News Of Books And Writers

Edited By Cameron Shipp

The First Reader: Mencken's Family Tree

—A Review by Inez Hansen

It was said of Arnold Bennett that he had a dull nature, reserving one hand for commerce and the other for art. It is feared said that there were two Rudyard Kiplings—one who wrote like a hack, and another who wrote like an angel. The mystery of H. L. Mencken has long awaited solution. Retiring from the petty squabbles of current literature, he shrewdly intrenched himself intellectually with trenches on the roads and morals, at the same time attacking the democratic administration with verbal batteries of high caliber.

More recently he has turned to genealogy and discovered, in tracing the Menckenii to their Teutonic strongholds, that the cousin of a seventeenth-century ancestor was Dr. Johann Burkhard Mencken, of Leipzig (1674-1732), who won considerable renown with two papers against charlatanry. Retranslating these papers in an English translation as "The Charlatanry of the Learned," H. L. Mencken has engaged in detective work that must have taken him far into the Baltimorean nights and worn out no end of copies of the Allgemeines Gelehrten Lexicon, the Minerva, the Almanach de Gotha, the Brockhaus Conversations Lexicon and the complete resources of the Baltimore Library.

PRONOUNCING SWINDLERS

Adding a prefatory introduction that reads like what the Germans call a "Fuehrer," or guide, Mr. Mencken has added copious explanations of the identity of authors named in the text, describing them so minutely that some pages have two lines of the original and 30 lines by the editor. Since Mr. Mencken, even as an annotator, cannot be quite as decorous and pronouncing as the learned doctor from Leipzig, this book gains its interest chiefly from what he contributes to the invitation.

What pleased H. L. Mencken was the discovery that Johann Burkhard Mencken had attacked the mountebanks and charlatans of literature, learning much as he had belabored them while uplifting American literature. He says:—"It delighted me to discover how vigorously he had assailed the swindlers. I have spent most of my life denouncing and how beautifully they survived his assaults!"

Johann, apparently, led in calling them charlatans, but great originality cannot be claimed for him for denouncing fools and bores was a classical gesture; even Plutarch engaged in it. In translating Johann's title, he begins to resemble that of his namesake. The learned scholar remarks, "The groundless burst into unrestrained guffaws," and again, "Such prize document does not have the right to display all these titles," etc. Mr. Mencken credits Johann with seventeenth-century anticipation of Carlyle's biographical method, the other recognizes the interdependence of history and jurisprudence.

H. L. MENCKEN IN HIS OLD FORM

It is unfortunate for the reading world that H. L. Mencken should prefer to publish, in book form, such papers as "The Charlatanry of the Learned" and have his smashing comment on current events to the impermanence of newsprint. If you want to read the famous Mencken thrusts at imbecility, skullduggery, political hocuspocus and bad manners of our time, you have to buy the Baltimore Evening Sun and clip his paragraphs.

But it is well worth the effort. I have in mind, as typical of his best method, his column called "Highlights of the Empire," in which he anticipated all the arguments raised since against the supposed unfitness of "the Honorable Hugo Lafayette Black, LL.B.," for the high office of justice. Every paragraph is characteristic of the Mencken style and manner of attack. Nowhere is there any pretentiousness of the mind that occupies itself with useless resuscitation of minor pedants, friars, astrologers and pamphleteers who cluttered up the seventeenth century and are best forgotten.

The Honorable Mr. Black, says the indignant Mr. Mencken, "is a respectable family man, a Shriner, an Odd Fellow, a war hero, a high dignitary in the Knights of Pythias and a member in good standing in the State Church of Moronia. But in his public capacity the honorable gentleman must still get down sadly as a lowdown southern politician, no more and no less." He belongs, says Mr. Mencken, to the "very species" that includes, Heflin Vardaman and Pat Harrison—"in brief, he is a demagogue from occiput to coccyx. His entire mind has been given up to ranting, puerile attitudinizing and bad manners. He is no more fit for the grave concerns of a supreme court of the United States than a Hollywood leading man could be fit for the College of Cardinals."

HACING IT TO FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

Warming up, Mr. Mencken defies that "discovering a candidate less judicial kidney might have an inconceivable, but it is still within the realm of the possible." Imagine a worse lawyer." He puts the blame on "the Honorable Mr. Roosevelt" and turns his guns on the President. "The only people whose rights and desires he gives any serious heed to are those who hate their betters and are always bellyaching," says he. "The conflict he fans is not the old one between capital and labor, baron and peasant, rich and poor, but a new one between all competent men on the one hand and the relatively inept and malcontented on the other. As between any man who earns his living and supports his family decently and any man who arises every morning bellowing for help, he is for the bellower."

One-sided and partisan is the flags of Baltimore, but no more so than the Lewises and the Browders on the other side. Confronted with such vigorous writing, the balanced evenhow lifting of Dr. Johann Burkhard Mencken (1673-1732), Recter Magnificus, Vir Consultissimus atque Excellentissimus, fades into limbo. H. L. Mencken, in his smashing polemics, belongs in the company of Swift, who never loaded his writing down with the dust of libraries. (Knopf, $2.50).

"Nothing Is Safe," announced E. M. Delafield in the title of her new book, just published by Harper's.

These Writers Would Mourn

It's A Good Thing The Old Gingolata Aren't Here Today To See The Flag Scorned.

It is an excellent thing, I guess, that Harold MacGrath, Burr McCulchson, and Richard Harding Davis have already gone on to whatever reward is vouchsafed to the practitioners of this kind of literature in the world beyond the sky. For if they were still in the flesh, I'm afraid they'd be suffering excruciating torture in their honest souls. And worse, that they'd find themselves in the most lamentable of human plights—deprived of their accustomed way of making a living.

In the books which they wrote by the carload, there was nearly always a passage which everybody who ever read them—and nearly all normal Americans have, to the great regret of the Messrs. Lewis, Dreiser, and company—will recall distinctly. In this passage a heroic young Americano, with golden locks and steel-blue eyes, was held prisoner by a foreign devil, for having continuatously necked the cute whom the foreign devil loved. Sometimes this foreign devil took the form of a wickedly mustached prince dwelling in some vague and romantic realm of Europe. Sometimes, again, he appeared in the seeming of a South American insurrecto or dictator, villainously bent on stealing back from the gentle North American entrepreneur the mines or the banana plantations or what-have-you that the gentle entrepreneur had stolen in the first place—and acquiring in the bargain the person of the entrepreneur's daughter, who of course was the little apple-pie in the case.

THE FOREIGN DEVIL

But whatever shape he assumed, you never had any troubles in recognizing him of the foreign devil he was. And always you hated his gut. And always when you had got to hating him sufficiently that you yearned to American him on a slow grid, a conversation took place between himself and the heroic young prisoner. The manner of that conversation varied of course with the particular scene and the particular guise in which the foreign devil was got up. But invariably it was pitched to about this tune:

"Canst give me reason, varlet, why I should not hang thee from yonder battlement?"

"Why this, sir, that I am a citizen of the mightiest land of the earth, and that, did thou harm but a single hair on this head, the Great White Father in Washington would send his ships, so numerous, I assure thee, as the leaves on those trees, to batter thy tinpot realm about thy ears, and hang thyself from an alp as a warning and example."

That tremendous retort always set the reader into an ecstacy. Myself, I could never contain myself. I had to get up in the floor and act the thing out, and I had the utmost difficulty in stifling the laughs when I knew might gravely disconcert the lady nearest me not too sure of my sanity. Nothing was ever so fine and gratifying save only the Ku Klux Klan scene in the Rev. Tom Dixon.—W. J. Cash.

LOTS OF MONEY

October 5th is the publication date of Mrs. Belloc Lowndes' new novel, "The Fortune of Bridget Malone." This is the story of a modern American girl of Irish background who inherits $4,190,000 and who gets into the clutches of a Parisian marriage broker.

William Walker: Lone Wolf In The Great 40's

—New Biography

Out of the fabulous Forties rose William Walker, a spare little Tennessean who saw a destiny for his nation and set out to win it single-handed. Lawrence Greene, who did so nobly with "America Goes to Press," recreates the career of William Walker in "The Filibuster" (Bobbs-Merrill; $3.50).

Perhaps American history has produced no better copy of a little Napoleon than Walker, in his youth he was regarded as effeminate. Later, in five crowded, dramatic years he ordered the execution of at least a dozen men. Walker possessed a magnetism that drew men to him. Yet he had few friends. Was physically weak, and weighed less than 100 pounds. He became, before he was 30, a doctor, lawyer, and journalist.

HIS REPUBLIC

But Walker chose arms and the territorial aggrandisement of the United States. In swift succession he "annexed" Sonora, a state of Mexico and set up an independent republic; moved into Nicaragua and became its strong man; headed next for Honduras.

At one time, on the eve of the Civil war, he plotted 10 governments. He disturbed both Washington and London. But failure, dismal failure, invariably caught up with this pedestrical soldier of fortune and at last he went down before a firing squad on a Honduran beach one September day in 1860.

Biographer Lawrence Greene has made the most of this chapter in American history; almost made too much of it, one feels. For despite the swift dramatic movement of this adventurer's life, Mr. Greene follows with a series of asides and characterizations that at length slow up the story. Yet, in any event, here is a masterful biography and one of the saltiest offerings of the year.—P. G. P.

Fanfare For Thunderbird

Hudson Strode's "South of Thunderbird," the story of a trip through South America made entirely by airplane, will be published this week by Random House to the accomplishment of a great deal more fanfare than is usually accorded a new travel book. The National Travel Club has sent the book out as its September selection. The Pan American Airways company is distributing hundreds of copies through every one of its branches in South America. Hamish Hamilton is publishing the book in England, and has given it page one in his autumn catalogue. Sumner Welles, Under Secretary of State, wired the author, "Hearty congratulations for a fine piece of work. Your book will do much to stimulate in the United States a real interest and appreciation of South America." And Dorothy Canfield writes, "This is a wonderfully fine piece of work!"

Regulations By The State

"What Colbert did under Louis XIV was precisely what General Johnson and Secretary Wallace did under President Roosevelt," says Walter Lippman in his book, "The Good Society." This is one of the many provocative statements which Mr. Lippmann makes in the course of refuting what he calls "the dominant dogma of the age," i. e., "that government with its instruments of compulsion must by commanding the people how they shall live, direct the course of civilization and fix the shape of things to come."

Elaborating on this theme, Mr. Lippman presents evidence to show that "the regulation of industry by the state was never more slow than in the 19th century before the great technical innovations."

"The Good Society" is published as an Atlantic book by Little, Brown.

LOGS IN LOUISIANA

Lost in vast, rich Louisiana, enclosed on three sides by the slow green bayou, lies Point Noir Maison. In this sombre house, remote on the black point of the black land, live the Devignes — isolated, detached — the strangest group with which a child-genius ever peopled the marvelous landscape of her dream. Thus Houghton Mifflin company describes the literary fellowship prize novel, "Point Noir," by Clelie Huggins, which they announce for publication on September 28. In the words of the author, it is "the story of a group of people who are afraid to suffer and unwilling to face reality, but who want happiness — happiness on impossible terms."

DIXIE AFTER THE WAR

In "Dixie After the War" (Houghton Mifflin company), Myrta Lockett Avary deals with the 12 years after Appomattox, picturing graphically what the southern people—white and black—were saying and thinking and doing, eating and wearing, in a volume dealing with social and economic conditions, race relations, politics, religious and educational matters. The book, long out of print, is an eye-witness account of southern life during the Reconstruction period.

THE BLUE GUITAR

In explanation of the title of his new book of poems, "The Man With the Blue Guitar," which Alfred A. Knopf will publish on October 4, Wallace Stevens states that he uses "the blue guitar" as a symbol of the imagination.

Gerald W. Johnson, one of North Carolina's foremost newspapermen, now an editorial writer on the Baltimore Sun, plays the flute to H. L. Mencken's plane thumping as a hobby. Now he's written a book about it, and it will be out soon.

A Blow to the Pride: Americans So Slow, Asserts Miss Stein On Her Return Home

—They Just Seem Quick

(Remember the stir caused by the Atlantic's publishing Gertrude Stein's "Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas"? The magazine now brings Miss Stein's adventures in her native America after an absence of thirty years. This is the way she begins)

By Gertrude Stein

It has always been a puzzle to me why American men think that success is everything when they know that eighty per cent of them are not going to succeed more than to just keep going and why if they are not they don't keep on being interested in the things that interested them when they were college men and why American men do not get more interesting as they get older.

I do think American men are slow minded, they seem quick but they are slow minded, yes they are. During the war Clemenceau remarked that one of the things that was most striking was the way the nations were not at all as they were supposed to be, the Englishman was noted for his calm and the English soldier tended more to be hysterical than any other one, the Americans were supposed to be so quick and they were so slow, the French were supposed to be so gay and they were so solemn. A young French soldier who was one of those who taught the American soldiers how to use the French mitrailleuse told me that to his surprise the Americans understood very quickly the mechanics of the gun but their physical reaction in action was very slow, very much slower than the French one, consequently it took more Americans to do anything than it did Frenchmen and so of course it was done less quickly.

He also told a story of when he praised the Americans as scouts, he told them when they heard a sound like quack, quack, it was not a duck. It was a German and he said he told them this and they always understood and then when it was the German they did not disappear quickly enough and the German got them.

THEY HAVE TO REMEMBER

We went to Berkeley and they had invited me I think it was the Phi Beta Kappa to lunch, and the only thing I remember is their asking why I do not write as I talk and I said to them if they had invited Keats to lunch and they asked him an ordinary question would they expect him to answer with the Ode to the Nightingale. Once it may have been in Cleveland or Indianapolis I was talking with two or three reporters and a photographer with them and I said you know it is funny but the photographer is the one of the lot of you who looks as if he were intelligent and was listening now why is that, you do I said to the photographer you do understand what I am talking about don't you. Of course I do said you see I can listen to what you say because I don't have to remember what you are saying, they can't listen because they have got to remember.

WHAT'S A 'LAY OUT?'

I liked the photographers, there is one who came to see me and I was sent to do a lay out of me. A lay out, I said yes he said what is that I said oh he said it is four or five pictures of you doing anything. Alright I said what do you want me to do. Why he said there is your airplane bag suppose you unpack it. Oh I said Miss Toklas always does that oh no I could not do that, well he said there is the telephone suppose you telephone well I said you but I never do Miss Toklas always does that, well he said what can you do, well I said I can put my hat on and take my hat off and I can put my coat on and I can take it off and I like water I can drink a glass of water, alright he said so that so I did that and the next morning there was the lay out and I had done it.

I liked Charlie Chaplin he is a gentle person like any Spanish gypsy bullfighter he is very like my favorite one Gallo who could not kill a bull but he could make him move better than any one ever could and he himself not having any grace in person could move one as no one else ever did, and Charlie Chaplin was like Gallo. We naturally talked about the cinema, and he explained something. He said naturally it was disappointing, he had known the silent films and in that they could do something that the theater had not done they could change the rhythm but if you had a voice accompanying naturally after that you could never change the rhythm you were always held by the rhythm that the voice gave them.

AN AMUSING EVENING

Anyway we both liked talking but each one had to stop to be polite and let the other say something. After dinner they all gathered around me and asked me what I thought of the cinema. I told them what I had been telling Charlie Chaplin, it seemed to worry them and at last I found out what was bothering them they wanted to know how I had succeeded in getting so much publicity, I said by having a small audience, I said if you have a big audience you have no publicity this seemed to worry them and naturally it would worry them they wanted the publicity and the big audience, and really to have the biggest publicity you have to have a small one, yet alright the biggest publicity comes from the realest poetry and the realest poetry has a small audience not a big one, but it is really exciting listening now why is that, you do publicity, alright that is it. Wait after a little while we left, it had been an amusing evening.

COMPREHENSIVE THOREAU

The first comprehensive single volume edition of the writings of Henry David Thoreau is published today in the famous Modern Library series. The volume runs to over 700 pages, and includes the whole of "Walden" and all the other important works of Thoreau. Brooks Atkinson, dramatic critic of the New York Times, edits the volume, and contributes a biographical introduction.

O'FLAHERTY'S 'FAMINE'

Liam O'Flaherty's "Famine," his first novel since "The Informer," will be published by Random House on September 28, and the author will arrive a fortnight later to participate personally for the disposition of the motion picture rights. "Famine" is the October selection of the Literary Guild.

1821 to 1861: America Before Civil War

—Reminiscences

With the revival of interest in Civil war days comes the timely publication of Dr. Thomas Nichols' "Forty Years of American Life" (Stackpole Sons; $3).

This is a sincere account of one man's careful observations of his own time, 1821-1861. It is an amazingly broad view, considering that most of his traveling had to be done by stage-coach, horse-drawn canal boat, steamboat and, later, the early railroads.

BUCOLIC DAYS

Brought up on a New England farm, Dr. Nichols first gives a picture of bucolic days when a quilting bee or a sugaring-off satisfied the gregarious, and men could snuff a candle with a bullet. On market days frugal farmers would carry bean porridge frozen into a block ready to be warmed at a tavern fire, saving the expense of dinner in town. Relief was no problem then: paupers were sold by the city to the highest bidder, for a year's service at a time.

Dr. Nichols began early to travel. He kept his eyes wide open and his notebook handy. The result is a very detailed recital of life in such cities as Buffalo, New York, Mobile, Galveston, New Orleans, Cincinnati.

He studied and tried to account for sectional peculiarities, was far ordinately fond of American hotel service and keenly, could laugh a little at the American love of lecturers and American fondness for forensics, extolled democratic ideas and chauvinism. He tells all sorts of amusing anecdotes about all sorts of men from Barnum to President Tyler.

IDEAL LIVING

The greatest interest of the good doctor was in communities designed for ideal living. Dr. Nichols and his wife themselves founded the Memnonia institute at Yellow Springs, Ohio.

The Civil war broke up all their hopes as well as their ideal communities. They fled to England and Dr. Nichols wrote this book first for the English magazines, to give the English public a straightforward account of life across the Atlantic.—D. S. E.

Simply Because— He Is Like That

John Jay Chapman once wondered why a man of sinister appearance, whom he disliked looked like he did, and concluded, as with the joy of discovery, "He looks like that because he is like that!" Precisely this might have been said of Chapman himself, according to M. A. DeWolfe Howe, who continues: "One saw him approaching on a New York street, perhaps Fifth avenue, and felt at once the nearness of a notable figure. Tall, with the commanding presence to which a prophet or a poet might lay claim, bearded, his hair grey, and then of a grizzled grayness, with small, piercing, friendly eyes, and clean-cut features, bending slightly forward as he walked with a shorter gait than most men of his height, dressed with something of the sweet neglect that sits best upon the well dressed and well formed, conveying a sense of nobility in neck and shoulders in nearly all weathers, and singular above all else through the lack of a left hand. There you said, passes somebody who indeed is somebody.

I wonder who. It was Jack Chapman. He looked like that because he was Jack Chapman." "John Jay Chapman and His Letters," by M. A. DeWolfe Howe, is scheduled for publication on September 28 by Houghton Mifflin company.

Foreign Policies Of The British

With the opposing forces of Fascism and Bolshevism straining to fly at each other's throats, it becomes more clear every day that the peace and salvation of Europe depend on the two strong democratic countries of Britain and France. Britain is thus once more in the role, which she has played for over a century, of striving to maintain peace by holding the balance of power.

Britain's motives as peacemaker and the ways in which she has at times succeeded and at times failed are clearly shown in a new Macmillan book which is outstanding for its objectivity, of material from bias "Britain in Europe," by R. W. Seton-Watson, of the University of London. This is required reading for all who feel that the future of western civilization may depend on Great Britain's foreign policy.

Escape From Devil's Island

Rene Belbenoit, whose escape from Devil's Island was reported a few months ago, will be represented on the early 1938 list of E. P. Dutton & Co. with his autobiography, "Prisoner Without Bars." He will probably be titled "Hell on Ruined Years: An Autobiography of a Fugitive From Devil's Island." The book will run to about 125,000 words and will carry an introduction by William LaVarre, who found Belbenoit in the jungles of Dutch Guiana and the trail blazer for his sensitive and hospitality.

North Carolina Offers: Prizes For Books

—A Wry Note, by Cameron Shipp

I see by the papers that the Mayflower Society of North Carolina is about the business of selecting a book for the annual prize, and as usual when the matter of prize-giving to writing men is stuck under my nose, I rise to remark that it is a vicious little practice habit. It is a habit that never comforted or produced a talent.

We can note that all the Pulitzer prize brought to Caroline Miller was a husband swap—a Georgia birchman for a Waynesville florist; that Margaret Mitchell was properly bored, and that Sinclair Lewis snubbed it with a dismissing guffaw. Save in the instance of the great publishing houses and their offers of $10,000 for novels on a bona fide contracting basis, the big prizes always come too late to encourage a genius. As for the little ones, I am convinced that no masterpieces are typed with one eye on a state prize.

NO COMPARISON

Still, the main objection to writing prizes is that there is utterly no basis for comparing one alleged work of art against another, and obviously no basis for comparing books of science against books of poetry, books of philosophy against books of fiction, and all of them against each other. And smugness always enters into the thing because the awarding society can always pretend that the prize-winner was written specifically to win his own little contest.

Well, we are against prizes. But we are not against the admirable list of books eligible in North Carolina this year. Some of them are grand, most of them are good, few of them are bad. Right are outstanding, and it is fair to say that the prize will fall somewhere among the following: LeGette Blythe's "Marshal Ney: a Dual Life;" Alex Mathews' "Charles Kitchin and the Wilson War Policies;" Phillip Russell's "The Glittering Century;" Dr. H. A. Royster's "Medical Manners and Morals;" Paul Green's "Call to Freedom;" Paul Green's "The Lost Colony;" Horace Williams' "The Education of Horace Williams;" Judge Robert W. Winston's "It's a Far Cry;" and Paul Neff Garber's "John Kilgo."

THE ALCHOL BOOK

If this were a strictly North Carolina contest, with a rule that you had to write about North Carolina to win, the list would be very narrow; I may be prejudiced in the matter, too, but I pray to Allah that nothing like Grant L. Donnelly's "Alcohol and Habit-forming Drugs" is awarded the prize. It would be too damn typical of North Carolina to do just that thing.

The other eligible books is impressive, and I append it for your information. Between you and me, I think either my spry contemporary Mr. Winston, my despair and delight Marian Sims, my classmate Bob Winston, or my old teacher Dr. Horace will get the prize—more so as the literary critic will be happy. Here's the list:

THE LIST

History and biography—"Claude Kitchin and the Wilson War Policies," by Alex Matthews Arnett; "The Clergy of Connecticut in Revolutionary Days," by Alice Mary Baldwin; "Marshal Ney: A Dual Life," by Legette Blythe; "The Ancient World," by Wallace Everett Caldwell; "John Carlisle Kilgo" by Trustees of Trinity College, 1934-1910," by Paul Neff Garber; "Dictionary of the Writers of Thirteenth Century England," by Josiah Cox Russell; "The Glittering Century," by Phillips Russell; "The Development of Modern Medicine," by Richard H. Shyrock. "The Education of Horace Williams," by Henry Horace Williams and "It's a Far Cry," by Robert W. Winston.

Poetry—"Bowl of Petunias" and "Wicks in Bethlehem," by Clement Burt; "Songs of Summer Nights," by Andrew J. Howell; "A Star Shines," by Elisabeth Sumnton Thomas, and "River Acres," by Ruth Vail.

SCIENTIFIC ENTRIES

Science — "Alcohol and Habit-forming Drugs," by Grant L. Donnelly; "Trees of North Carolina," by Harry Roy Fletcher; "Plants of Eastern North Carolina," by Harry Roy Fletcher; "Trees of Eastern North Carolina," by Harry Roy Fletcher; "Trees of Eastern North Carolina," by Harry Roy Fletcher; "Trees