

Brave, Vital, Revealing Writing

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BRAVE, VITAL, REVEALING WRITING

MACKINLAY KANTOR'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY CHARACTERIZED AS ACHIEVING THE IMPOSSIBLE

Sterling North in Atlanta Constitution

BUT LOOK, THE MORN, by MacKinlay Kantor; Coward
McCann. 308 pp. \$3.50.

Very few autobiographies are completely trustworthy. The art of self-appraisal is not only difficult, it is well-nigh impossible.

Few men have been sufficiently brave or balanced to be utterly objective in revealing their lives. The average human being has too much to hide. The "creative" memory is too undependable, too warped by subconscious motivations.

Historians have discovered that most autobiographers are notoriously careless about dates, places and other simple facts. They are prejudiced witnesses. They romanticize, dramatize, or simply lie in their teeth.

It is always astonishing, therefore, to come upon an autobiographer who is at least attempting to tell the truth. Kantor's "But Look, the Morn" has some of the electric quality which marked the opening chapters of H. G. Wells' "Experiment in Autobiography"—because like the Wells Memoir it apparently seeks to hide nothing. And there are several matters that Kantor might have wished to conceal, but openly confesses. For instance, the fact that his father was a thief, and a political conniver (in jail as often as he was out); a man who completely neglected his children and condemned his wife to years of drudgery.

Unlike Rousseau, Kantor is not masochistic about his confessions. He is not trying to shock his public. He is merely recording (sometimes painfully and repetitiously) what it was like to be a poverty-stricken, imaginative,

highly strung youngster in Webster City, Iowa, during the first decade and a half of the 20th century.

Here, on the one hand, is the pastoral of life in a small town where wolves had recently howled; picnics, parades, first love, the turning of the seasons and the dawning of ambition give this narrative a breath of Springtime.

On the other hand, small town bigotry, narrow cultural horizons, the constant embarrassment of extreme poverty, the maiming taunts of other children who knew MacKinlay's father was in jail, have left their scars upon the sensitive author.

This is a brave recital of a mother who brought up her son and daughter by doing any ill-paid menial job she was offered. One year working diligently she earned less than \$200. It was a red-letter day when she finally rose to \$9 a week clerking in a store. And the world was as rosy as it was to Browning's Pippa when Effie Kantor at last became a reporter on the local paper.

To this great-hearted mother, and to the town he so loved and hated, to veterans of the War Between the States pouring their stories into his ears, and to a few understanding friends Kantor traces his spiritual origins. Webster City, Iowa, wrought better than it knew in producing this American writer.

FIRST BOXCAR BUILT IN IOWA

Richard Edmund Smith came to Keokuk, Iowa, in 1855 and later became assistant superintendent of the Des Moines Valley railroad, occupying that position for sixteen years. He constructed the first freight car ever built in the state, the work being done under a spreading tree, as that was before any shops were constructed or available.—*Biographical Review of Lee County*; pp. 216-18.

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