

# It Ends with Zyzzogeton

J. BRYAN, III

**H**AILE SELASSIE thinks it is such a good book that he bought six copies. Chief Justice Fuller of the United States Supreme Court endorsed it. The Siamese Navy often consulted it. The English biologist Julian Huxley called it "undoubtedly the most wonderful single volume in existence." Sacred writings aside, it probably deserves his tribute.

The author of this book was a Connecticut Yankee who died 99 years ago. With the single exception of Benjamin Franklin, he was the most versatile of his contemporaries. He was a lawyer, a gardener, a scientist. He advocated unemployment insurance, city planning, forest conservation, and the gradual abolition of slavery. He wrote pamphlets on subjects ranging from the rights of neutral nations to the decomposition of white lead. He also wrote books; one was a record best-seller, but he is remembered for another which has put the whole English-speaking world in debt to him.

... What, you *still* don't recognize him? You needn't be ashamed. The United States' least-known best-known man is Noah Webster, of Webster's Dictionary.

Noah was a vigorous patriot. He was 17 when they signed the Declaration of Independence, and he didn't think it went far enough. Our separation from England, he believed, should be cultural as well as political. We should have our own school books, particularly our own grammars and spellers. English spelling not only was chaotic—you might find the same word spelled three different ways on the same page—but it was ornate. Useless *u*'s cluttered *honour* and *labour* and *colour*. The *k*'s in *critick* and *musick* were decorative parasites. And why should we continue to imitate the English imitation of French in *theatre* and *centre* and *cheque*? Such slavish fal-lallery was unbecoming a free and vigorous nation!

So in 1783 young Noah, five years out of Yale, published his "American Spelling Book" "to facilitate the acquisition of our vernacular tongue

and for correcting pronunciation." It was an immediate success. Storekeepers stocked it as a staple, along with rum and molasses, needles and cheese. The demand was so great that Noah rented out sets of the plates for a fee of one half cent a copy. Impressions were struck off from Portland, Maine, to Salem, Oregon. By 1861—18 years after Noah's death—his "blue-backed speller" was selling a million copies a year. By 1890, the total was more than 70,000,000. With the lone exception of the Bible, it is the best seller of all time.

When his royalties levelled off to an annual \$5000, Noah was able to announce a more ambitious project: an American dictionary. The best of the current English dictionaries was Dr. Samuel Johnson's. It had gone through several revisions since its appearance in 1755, but it was still inaccurate and incomplete. Moreover, Johnson's definitions were sometimes impenetrably pedantic—"network: anything reticulated or decussated at equal intervals, with interstices between the intersections"; and sometimes frankly prejudiced—"oats: a grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people." To which—so goes the story—a Scot retorted: "And



where may one find better horses than in England or better men than in Scotland?"

Noah felt that there was room for a dictionary which Americans could understand and trust, and which would supplement the work of his speller. He was amazed at the avalanche of abuse which followed his announcement. The Anglophile Boston *Palladium* suggested that this "volume of foul and unclean things bear his own Christian name and be called NOAH'S Ark." Another critic dubbed him "Coxcomb-General of the U. S."

**N**OAH ignored them and set to work. At the end of a year, he estimated that his dictionary would "require the incessant labor" of three to five years. It required 18. Clad always in academic black, he toiled around his huge circular desk, ransacking the grammars and dictionaries of 20 languages. Finally, in 1828, "An American Dictionary of the English Language" was published. It contained 70,000 entries, or 12,000 more than the latest revision of Johnson. Its mistakes were few, and only rarely had Noah wet his pen with bile instead of ink—"Dandy: a male of the human species, who dresses himself like a doll, and who carries his character on his back." Moreover, the book was just what its title promised: American from cover to cover, in spelling, pronunciation, and citation.

That is one reason why sales were disappointing. The public considered many of his simplified spellings more eccentric than sensible. Besides, the two volumes were unhandy, and \$20 was a high price. Fifty-five hundred sets had been printed. Although many of them were still unsold in 1840, Noah decided to bring out a revised edition at \$15. This went badly too. In three years the "schoolmaster to a nation" was dead, leaving his magnum opus "stranded like Robinson Crusoe's boat, a vessel too big for the builder to launch."

The man who so described it helped launch it. He was either George or Charles Merriam; no one remembers which, and it makes no difference. The

brothers had been partners since 1831, when they set up a small job-printing business in Springfield, Massachusetts, with toothbrushes and wallpaper as sidelines. Now, 12 years later, they offered to lease Noah's copyrights on a royalty basis. His heirs accepted. The Merriams farmed out the speller and the other books, and concentrated on a new revision of the dictionary, with Noah's son-in-law, Professor Chauncey A. Goodrich of Yale, as editor.

It was ready in 1847: one volume, \$6. This was what the public had been waiting for. Educators liked it too. New York State ordered a copy for each of its 10,000 district schools. Massachusetts ordered 3,000. The book sold so fast that when, in 1857, G. & C. Merriam bought the copyrights outright, they were glad to pay \$250,000.

The first printing of the current edition was in 1934. Although its title is "Webster's New International Dictionary, Second Edition," it is actually the tenth revision of Noah's original. Its editor in chief was William Allan Neilson, formerly President of Smith College. Special editors numbered 207. There are 12,000 illustrations, 13,500 names in the biographical section, 30,000 localities in the gazetteer, 550,000 entries in the vocabulary. Many consider it is thus the most complete and most sumptuous general dictionary ever published\*—a monument that will endure unchanged, you may think.

But don't say so in the presence of Merriam's staff. They deplore the popular belief that whereas a newspaper editor meets deadlines as breathlessly as a sprinter meets the tape, a dictionary editor uses the same time-scale as a geologist. The Webster is a fluid publication. A whole edition, which may total 1,000,000 copies, is not printed in a single Marathon run of the presses, but in printings of 10,000. Between printings there is an interval permitting revision. For example, the department of new words is continually being enlarged. *Panzer* and *blitzkrieg* are already listed. So is *Quisling*, though the term was not born until April, 1940.

Merriam advertises that the Webster has 122,000 more entries than any other dictionary, but the editors are careful to point out that mere bulk is not necessarily significant. If they wanted, they could heap up a vocabulary of 3,000,000, by pitchforking in hyphenated, technical, obsolete, and disreputable words. Chemistry could supply the names of 100,000 carbon compounds alone. Usefulness is the

(Continued on page 32)

\*Of course, there are other good dictionaries of the English language. The 13-volume "Oxford English Dictionary" is a monument of scholarship; it is historical and linguistic rather than "general." In this country there are several thorough works, notably Funk & Wagnalls' "New Standard Dictionary" and the "New Century Dictionary."

# THIS WEEK

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## Features

	PAGE
IT ENDS WITH ZYZZOGETON By J. Bryan, III.....	3
ALMANAC FOR SPRING READING By Amy Loveman.....	9
OUTING OF SPRING AUTHORS Drawn by Willard Mullin.....	10
THE PHOENIX NEST By William Rose Benét.....	24
REGIONAL COSTUMES By Carl P. Rollins.....	26
IN THE SCHOLARLY JOURNALS By Frederick F. Seely.....	34
AMONG THE YOUNGER POETS By Winifred Fisk.....	34

## Reviews

BOOK	AUTHOR	REVIEWER	
SHERWOOD ANDERSON'S MEMOIRS	Sherwood Anderson	Harry Hansen.....	5
THE EDGE OF DARKNESS	William Woods	B. P. Schoyer.....	6
ISLANDIA	Austin Tappan Wright	Norman Cousins.....	7
IN THE YEARS OF OUR LORD	Manuel Komroff	George N. Shuster.....	8
KINGS AND DESPERATE MEN	Louis Kronenberger	Crane Brinton.....	8
VILLAGE IN AUGUST	T'ien Chun	Chen Shih-hsiang.....	13
BINDWEED	Betty de Sherbinin	Bess Jones.....	16
MY UNCLE DUDLEY	Wright Morris	Paul Armstrong.....	16
BEND IN THE RIVER	Jan Valtin	Paul Starrett.....	17
RIVER LADY	Houston Branch and Frank Waters	N. L. Rothman.....	17
FULL SCORE	Frank Baker	Richard A. Cordell.....	17
VICTORY IN THE DUST	Arthur Phillips	Phil Stong.....	18
BIDDY BROGAN'S BOY	Jim Tully	S. L. Phillips.....	18
NO COMMON GLORY	David Pilgrim	Charles David Abbott.....	18
STRATEGY FOR DEMOCRACY	J. Donald Kingsley and David W. Petegorsky	Roger N. Baldwin.....	22
CESARE BORGIA: THE MACHIAVELLIAN PRINCE	Carlo Beuf	Crane Brinton.....	23
LIVING LETTERS FROM AMERICAN HISTORY	Edited by Frances Boykin	Allan Nevins.....	25
BLACK MARTINIQUE—RED GULANA	Nicol Smith	Linton Wells.....	28
BLACK BORNEO	Charles C. Miller	W. L. Tipton.....	28
FROM MADRIGAL TO MODERN MUSIC: A GUIDE TO MUSICAL STYLES	Douglas Moore	G. S. Dickinson.....	30
HORATIO PARKER	Isabel Parker Semler in collaboration with Pierson Underwood	Paul Henry Lang.....	31

## Departments

YOUR LITERARY I.Q.....	13
EDITORIAL .....	14
POEM.....	14
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR.....	15
THE CRIMINAL RECORD.....	30
RECORDS IN REVIEW.....	35
DOUBLE CROSTICS CLUB.....	37
TRADE WINDS .....	38

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# Sherwood Anderson's Story

HARRY HANSEN

WHEN Sherwood Anderson died unexpectedly at Colon, he had been writing his reminiscences with the object of issuing them in book form. From time to time he would describe an event or a period in his life and publish it in a magazine; thus parts of the book had been appearing since 1927. These parts have been assembled, and, together with unpublished chapters judiciously chosen from his manuscripts, are now being issued as "Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs."\* Mrs. Anderson was the principal editor; she had the help of Paul Rosenfeld, who not only knew Anderson well but was one of the first to assess his gifts critically—and accurately; in addition the manuscript was read by such understanding friends as Roger Sergel, Lewis Galantieri, Ferdinand Schevill, and Stanley Young.

Sherwood Anderson was the most self-revealing author of our time; he not only drew on facets of his own personality for his imaginative work but admitted the reader repeatedly to the study of his most intimate writing problems. As a woman recalls her pregnancies, so Anderson was constantly recalling his state of mind before he had completely visualized a character or a situation, for, as he once expressed it, the telling of the tale is the cutting of the natal cord.

He made himself the example, the object of experiment and the springboard for whatever he had to say, contending eternally against the crystallization of an attitude toward life and a rigid pattern in his writing; this gave an imminence to everything he wrote and made him seem to be on the brink of new discoveries in the realm of personality. It also gave the impression that he was groping, and though he resented this word, it was by no means misapplied, nor should any blame be attached thereto. Anderson had the capacity of recognizing his material in what lay close at hand; he accepted every man as an interesting and enigmatic individual, and tried to penetrate his mask.

"Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs"—informal, genial, and dealing more factually with events that he had already kneaded into literary substance—verifies these general remarks. Here Anderson supplies names and dates for his rich adventures in personality, repeats some more in detail than before, and again lifts the veil on the story-teller's hopes, methods, and in-

\*SHERWOOD ANDERSON'S MEMOIRS. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1942. 507 pp. \$3.75.

tentions. Here, again, is his Ohio boyhood, so important in his story-telling career, with illuminating pages on his home life with his sister after his mother's death; here is the beginning of his struggle against American business routine and the emergence of the brooding artist, until, in the 1930s, he joins in concrete forms of social protest. Once before Anderson had combined his worlds of fact and of imagination in "A Story Teller's Story"; there the emphasis was on mental images and moods developed from his experiences. Now he proposes to be more exact, but he can never shake off the conviction that "the self of fancy persists in laughing at the self of fact." It is impossible, says Anderson, for any man to live solely in the world of fact. Men do not exist in facts, they exist in dreams. "My readers, therefore, those who go along with me, will have to be patient. I am an imaginative man."

In Anderson's life-story we have the American small-town version of the eternal battle of the artist with the material concerns of this world. Where Thomas Mann develops the issue on a high intellectual level, Anderson deals with his emotional response and relies on his intuitions to tell him that he is playing a part for which he is not suited. He is frank about his eagerness to ape the successful advertising man. He swaggers, bangs doors, orders subordinates around. He is not above telling lies to ingratiate himself with his employer; he magnifies an accident, so that he appears to have wheedled a client into a larger order, and thus gets a boost in salary. He wears flashy clothes—"I have always been a clothes lover, lover of fine fabrics." But this is not wholly his advertising-man personality. Clothes he will continue to enjoy, even when he is no longer the advertising man. He is original in his attire; he buys bits of odd cloth and runs them through a ring to make a necktie. He is aware that he is something of an actor.

He relates, almost as an afterthought, that five employees of the advertising agency committed suicide while he worked there; his implication is that they went mad from artistic frustration, writing copy in which they did not believe. If this were true, then this agency would have had more than its legitimate share of the artistic temperament.

Van Wyck Brooks blames our literary bankruptcy on "the eternal taboo which the ideal of the acquisitive life



Sherwood Anderson

places on experience." Anderson was uneasy in the presence of this taboo long before he read Brooks and recognized his own ailment. He writes that he wished to make money, yet when he accompanied Ohio business men to Cleveland for a spree involving drinks and women, he found the rewards unpalatable. He became interested in strange, wayward people, and during his first marriage played this interest against the respectability to which he conformed, taking out his frustration in baiting his respectable friends. "I got habitually nasty. I had got stories that would curl the guts of college professors in for an evening with their wives and I wanted to tell them and sometimes did. Painful moments of silence. . . ." In time this made him a willing outcast from the conventional world.

He was the artist, clutching at straws to sustain his belief in himself. When he was invited to meet the young Chicago authors in Margery Currey's Jackson Park home—Floyd Dell, Arthur Ficke, Ben Hecht, Eunice Tietjens, Lucian Cary, Ernestine Evans, Robert Morss Lovett, Llewellyn Jones—he hovered outside, trying to get up courage to go in; yet later he was quite at home, strutting and declaiming. Those who, like Floyd Dell, tried to guide his writing, encountered his rock-like determination to go his own way. "In 'Winesburg, Ohio' I had made my own form. Life is a loosely flowing thing. There are no plot stories in life." Anderson may have been unsure about people, and professed to be unsure about his own conclusions, but he never doubted his star, and he admitted Ben Hecht's charge that he was a colossal egotist.

Many of the stories about people in this book are good entertainment. Some are doubtful literary history. He describes an encounter with Heming-