

Dixie's Difficult Perfectionist

Jefferson Davis: Private Letters, 1823-1889, selected and edited by Hudson Strode (Harcourt, Brace & World. 567 pp. \$7.50), reveals the Confederate President as a warm-hearted man of high principle and an unshakable conviction of the rightness of his own opinions. William Bruce Catton is co-author of "Two Roads to Sumter."

By WILLIAM BRUCE CATTON

THIS correspondence provides a supplement to Hudson Strode's three-volume biography of the Confederate President. Most of the selections are personal letters never before published, chiefly between Davis and his wife; some three-fourths of them are drawn from the period after Appomattox, with particular emphasis upon Davis's two years in federal prison following his capture in the spring of 1865.

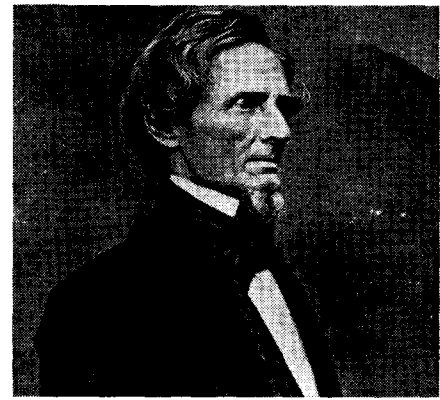
The collection serves to reinforce what Mr. Strode maintained with such tireless insistence throughout the biography: that Jefferson Davis was not merely a leader of great ability, lofty principles, and boundless courage, but also a warm-hearted human being, a devoted husband and father, a man of great kindness, patience, and charm. One is inevitably impressed by the even-tempered fortitude with which Davis endured appallingly large quotas of obloquy, defeat, hardship, and personal heartbreak. Despite provocation, the letters are remarkably free from bitterness. This refusal to hurl maledictions or give way to spite, even in private, may have owed much to the breastplate of righteousness which he had buckled on early in life; but the inner strength and self-control that accompanied it are equally impressive.

Not surprisingly, the letters also bring many of Davis's opinions into sharper focus: his devout belief in state sovereignty and the right of secession; his genuine sympathy for the Negro, tightly interwoven with a conviction that race relations belonged in Southern hands; his dislike of politics; his love of books and the contemplative life. Letters from friends and admirers suggest that Davis commanded not merely loyalty but deep affection and something like veneration from many of his associates.

Yet the picture remains incomplete.

One emerges from this collection, as from the biography, convinced that Mr. Strode has mistaken the truth for the whole truth, which is bad business for anyone and fatal for a historian. Take Davis's unswerving belief in the correctness of his own views. That breastplate of righteousness may or may not have been easy to wear, but it must have been enormously difficult for others to confront, especially on a permanent basis. Davis's warmth and charm were reserved for those who agreed with him—and there were far too many others.

High principle, devotion to duty, iron self-control, and compassion operated within a framework that was essentially narrow, rigid, and exclusive (Mr. Strode would be the first to call an abolitionist to account on such grounds) and a world-view that missed as much as it encompassed. Davis's opinion of politics



—Bettmann Archive.

Jefferson Davis — "even-tempered fortitude."

affords a clue: "Notwithstanding my years of political service," he wrote in 1878, "I had no fondness for it and felt always a distaste for its belongings."

Here speaks a high-minded man, to be sure; but also one who ignored a vital ingredient in American history and a basic element in human relations. Adapting Leo Durocher's classic remark, it is possible to argue that those who detest politics will tend, in a political situation, to finish last. And whether they are nice guys will always be a matter of opinion.

Soul-Searching in Tennessee

Ely: An Autobiography, by Ely Green (Seabury. 236 pp. \$4.95), transcends bitterness in the witty account of a despised mulatto's adventurous life in the mountains of Tennessee. Margaret Walker, who is professor of English at Jackson State College, is the author of the novel "Jubilee."

By MARGARET WALKER

THIS brief autobiography of a troubled boy seeking identity, acceptance, and recognition is unlike any other story of race. Poignant and powerful, it may trouble the conscience of many Americans; however, the author's nostalgic recounting of life in a past generation, with its episodes of high adventure, will also fascinate many.

Ely is a mulatto, but the theme of miscegenation appears with fresh and vivid variations. His story begins when he is called "nigger," and he tries to discover the meaning of the word. His foster mother says, "If you don't stop annoying people about being a Negro I will whip the life out you. . . . Stop asking people questions, especially like that. . . . We are all niggers and there is nothing wrong about it." The story continues with Ely's growing perception:

"White people seem to like bastards, but Negroes don't." "I was having a struggle within; trying to get this Negro religion worked out, and learning to hate white people, after I had been taught that they were all God's children and we are to love everybody." Despised, rejected, and bewildered, he suddenly lifts himself out of a welter of confusion to articulate his fight against bitterness and hatred.

Nevertheless, Ely, who is what his people would call "a natural-born storyteller," relates his painful tale with a bright sparkle of wit. His foster mother, Matt; his two sets of parents; his friend, Jack Prince, and his remarkable grandfather, Ned, are all unforgettable characters. However, the most interesting sections of the autobiography deal with Ely's life as a trapper, hunter, and digger of "gensend" or genseng root, which is noted for its medicinal qualities and abundance in the mountains of Tennessee. And the great incident of the book—the hunt for a huge wild hog—is in the tradition of Tolstoy's wolf hunt and Faulkner's bear.

In her introduction Lillian Smith makes the apt comment that "Ely is a most extraordinary document." It is, indeed; judged by any standards the book comes out a living whole.

Hotheads in Cooler

The Riot, by Frank Elli (Coward-McCann. 255 pp. \$4.95), offers a first-hand glimpse into a zombie world of iron bars and concrete. Clarence L. Cooper, Jr., is the author of "The Scene," "The Syndicate," "The Weed," and "Black." His next novel, "The Farm," concerns the Public Health Hospital in Lexington.

By CLARENCE L. COOPER, JR.

THIS is a badly written first novel by a man who has spent twenty years behind the walls of Walla Walla and Stillwater penitentiaries. The action encompasses two days of a prison riot, during which occupants of the Hole manage to break out and capture members of the staff, including the deputy warden. From Joe Surefoot, a maniacal Indian who likes to stick people with well-honed boning knives, to the protagonist, Cully Briston, a heavyweight boxer with a flyweight heart, the characters are two-dimensional caricatures from Jimmy Cagney movies and con folklore. The dialogue is rarely either crisp or authentic; everybody says "Christ" or "crissakes" and backs down at the moment of meaning. Moreover, the depiction of prison attitudes borders on the burlesque.

Yet this novel has virtues that demand it be read—if only for the prison atmosphere it evokes. I can vouch for the veracity of Mr. Elli's description, for I have served time in both state and federal institutions. In each there were the slimy, unscrupulous sado-masochist guards—the "Andy Gumps" of *The Riot*—, the silent Skinny Burnses, the somber insurgents, the dead-city aura of steel and concrete, the zombie environment.

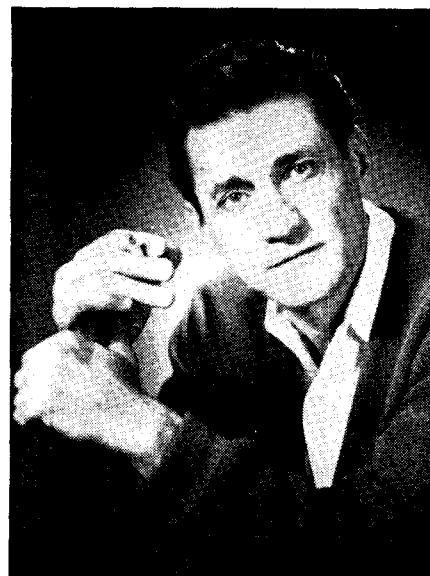
The cellhouse-size hall was as quiet and desolate-looking as an abandoned

warehouse. He [Cully] could see a patch of slate-gray sky beyond the barred forty-foot-high windows overlooking the segregated exercise yard, the trampled square of earth on which the outcasts . . . were allowed to walk for twenty minutes a day. . . .

The air between the buildings was muggy, motionless. Only the con on the messhall ramp was moving. Then he disappeared. A door slammed, and it was quiet.

The book appears to have had no editing, but this is not to deny that the author has a basic gift. Though tortuous in expression, he possesses an innate scenic-prose power, and toward the end of the novel he reveals that he has gained an emotional one as well.

Ironically, what this book does most



Frank Elli—"an innate scenic-prose power."

effectively (in a way that the author and his publisher may not have realized) is to point out the necessity for prisons rather than for their elimination.

Wages of Dalliance

Castle Ugly, by Mary Ellin Barrett (Dutton. 255 pp. \$4.95), tells of a love affair doomed by family catastrophe. A free-lance critic, Joan Joffe Hall teaches English at the University of Kentucky, Lexington.

By JOAN JOFFE HALL

MARY ELLIN BARRETT'S first novel, *Castle Ugly*, opens exotically: a beautiful woman sunbathing at her Riviera estate sends her husband off with the children so that she may meet a romantic stranger from her past. The second chapter displays that past, the ugly house on Long Island where Sally Courtland and David Ralston spent their childhood summers until catastrophe struck. Sally's rich parents were on the brink of divorce; her father was about to marry David's mother, and her mother, while flirting with David's uncle, was having an affair with her French cousin. Everything was about to blow up when mother and lover were shot on the beach and a hurricane ripped the tip of Long Island, hurling *Castle Ugly* into the sea.

A love story, a colorful setting, mystery, violence, wealth, sex, a touch of sadness and nostalgia—all are presented with a sure hand. But what the delayed exposition portentously reveals only

floats on the surface. The reasons for the Courtlands' quarrel are superficial: she's got culture and boredom, he's got money and bourgeois taste—an old story. Surely our seeing Sally's parents frequently from the child's point of view needn't



Mary Ellin Barrett—delayed exposition and proliferated surfaces.

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