

Criticism. William Butler Yeats began his literary life as a self-conscious esthete of the fin de siècle school; he ended it as a literary dictator, a poet of power and of transcendent greatness. In between lay the Irish literary renaissance—largely his creation. With Lady Gregory he founded the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, he encouraged the playwright Synge, he was friend and counselor to George Moore, Padraic Colum, Oliver St. John Gogarty. We review below a major study of the poet. . . . A contemporary of Yeats's, Edwin Arlington Robinson late in life was caught up in the American poetic renaissance which began a few years after the Irish literary revival. Emery Neff's searching study of Robinson, the second volume in Sloane's American Men of Letters Series, is also reviewed this week, with the first volume of the series, Joseph Wood Krutch's richly informative biography of the sage of Walden.

Clearing Mist & Haze from a Sby Man

YEATS, THE MAN AND THE MASKS. By Richard Ellmann. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1948. 331 pp. \$5.

Reviewed by HORACE REYNOLDS

THE conflict between the self of everyday life and that of the imaginative life, which troubles every subjective man and makes him think of his social life as an allegory—that was the life of Yeats. So dynamic was this conflict in him that his imagination dramatized it, and he believed for years that he had an attendant spirit, one Leo Africanus, who was his opposite. This belief excited him—and it was primarily for imaginative excitement that he sought belief—because it externalized what he had thought of as a purely internal conflict into a tug of war between a living man and a ghost.

Mr. Ellmann's perceptive book on Yeats is a study of that dichotomy and the successive series of dramatizations which the mind of the poet gave it.

Theosophy, the Hermetic Students of the Golden Dawn, Spiritualism, the astronomical psychology of "The Vision"—Mr. Ellmann clearly expresses the backgrounds of all these successive beliefs of Yeats, and poses the poet clearly in front of them. John Sherman and Howard in Yeats's story "John Sherman"; Michael Robartes and John Ahern, the Hic and the Ille which Ezra Pound called Willie, of Yeats's verse—Mr. Ellmann shows how these pairs of opposites in Yeats's work reflect the divided consciousness of their creator. He relates Yeats clearly to the three focal points of his life—his father, Maude Gonne, and his wife. His father's skepticism deprived Yeats of religion and gave him the theory of personality of which his work is manifest.

(His father understood his son better, I think, than Mr. Ellmann gives him credit for doing.) Yeats's Laura gave him decades of frustrated love, of biting the pillow—and his love poetry. His wife wrote out for him in her automatic writing the system which mapped chaos for him and provided him with a working hypothesis, in which he probably had as much, and as little, belief as he had in table-rapping and mediums. Of this, he wrote significantly that he

hoped "for ten years to write out of his renewed security." With what AE called the "heavenly geometry" of "The Vision," as with the other systems which were his aids to poetry, Yeats had a way of eating his system and having it, too. He went to mediums but he did not take their advice.

Mr. Ellmann traces this inner drama of Yeats's life clearly, calmly, convincingly. He has been frank to point out weaknesses of the flesh and spirit; he treads firmly if softly on the poet's dreams. He is cool and detached; he sheds light not heat; he is at the same time full of his subject and yet detached from it. He has scaled detail wisely to interest and understanding. So clearly has he presented difficult backgrounds and related the poet and his work to them that he makes the reader realize that much of what Yeats's friends have written about him has been the mere outward manifestations of a drama to which they had few clues. He shows that behind the pose and arrogance of the man who "carried immortality in his pocket" was a confused and timid man.

To prove this he publishes many hitherto unpublished documents; Mr. Ellmann won Mrs. Yeats's confidence and has had free run of the poet's

THE AUTHOR: Richard Ellmann, A. B. Yale 1939, was wandering about Paris that year indulging a passion for travel when war was declared. Certain, like everyone else, that the city would be bombed momentarily, "it occurred to me," he says, "that I might as well be annihilated with a book in my hand." Although his grave expectations were delayed, a month's wait for passage home gave him pause to peruse the macabre prop he purchased—a volume of Yeats's poems—and, in 1941, he chose the bard for his Ph.D. dissertation. "But before I could finish I went into the Seabees, where I spent about a year lecturing to 'boots' on everything from articles of government of the Navy to tropical snakes." As a French-speaking yeoman third class, he returned to Paris. There he met Henri Michaux, whose prose poems "The Space Within" he has translated for publication next summer. On leave in Dublin in 1945, by then with the OSS in London, he took tea with Mrs. Yeats, who, he suggests, felt sentimental about Americans in bell-bottomed trousers. She showed him a studyful of her husband's manuscripts, many unpublished, including hitherto private journals. Granted a Rockefeller humanities fellowship the next year, he devoted thirteen months abroad to studying the cache and quizzing Yeats's friends. He finished his Yale thesis (a John Addison Porter winner), and one for a Trinity College B. Litt. on the poet's early life. "Yeats, the Man and the Masks," his first book, is a modified combination of the two. He was born in Highland Park, Mich., was graduated from the local high school, is unmarried. His father, a lawyer, is completing a work on conciliation and arbitration. His mother writes verse—as has he, in addition to articles for the *Partisan*, *Kenyon*, and *Sewanee* reviews. At Harvard, as Briggs-Copeland Assistant Professor of English Composition, he'll start a course next term on "Blake and Yeats." After-hours, "mostly to strengthen tendons," he swims, pulls weights, and crawls on his hands and knees—"which I don't think I really like." —R. G.



papers in Dublin. One of the most revealing of these is a letter of explanation Yeats wrote to Robert Gregory, Lady Gregory's son. In it he explains how again and again he had been prevented from doing the natural, instinctive, and right thing by the reason he substituted for impulse in his personal life. If you would understand how his friend AE could cry out, "If only he would be natural!" if you would appreciate Mr. Ellmann's difficulties in shadowing so artful a dodger, read that letter. Surely Yeats had more than his share of what someone has called "the crookedness of the Gaelic mind."

It is typical of Yeats that he wrote the letter (more to put himself right with himself than with the Gregorys), that he probably did not send it, that he omitted it from his published autobiography, that he preserved it among his papers to be read and used by others after his death.

Surely this new life of Yeats is the most revealing and exciting yet to be written. Naturally, some of it is bound to stir controversy and argument. I wish for time, for instance, to go over Mr. Ellmann's interpretation of "Oisín," his explanation of the meaning behind the symbolism of "The Herne's Egg," his judgment of "Purgatory." Also by elaborating and documenting what everyone has long known—that no critic can accept at its face value anything Yeats has written of himself for publication—Mr. Ellmann casts doubt on the trustworthiness of the Yeats manuscript books and diaries on which Mr. Ellmann has in part based his study. These, too, may well be full of red herrings. Selection can be reticence, and there are reticences here to balance the revelations of new documents. But Mr. Ellmann's essential thesis that Yeats was an essentially shy man whose whole life was an attempt to cure himself of that shyness, to learn to act like other men, seems to me hard to deny. Seen thus from the inside, Yeats's life takes on both pathos and dignity, his development from a poet who fled life with Oisín into one who grasped reality greatly becomes a moral as well as an artistic achievement.

Every student of Yeats knows of the poet's professed hatred of rhetoric. When Ellmann warns us not to be deceived by this profession and points to the poet's magnificent use of the rhetorical question, one picks up the hint and runs with it to the realization that Yeats's poetry is Irish oratory at its greatest. It is personality speaking, personality in action, a glorious voice with which the reader, like a spectator at a play, identifies himself, echoing the master-

ful mouth when it recites "Out of the murderous innocence of the sea" or speaks of "The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor."

A young man from Michigan, who graduated from Yale the year Yeats died and now teaches at Harvard, has dispelled much of the mist and haze that hovered around both Yeats the

man and his work. From now on no one can study Yeats without studying Ellmann on Yeats.

Horace Reynolds, who has written many articles on various aspects of Yeats's work, unearthed and edited for the Harvard University Press Yeats's "Letters to the New Island."

Creators of "Walden" & "Tristram"

HENRY DAVID THOREAU. By Joseph Wood Krutch. New York: William Sloane Assocs. 1948. 298 + xiii pp. \$3.50.

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON. By Emery Neff. New York: William Sloane Assocs. 1948. 286 + xviii pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by MILTON CRANE

WILLIAM SLOANE'S American Men of Letters Series has been inaugurated most auspiciously by the publication of Joseph Wood Krutch's "Thoreau" and Emery Neff's "Edwin Arlington Robinson." These first volumes, as well as the works announced to be in progress, give promise of a series of considered evaluations by gifted critics. And it is clear that these studies will not suffer from the narrow academicism that has marred earlier series of this order, especially in England.

Joseph Wood Krutch's "Thoreau" is a superlative example of richly informative biography and balanced assessment effortlessly combined in a single book. The figure of Thoreau is one to daunt the most audacious scholar and critic, but it is difficult to imagine a better or more comprehensive treatment of Thoreau's life and writings than the one Mr. Krutch has given us. For Mr. Krutch is neither an idolater nor an iconoclast; he propounds no thesis which his examination of Thoreau is designed to support. His book is an eminently sane and delightful marshaling of those facts which alone can permit us to arrive at our own conclusions about the author of "Walden," the man whose essay on "Civil Disobedience" became a crucial element in Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy and policy, the man who denied the value of the developing American civilization and who has nevertheless remained what may be called the conscience of America.

Mr. Krutch makes much of the warring elements in Thoreau; he is unsparing in his revelations of Thoreau's inconsistencies, of his illogical thinking and behavior. Some

readers may even find the book unsympathetic to its subject. But Mr. Krutch is throughout scrupulously fair, at whatever cost in sentimentality. The lack may be supplied by the pilgrims to Walden Pond, who hallow Thoreau's memory by eating picnic lunches. For Mr. Krutch, Thoreau was no "nature-lover" in the common sense, and he must be clearly distinguished from those writers who turn physical nature into facile, elegant sentences or who shudder deliciously before "Nature red in tooth and claw." Nature was nevertheless capable of shocking him, and he once scolded her for putting herself "on the level with those who draw in privies." In Thoreau the Puritan and the pantheist maintained an extremely curious and sometimes precarious balance.

The final chapter is a brief but admirable discussion of Thoreau's style (or styles, to follow Mr. Krutch) and offers a brilliant, unpedantic analysis of those qualities in excellent prose that most stubbornly defy analysis. In this, as everywhere in his book, Mr. Krutch writes with a wit and finish that have made his work an ornament of contemporary American criticism.

Mr. Neff brings to his critical biography of Robinson a profound and sensitive understanding of one of America's most extraordinary poets. It was at once Robinson's misfortune and his glory to have come to maturity in a barren era for poetry: the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth. His generation produced, in Robert Frost, only one other poet of the first rank who continued to practise his art.

Robinson's story is one of passionate artistic devotion that bordered on the suicidal. Virtually self-trained, apart from his two memorable years at Harvard, he began almost without warning and without volition to write poetry of hard brilliance and deceptive simplicity—and paid for his devotion with a life of poverty, relieved by occasional gifts from patrons and interrupted by exhausting labor at