Gertrude Stein, D. H. Lawrence, and the New Critics, suspicion was succeeded by downright hostility. Then *The Writer in America* (1953), in which he attacked Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Hart Crane, *et al.*, and praised Arthur Miller and James Michener, completed his alienation.

According to his wife, Brooks said more than once, "The last years of life are irreparably sad." There was not only the sadness that came from his sense of isolation; there was also the sadness brought by the death of one friend after another, by the infirmities of venerable contemporaries, and by his own bad health. In spite of all this, he did his work and took pleasure in what life could still offer him. For the satisfactions that his final years gave him his wife could take much of the credit, though she makes no such claim. Her title comes from some lines by E. E. Cummings, whom both she and Brooks admired, she rather more than he:

if strangers meet
life begins

Mrs. Brooks had lived many lives, as from girlhood she had wanted to, and the life she led after her meeting with Van Wyck Brooks was full of richness both for her and for him.

—GRANVILLE HICKS.

FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT No. 1229

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1229 will be found in the next issue.

E VHFU VMUB UKF CHTPR
YZUIH E ZMUBKFPP; UKF HTE-
UHT, HMU HS E ZMUBKFPP
OTYZWB E CHTPR.

—KM'TZEZR

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1228

The difference between journalism and literature is that journalism is unreadable and literature is not read.

—WILDE.

LETTERS TO THE Book Review Editor



Review by Thumb

REGARDING THE ALLEGED REVIEW of *Retrial: Murder and Sam Sheppard*, by Paul Holmes [SR, Jan. 7], a reference to a "highly amusing chapter" in a book containing twenty-two chapters and a criticism of the book cover (which, incidentally, is not the creation of the author) does not, in my opinion, constitute a review. The cogent points of the book were completely ignored by the reviewer, indicating 1) he did little more than thumb through the book, or 2) he didn't understand what was written. It is my belief that the nagging problem of fair trial vs. free press is worthy of mention in a literate review.

In conclusion may I state as a positive, undeniable fact that the first half of the book was not written before the trial. If the reviewer felt that it "obviously" was, he was in gross error and might reflect a moment on the ability of an author to construct a book of this excellent quality in so short a time. The reviewer's own ability might be enhanced by such a study.

MRS. P. HOLMES.

Pompano Beach, Fla.

Non-Rhetorical Questions

THAT WAS A THOUGHTFUL and sympathetic review of *Freedom and Order* [SR, Jan. 28], and I appreciate it. Donald Young did, however, ask two questions which were more than rhetorical. Commenting on my assertion that some Americans were prepared to consider using the nuclear weapon, and on my observation that some consider Oriental lives less precious than American, he asked, "Who in authority is ready?" and "Who subscribes to that view?" The answer to the first is the Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Senator Russell, and the Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Representative Rivers. Both are on record—publicly and over national television—as saying that they would of course consider using the nuclear weapon if that was necessary "to save the lives of American boys." Ex-President Eisenhower, certainly a person of influence if not, technically, of authority, has expressed the same view—at least he has said publicly that he would not "rule out" the use of the nuclear weapon. As for the second, it is perhaps sufficient to quote Representative Rivers's television address a few weeks back in which he said that the life of one American boy was more valuable than the lives of all the Vietnamese, and that, as for world opinion about the way we fought the war, it could go fly a kite.

HENRY COMMAGER.

Amherst, Mass.

DONALD YOUNG ASKS who subscribes to the view "that somehow Oriental lives are not as precious as American lives." One answer: those who believe it is better to fight the Communists in Southeast Asia than on the

shores of California. Perhaps this argument has not yet reached Dr. Young but it is one that is prevalent among the "hawks" of the West and Midwest.

EUGENE KELLY.

Chicago, Ill.

REVIEWER DONALD YOUNG, in reacting to Henry Steele Commager's position on U.S. actions in Vietnam, rhetorically asks: "... what must we conclude about someone who is certain that he knows where to fix the blame in the complex Vietnam crisis of today?" This bit of rhetoric is hardly likely to discredit the opinions of Mr. Commager. Rather, the conclusion one reaches is about Young himself, that he is typical of a certain strain of American "intellectuals" who cling to the middle ground on actual issues, affecting a phony "objectivity" to cover their lack of conviction. Predictably, on the issue of U.S. actions in Vietnam we find Young and too many others over-reacting to clearly stated opinion and hiding behind the protective attitude that this question is just too, too "complex" to allow any answers.

JEANNE RUPPERT.

Iowa City, Iowa

A Human Condition

LOUIS SNYDER in his excellent review of Bernd Neumann's *Auschwitz* and Eugene Davidson's *Trial of the Germans* [SR, Feb. 4] seems to believe that there is a relation between the German national character and the horrors of the Nazi era. I do not excuse the Germans for what was done. ... Neither do I believe that a repetition is unlikely in Germany. But to assume that the Hitler era was in some way caused by the German national character does not stand up in the face of history.

Actually, slaughter of Jews was an historically favorite sport of many East and Central Europeans for some hundreds of years. That the Germans "improved" the techniques is merely a comment on their technical advancement.

The slaughter, even in the Hitler era, was not solely the work of Germans. Oskar Pinckus in his *House of Ashes* accuses (with considerable justification) members of the Polish underground of killing Jews even as they fought the Nazis. In researching a book which I completed recently (*The Politics of Futility*), I discovered significant evidence that Latvians, Estonians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and other East and Central Europeans were as much involved proportionately in the slaughter as were the Germans. True, the Germans led the slaughter—but only because they were the dominant nation (the "Herrenvolk" by their own definition).

No nation has a monopoly on a character which leads to genocide. It is a human character—a human condition.

BERNARD K. JOHNPOLL.

Albany, N.Y.