

ferred as gospel, no sources quoted, and, to arrive at them, Decter overlooks sexual studies demonstrating that orgasm affects the entire well-being of women and she dismisses Masters and Johnson as "busy sexual engineers." Clearly, if women were as asexual as Decter sees them, a liberation movement might be wise to push chastity. But, since the premise of the sexually deadened female is here so absurd and undocumented, it hardly seems worth saying that of course this is not what the women's movement is about.

Nor is it about irresponsibility, being little girls again, or stopping the reproductive process. When Decter isn't damning the entire movement but using her unique abilities to dig at the underside of specific noble pronouncements, she unearths some chilling tendencies in some members of some liberation phalanxes. But in the end, like most of history's counterrevolutionaries, Decter finds the movement she attacks too broad, too grand; it eludes her. She has written a sonorous, investigative, but ultimately fallacious book because she has kept mistaking her own trees for the whole branching forest. □

Horror and Struck

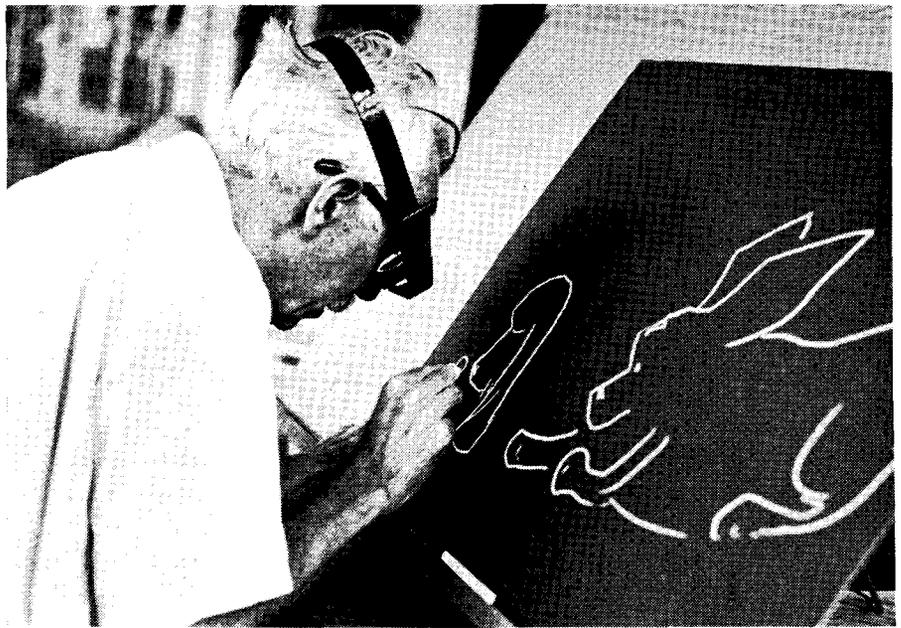
THE CLOCKS OF COLUMBUS: The Literary Career of James Thurber. By Charles S. Holmes. Illustrated. 331 pages. Atheneum Publishers. \$10.

BY WILLIAM HOGAN

James Thurber wrote fables, memoirs, reports, satires, fantasies, complaints. He ventured into the drama (*The Male Animal*, with Elliot Nugent). The movies smoked him out (*The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*). As his friend and colleague E. B. White once noted, Thurber "littered the world with thousands of drawings." Some were among the funniest in the annals of cartooning ("All right, have it your way—you heard a seal bark!").

He was not merely a clever writer for *The New Yorker*, which he joined in 1927 and helped to illuminate until his death in 1961 at age 67. He was a major American comic artist, whose puzzling Thurber country was as haunting as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, populated by resigned dogs, predatory women at war with bewildered men, creatures whose wheels were set in motion by the damp hand of melancholy. The melancholy was Thurber's.

William Hogan is book review editor of the San Francisco Chronicle.



James Thurber, before he became totally blind

Much autobiographical material appears in Thurber's books, notably in *The Years With Ross*, in which Thurber becomes as vivid a character as the book's ostensible subject, the late editor of *The New Yorker*, Harold Ross. Thurber's Columbus, Ohio, years—the McKinley era and later—were well documented in *My Life and Hard Times* (1933), a collection of stories that were fundamentally true, like the night the ghost got in and similar adventures in a family that was obviously addicted to absurdity.

In a 1957 collection, *Alarms and Diversions*, Thurber recalled his young manhood and his first trip abroad, as a code clerk in the American embassy in Paris. "The City of Light during most of 1919," he wrote, "was costumed like a wide-screen operetta, the uniforms of a score of nations forming a kind of restless out-of-step finale. . . ."

Charles S. Holmes does not deliver lines of this Matisse-like quality in his anecdotal biography, which concentrates chiefly on Thurber's role as a literary stylist. An Ohioan himself and a professor of English at Pomona College in Southern California, Holmes is a dedicated Thurber scholar who has done his homework exhaustively and with affection for his subject. The fact that, in a retelling of many familiar tales (from *The Years With Ross*, among other sources), his prose generates less magic than Thurber's did is not the biographer's fault. Thurber wrote like some unicorn in a garden, and Holmes is merely a mortal scholar, a solid writer rather than an exciting one, who is only able to suggest a world that constantly explodes into confusion and chaos, or

the Thurber quality of fantasy, which was so delicate and thoughtful.

The Clocks of Columbus might send a multitude of readers back to the originals—from *The Owl in the Attic and Other Complexities* to the children's fantasy of 1950, *The Thirteen Clocks*—and that in itself is a favor to us all. Yet the story is here, told chronologically—many Thurbers brought into perspective as a single phenomenon: the college days; newspaper days in Columbus, New York, and on the old Paris edition of the *Chicago Tribune*; his two marriages; and *The New Yorker*, on which Thurber became one of the most distinguished writers of his time.

And his blindness, which developed in the spring of 1940. For decades, as it turned out, he had seen without the normal apparatus of vision. We see the tormented artist becoming resigned to a distressing, but not defeating, affliction. His essays and children's stories continued to appear, as well as acid comments on the decline of America and the human race in general.

"People don't read any more," he observed in his late days; "they just develop a TV mouth and a TV stare." He added that ours is the age of mental illness, "of tranquilizers, sleeping pills, women-chasing and drink—everybody in the United States is trying to escape from reality."

Yet Thurber made a career of escaping reality, and Holmes shows this in many stories. In 1926 Thurber covered the Helen Wills-Suzanne Lenglen tennis match at Cannes in a style that resembled a Henry James novel (he had been through a James period). The impish Thurber was on hand, too.



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WIT TWISTER NO. 294

Edited by ARTHUR SWAN

The object of the game is to complete the poem by thinking of one word whose letters, when rearranged, will yield the appropriate word for each series of blanks. Each dash within a blank corresponds to a letter of the word.

Above all others, he — — — —
— — — — her;

Her image long — — — — —
— — in his breast.

Years passed. His passions
changed from what they were.

He now — — — — —
the love he once professed.

A.S.

Answer on page 80

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When things were slow on the *Tribune*, Thurber made up parody news features involving international figures in mythical tales of burglary, rape, gambling, and gunfighting. He speared Thurberisms into the paper as phony filler items; one, under a Washington dateline, had Calvin Coolidge telling a Protestant Churches of America convention that “a man who does not pray is not a praying man.”

Years later Samuel Goldwyn told Thurber he didn't like the ending to the *Walter Mitty* screenplay his writers had prepared for Danny Kaye. “Too blood and thirsty,” Goldwyn said. Thurber read the whole script and replied that he was “horror and struck.”

Holmes does not neglect Thurber the cartoonist; the cockeyed drawings, as well as the captions, were part of the literary pattern. There was what today might be called an antifeminist strain in Thurber's work, notably in the cartoons, where even courtship was a species of warfare. Women in Thurber's world were almost always in charge; his men were furtive, frustrated types, “vaguely striving to get out of something,” as E. B. White described them.

Primarily a literary person, he was never a political spokesman, but in the McCarthy era, as Holmes makes clear in an especially revealing sidelight, Thurber was distressed that America seemed to be inviting a dictatorship of the Right. He saw the United States in the early 1950s as “the most frightened country in the world.” When the State Department confiscated Arthur Miller's passport and a congressman asked Miller whether he really thought “that the artist is a special person,” Thurber protested in the *New York Times* that “a nation in which a congressman can seriously ask, ‘Do you think the artist is a special person?’ is a nation living in cultural jeopardy.”

Thurber, American artist, comes alive again for a while in this book. Though “horror and struck,” he remains a man of good sense and sensibility and nostalgia—a boy who continually searched for the normalcy and wonder of his youth in Columbus. “The clocks that strike in my dreams are often the clocks of Columbus,” he said upon receiving a medal from the Buckeye State in 1953.

Thurber might have written his epiphany in his own classic lines: “To hell with the handkerchief,” said Walter Mitty scornfully. He took one last drag on his cigarette and snapped it away. Then, with that faint, fleeting smile playing about his lips, he faced the firing squad: erect and motionless, proud and disdainful, Walter Mitty, the Undefeated, inscrutable to the last.” □

SHORTER REVIEWS

LUCE AND HIS EMPIRE. By W. A. Swanberg. Illustrated. 529 pages. Scribner's. \$12.50.

There is something right and a great deal wrong with W. A. Swanberg's massive new press-lord biography. (After *Pulitzer* and *Citizen Hearst*, who else but the beetle-browed publisher of *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune*?) What's right is that you can open Swanberg's latest tome to almost any page and find some intriguing and delightfully ludicrous snippet about Henry Robinson Luce (1898–1967). Famous for his naïveté, his insatiable and indiscriminate curiosity, his literal-mindedness, his missionary's assumption that God was Christian and had a special interest in America's destiny and that he, H. R. L., was chosen to speak for both—Henry Luce presented (and still presents, in part and to some) an absolutely irresistible target for instant comic deflation. Not for nothing did Wolcott Gibbs, in his 1936 *Timestyle*-parodying *New Yorker* profile, refer to him as “Baby Tycoon.” (True to form, Luce objected strenuously to the piece, arguing that not only was it unjustifiably unkind but that, contrary to the impression it gave, he did *too* have a sense of humor.) Swanberg is no Gibbs; but, still, there is a lot of amusingly deflating material to draw upon, and Swanberg has done his determined, level best to get every tidbit of it in, willy-nilly. (The willy-nillyness, in this case, is a convenience; as you can open the book at any page, so you can, likewise, with a head-shaking chuckle or two, close it.) What is wrong with the book is not simply that Swanberg doesn't know when to stop with the funny stuff (too much ridicule can breed respect), but that it isn't meant to be funny. It is meant to be very serious. It is meant, in fact, to be an indictment of Luce and his empire. Prosecutor Swanberg (as opposed to Compiler Swanberg) would have us believe that perhaps Henry Luce really did have some pipeline to the Almighty, that he was, anyway, more powerful than Presidents and therefore primarily responsible for, among other ills, the Cold War, McCarthyism, and Vietnam. This is crediting even a grown-up tycoon with a bit much—especially when he is otherwise portrayed as a buffoon. Luce and his magazines were, of course, influential; just how influential is hard to measure, but, in their heyday, let's say quite (which is less than Swanberg would say, or Luce, for that matter). The magazines were often, as charged, sanctimonious, cruel, propagandistic, and self-serving (and sometimes idiotic;