

Maynard Keynes—and their distinguished friends and guests coming and going—Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell, Leonid Massine, Sergei Diaghilev, Mark Gertler, Lady Ottoline. Frieda and Lawrence were there, too, in Monty Shearman's flat, but Lawrence was in a dour mood. Confronting the group, he declared somberly, as David Garnett has recorded: "The hate and evil is greater now than ever. Very soon war will break out again and overwhelm you. It makes me sick to see you rejoicing like a butterfly in the last rays of the sun before the winter . . . Even if the fighting should stop, the evil will be worse because the hate will be dammed up in men's hearts and will show itself in all sorts of ways which will be worse than war. Whatever happens there can be no Peace on Earth."

More than ten million had died to make the world safe for Democracy; "but who," asks Paul Delany, "except Lawrence could foresee, or accept, that the Nightmare was not over?"\*

Reviewed by NICHOLAS JOOST

\*All quoted matter is by Paul Delany except as specified in my text.

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## *A Mencken Primer*

**H. L. Mencken: Critic of American Life,**  
by George H. Douglas, *Hamden, Conn.:*  
*The Shoe String Press, Inc., 1978. 248 pp.*  
\$15.00.

H. L. MENCKEN was once very important to me, as I suspect he has been to many readers of this journal. When I was a college student in the bland fifties, he provided a marvellous antidote to the ideas of both the Republicans in Washington and the Democrats on the faculty. Mencken told us what we knew in our bones to be true, that the only thing worse than a government of philistines devoted to business and money was a life devoted to

liberal bromides about democracy, progress, the essential intelligence of the masses, and the benevolence of authority. Since then I have written about Mencken myself on several occasions, anthologized his work, and kept track of new publications in the field. I have also changed my own mind about a number of questions over the past twenty years.

I was thus curious and even eager when George H. Douglas' book arrived. Knowing the Mencken bibliography fairly well, I knew that there was no single brief work that I could recommend to anyone that would convey what I had found in Mencken's writing, and I very much hoped that this book would be what I wanted. We have had a very dull biography of Mencken by Carl Bode; a loving memoir by Sara Mayfield; several fairly competent monographs on various aspects of Mencken's career; and a few pieces of real trash, ranging from at least one of the memoirs to a study of Mencken as literary critic that is unworthy even of being listed in a bibliography. What the world needs is a volume of between 200 and 300 pages that gives the biographical details, elucidates the key intellectual influences, places Mencken in context with others of his time and inclination, separates out the best of his work, and distills what is original in his thought from what is well-written but derivative. Above all, we need a book that unpretentiously captures the tone and manner of Mencken's discourse and that recovers for us what it meant to be roughly as old as the century and to find the *American Mercury* on the newsstand on publication day.

This is not that book. It reads, most of the time, like the product of a literate teacher of freshman composition who has chosen to devote the semester to Mencken's essays. First he tells you what Mencken says. Then he quotes or paraphrases a large hunk of "primary source." Then he tells you what Mencken means. Then, presumably, you are to go out and do the same thing on another essay. Professor Douglas clearly understands Mencken and is sympathetic to his ideas. He wants his readers to like Mencken and return to the texts. He is usually clear and correct in what he says. But the result is ultimately

trivial and does not contribute anything to knowledge.

Some of the ignorance is historical. Douglas does not seem to know much about what else was going on when Mencken lived, unless Mencken mentions something himself. He only involves himself with precursors, like Nietzsche and Sumner, when Mencken himself brings the subject up. He seems very much afraid to offer his own opinion on anything, preferring to quote Mencken, or Walter Lippmann, or Edmund Wilson, or whomever, rather than venture anything of his own. His prose style, which can be admirable when sticking to exegesis, becomes clogged with parentheses, hyphens, rhetorical questions, block quotations, and expletives when he seeks to assure us of the commonsense and the wisdom of the man he is discussing. He has yet to learn one of the first principles of freshman English: that neither quotation nor repetition is analysis.

The book is also alarmingly self-indulgent. Aside from being innocent of much chronology and context, it has a present-mindedness that betrays what I assume to be its derivation from the classroom. A professor, these days, often has to ask questions of his students about the "relevance" of old ideas ("Now class, what would Thomas Jefferson have done in Vietnam?"). The scholarly soul might cringe, but the pedagogue realizes that such questions can move the insensate young to some sort of intellectual activity, however spurious. But print implies more serious obligations. Most students don't read anything; only those with terminal devotion read the works of their own teachers. Douglas is presumably addressing us, who know how to read, who know something about both Mencken and American history, and who would only pick this book up if they wanted something new on the subject. Well, as Queen Victoria said in another context, we are not amused.

To pick only one of several examples of how not to write a serious contribution to knowledge: Douglas has a fairly decent trot to Nietzsche, to which few would object, which he then follows with a whole series of

irrelevancies about what Mencken would say today about current problems; how David Riesman, despite his showing virtually no sign of Mencken's influence, was Menckenesque in places in *The Lonely Crowd*; how Richard Hofstadter and C. Wright Mills, despite equal lack of much influence, carry on Mencken's spirit; and how, to pass on my favorite example, Senator Joseph R. McCarthy fits into this whole scheme. Mencken, you see, loved to write about politics, and he loved to castigate "puritans," although he admittedly did not use the term with much scholarly precision. Thus, by some kind of academic dexterity, we come to "one of the greatest modern puritans of them all—the late Senator Joseph McCarthy—who, more than anyone else in recent times, displayed all the familiar puritan vices on a large scale . . . he became the paragon of modern Puritans. . . ." To a poor historian tied to demeaning things like facts, such insight simply takes the breath away. One wonders what McCarthy's personal friends, not to mention his priest, would make of it all. Ultimately one gets a bit numb to accuracy, and almost welcomes the insight that "the final years of the Vietnam war were especially keen times of puritan agitation. . . ."

Even as rhetorical analysis, the book presents severe problems. Douglas reviews Mencken's famous essays on William Jennings Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson, and never bothers to glance at what other journalists and scholars have said. Mencken can be terribly funny in these essays, and often has hold of a partial truth, but his total picture is about as measured as an Oliphant cartoon. Douglas never lets us know where Mencken is solid, where he is innovative, and where he is simply wrong. He should not commit a book unless he is willing to do the work and tell us these elementary things. In short, this book is a freshman composition version of a major satirist. You can give it safely to your teenage children, but you'd do better to give them primary sources and let them figure it all out for themselves.

Reviewed by ROBERT M. CRUNDEN