

for foreign service growing fast. January 15, still in camp. February 15, still in camp. March 15, ditto. April 15, ditto. (Unfair to mustache.) May 15, ditto. At last a troop train to an embarkation camp. Another period of waiting several endless weeks. Throbbing mental question: Why doesn't the President put me in a branch of the service where I'll get somewhere? Oh, why didn't I wait to be drafted and get there first? . . . Then, at length, my transport. . . .

"Being with sanitary troops, I expect to go through the war unharmed and come back and be run over by a baby carriage."

John McClure

John McClure of Oklahoma, youthful writer of modest airs, is sponsored by that able critic, Mr. H. L. Mencken, one of the editors of *Smart Set*, author of serious and not so serious critiques and who declares that his judgment of poetry is based solely on the beauty of poetry. He says, "I have little love for long or ambitious poems. My favorites are such men as Heinrich Heine, Robert Herrick, Thomas Campion, Burns at his best, the minor Elizabethans, old ballads and folksongs, Mother Goose. Simple airs and melodies are what delight me in literature most keenly. I mean to say that it is such verse as the above that has influenced me most in my own work. I've a great deal of affection for all good English verse, bar none.

"My only observation on American poetry had better be this, which puzzles me; out of a great many poets who do occasional splendid things, there is not

one who does consistently fine work, not one who is a poet of large significance, unless perhaps Sara Teasdale. I have great admiration and respect for her."

Mr. McClure first appeared an object for consideration as a poet in the pages of *The Smart Set* and his collected poems, many of which had appeared in this periodical, were afterwards published under the title of "Airs and Ballads."

When Mr. Mencken finds a poet or a writer of any sort in whom he believes, his belief is without stint as is his enthusiasm. For example, he writes in his magazine: "What I find in these modest airs (the poems of John McClure) is what the late Elijah found in his still small voice; an assurance and a criticism—the first of the making of songs is yet a living art among us, yet young, yet adroit, above all yet natural and innocent. In brief, McClure is the born poet, the poet, first and last, the poet full-fledged from the start, as opposed to all your stock company of sweating poetizers. His simple and perfect songs are to the tortured contraptions of the self-consecrated messiahs of prosody, with their ding-dong repetitions, their chopped off lines, their cheap shocks, their banal theorizings, their idiotic fustian—these songs of his are to such tedious gabblings as the sonorous lines of Swinburne were to the cacophonous splutters of Browning, the poet of pedagogues and old maids, male and female. What we have here is the Schubert complex—the whole pack of professors and polyphonists routed by a shepherd playing a pipe."

Whether one shares Mr. Mencken's whole-hearted

enthusiasm or not, John McClure's simple songs may best be judged by his "Elf's Song":

She came in the garden walking
 When shadows begin to steal;
 She trod upon a wing o' mine
 And broke it with her heel.

She was a very queen, I think,
 A queen from the West,
 I should have only smiled
 Had she stepped on my breast.

But I have told nobody,
 I have told nobody yet!
 I have told nobody—
 Only the violet.

Or the opening lines to "The Celts":

We are the grey dreamers
 With nets of moonlight
 That always go a-hunting
 About the fall o' night.

True, there are some immature spots in his work. There is a fondness for comparisons to jewels that is similar to George Sterling, over-use of such trite and inexpressive words as "red gold," "white silver," "lady," "hoary head," and "wee." But these are only specks on the surface of such lines as:

But she shall dress more strangely still:
 In all men's eyes she shall be seen
 To wear my little silver dreams
 Like tinkling trinkets of a queen.

Ay, queenlike, she shall move them all
To adoration and desire ;
For she shall wear my golden dreams
As though they were a robe of fire.

Or in his lines called "Man to Man" :

Better it were, my brother,
You twain had never met,
Then were no hearts broken
And no dream to forget.

Now you must not remember,
After you are gone,
The mystic magic of her eyes
At twilight nor at dawn.

Now you must not remember
The songs her red lips sing
Of love and lovers' ecstasy
At dawn or evening.

An interesting comment on McClure's work was recently made to me by one of his contemporaries :

"John McClure's 'Airs and Ballads' impress me as the work of a man who has not (and perhaps, cannot) outgrow the impulse to enthusiasm which is characteristic of young writers of the romantic school. There is in his poems a certain *naïveté*, a certain artless simplicity which his very real lyrical ability makes quite charming. In reading him I feel as though I were in the presence of an unusually well-bred youth who wishes to forget his 'good breeding' in favor of a more impulsive and less '*civilisé*' attitude toward life and

toward his own experiences. The result is not without beauty (at times, as in 'The Lass of Galilee' the author reaches a very high mark of poetic feeling), but at the same time I imagine that I detect the note of 'fabrication'; not the species of deliberate fabrication practised by the great decadents and lovers of artifice (as Huysmans, Baudelaire, Mèndes, Rimbaud, 'Maldoror' and others) but a kind of straining after pure simplicity which it is very hard to succeed in—especially in these days when nothing can escape the influence of the cosmopolitan spirit. . . . However, I like McClure; I like him because he has lyrical charm, because he is indifferent to all the ceremonials of adoration for the Muse of Poetry. McClure is an independent: poetry is not a ritual with him, but a simple, human need. I think that, if he should ever acquire subtlety, he could with his technical ability turn out some very powerful things. At present he is a singer, a 'troubadour'—and perhaps well content to remain one."

Out in Oklahoma with its sun-baked roads, fields of corn and wheat and cotton, McClure lived and wrote until the war when he entered service in the 394th Cavalry. It must be gratifying to Oklahoma and the Middle West to know that Oklahoma has produced an American poet in interesting contrast to those of the New England states and the East.

McClure was born in Ardmore on December 19, 1893, of a Southern family of Scotch Irish descent. He is a graduate of the University of Oklahoma, of which he was later an assistant librarian.

In 1913 and 1914 he was in Paris with Henry McCullough, who was then studying art.

"I did nothing whatever there," says Mr. McClure, "except catch *vers libre*, from which I believe I have recovered."

"Poetry? . . ." he writes,
"The voice that leaps up
"With the spring water
"And thunders
"Out of the mountain."

Mr. McClure is a member of the national hobo fraternity "Quo Vadis" and has tramped about 2,000 miles in the Southwest.

He has also compiled and edited "The Stag's Horn-Book," a bachelor's anthology of verse.

Our Poets of **T**oday

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