

Sinclair's 'My Lifetime in Letters'

A University Press Book

Reviewed by Mary Paxton Keeley

With the publication of Upton Sinclair's *My Lifetime in Letters* by the University Press (there is something new under the sun; a biography written in letters, not letters written by the subject of the biography, but letters written to him). Most of these, of course, are revealing of the writers as well as Sinclair.

His work on this volume was colossal; at eighty-one, with the help of his wife, he selected the 300 letters that appear on these pages from the 250,000 that he had saved. His decision to confine his choice to letters he received during his first twenty years as a writer, proves a disappointment to his great body of fans of the Lanny Budd series (of which this writer is one); and a later volume is perhaps projected to supply this lack.

The book certainly bears out the notion that writers meet such interesting people, for these letters were written by the famous as well as the infamous of those two decades. Some of the writers are: George Bernard Shaw, Jack London, Luther Burbank, M. K. Gandhi, Thomas Mann, Maxim Gorky, Bertrand Russell, A. Conan Doyle, Arnold Bennett, Albert Einstein, H. L. Mencken, Sinclair Lewis, and Theodore Roosevelt, to mention only a few of the Sinclair correspondents.

Some of the letters are interesting historically; some because they are highly entertaining; and some because they are so funny. None of them are without interest, though some reveal little of the writer, especially those who are reserved people, but all of them reveal something of the writer Sinclair, if nothing more than that he was his own skillful press agent. That he selects some of the letters is evident of his humility and sense of humor; but that he selects others is evidence of his overwhelming vanity, for they are as obvious and exaggerated as patent medicine testimonials.

The most astonishing thing that the book shows is the number of letters Sinclair himself wrote, since most of them are answers to letters he has written or thanks for one of his books. One wonders how he had the time to write so many letters and eighty full length books, magazine articles, besides taking part in various crusades and running for Congress and for governor of California.

The only possible way to give an idea of this volume is to cite samplings from it.

Ezra Pound, as was his wont, was the most insulting of the correspondents: "NUTS Upton. 'How you got licked.' You are too pigheaded to recognize what has been *thought* during the last 20 years. Mop up yr tears and start reading modern economics. If ever a

man with enough intelligence to be responsible for his acts deserved to be beaten at the polls you are that man. . . . You got a mind like an old family photograph album. . . . The picture you will present to posterity if they investigate is a man who HAD a few ideas in 1890 and absolutely refused to LEARN, or to inspect the facts assembled by my generation. In other words, a damn ass." Certainly a man would have to possess an unusually keen sense of humor to print such a letter written to him.

Thomas Mann salutes him, "With sincere congratulations and the expression of my respect as a colleague," and in another letter says, "I want to thank you very much for your strong and truthful new novel (*Dragon's Teeth*) which you sent me with your kind inscription. It is painful reading matter, especially for a German, but the pain is turned into pleasure by the art of the presentation—a pleasure, of course, constantly intermingled with rage and shame. Whoever knows Nazi-Germany will admit that not a word in your book is exaggerated. While I read it, my principal feeling was one of satisfaction that all this was written down and preserved for the future."

Van Wyck Brooks tells him, "I have just written an article on your last three books which I am sending you. I had to say that I didn't like the books and that I didn't believe in them from any point of view."

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle tells him, "I read your book with sympathy and interest. I certainly take off my hat to you for the long unselfish fight you have made for what you believe is right. As to your literary reputation what you say amazes me, for no American stands higher in this country."

Edith Wharton goes to some pains to tell him her reaction. "I received your novel *Oil!* and read it (from the point of view of your skill as a novelist) with great enjoyment and admiration. It seems an excellent story until the moment, all too soon, when it becomes a political pamphlet. I make this criticism without regard to the views which you teach, and which are detestable to me. Had you written in favor of those in which I believe, my judgment would have been exactly the same. I have never known a novel that was just good enough to be good in spite of its being adapted to the author's political views." The letter sums up very well most of the literary criticism currently held by critics in this country.

The University of Missouri Press is to be congratulated on publishing such a highly enjoyable book (412 pages, \$6.50), one which any University Press might be glad to claim.