

Atop Parnassus

John McClure Spreads Soonerland's Fame With Lyric Pen

By George Milburn, '30



John McClure at his copy desk. A drawing made especially for the Sooner Magazine by Louis Andrews, a New Orleans artist. Miss Andrews designs floats for Rex, the principal Mardi Gras parade.

tured with polite surprise, "Oh, so you're from Oklahoma?" In New Orleans this question is treaded by, "Do you know John McClure?"

One night the man with whom I had been having dinner leaned back in his chair and said, "Tonight we'll stay up and visit John McClure."

All night he sits at the horse-shoe table on the fourth floor of the Times-Picayune building editing copy. Between 2 and 3 o'clock in the morning there is a lull in the news of the world. That is the time when secretaries of state are patting out uneasy pillows, when the Chinese armies are calling it a day and the Chicago gangsters are calling it a night. That is the time when John McClure has a brief spell for drinking a cup of coffee and for conversation with his friends.

That first night we talked of hunches and of Paris before the war and of Cabell and the archaic style and of esthetic credos and of the modern novelist's obsession with freakish characters and of a fellow-copyreader's recent success and very little about John McClure.

That night, over the thick cups of an all-night lunchroom he told us of his long search for an old book on esthetics and he said he had found in it one sentence which was the epitome of that science: "He has made of virtue a lovely form."

We came to see him on another night and that night the talk was all

read John McClure's Sunday book page "Literature and Less" more devoutly than most folk read Sunday school quarterlies.

And when the conversation slips among the velleities and carefully caught regrets of French Quarter studios, the eventual question is, "Well, what does Jack McClure say about it?" or "Did you read what John McClure wrote about it last Sunday?" Because he is so often present in name and so seldom present in flesh, one is likely to have a feeling that John McClure is something approaching omnipotence.

THE word "Oklahoma" carries with it connotations which do not attach themselves to the name of any other state in the midlands. That is why, when "Oklahoma" is included in an introduction, one grows to anticipate the query, tinc-

ORLEANS ALLEY is a narrow paved runway off Royal Street. The Royal Street end of it is flanked by the Cathedral garden and a short row of old stone buildings. In the cathedral yard there is a large white statue of the redeeming Christ. In one of those buildings fronting on the cathedral yard lives the man who wrote "The Lass of Galilee."

John McClure is a name that is jugged with precision in New Orleans. Literate Orleanians, most of whom are congregated in that little section of the city known to sailors as Frenchtown and to Iowaian tourists experimenting with high school French as "Vieux Carré," literate Orleanians

of a troubadour nigger named Phillip who sang and played the bass viol at the Red Dot, of James Stephens and the stories in his book "Etched in Moonlight," then wet from the press, and of Burton Rascoe's articles in the Nation on Oklahoma and of hobo technique.

He told us which foot to land on in jumping off a moving train. He told us how to avoid detection in the "blinds."

FOR, if John McClure is an authority on esthetics, he does not fit at all the present conception of an esthete. He has been places and he has seen things and he has gone and has seen in the most interesting of all ways. He is a charter member of "Quo Vadis," the first hobo fraternity on the University of Oklahoma campus—an order which has long since undergone a most ridiculous metamorphosis. It is now a student travel organization with printed letterheads and an address on the mailing lists of Cook's tours and the Santa Fe general passenger agent.

When McClure was a University of Oklahoma sophomore in 1913 he went to Europe with another student, Henry McCullough of Arapaho. The two tramped in the Harz mountains in central Germany and down the valley of the Rhine. They went to Paris, where they lived for a year on the Left bank.

He returned to the University of Oklahoma in 1914, before the outbreak of the European War. In 1915 he was graduated with a B.A. degree.

In 1915, also, his first book, a collection of verse, "Airs and Ballads," was published by a house that was then the youngest and lustiest of all American publishers, Alfred A. Knopf. The slip-cover on this cool, thin volume, now even more rare than the book, which is out of print, bears the stark biography of the author. It includes one interesting notation, however, and that is that he had at that time hoboed several thousand miles on freight trains through the southwest.

"Airs and Ballads" is composed of sixty poems, most of which had been printed in current magazines. The bulk of them had been accepted by Mencken and Nathan's old Smart Set. McClure never loses an opportunity to express his gratitude to those twin literary swashbucklers. Some of the poems had been printed in Harriet Monroe's Poetry: A Magazine of Verse;

in Alfred Kreymborg's Others and in the University of Oklahoma Magazine.

WHILE the verse of "Airs and Ballads" is meticulously finished, the naïve note in it is always predominant. All around him poets were striking out with a hysterical unrestraint, rebelling against the precise Elizabethan manner. But John McClure isolated himself, clinging to Paul Verlaine and the symbolism of a generation before. There are Celtic cadences in "Airs and Ballads" due, very possibly, to his introduction to William Butler Yeats early in his university training. He credits Miss Adelaide Loomis, one of his first English instructors, with this.

From the first shy "Apology" in the collection to the last intensely human poem, "Lass of Galilee," a narrative which interprets Jesus more satisfactorily than have twenty centuries of theological dissertations, John McClure is an aristocrat turned jongleur. He is always patient in his word choice; his impulses are never unreined. He is a Villon for whom circumstances never combined to turn rascal.

John McClure is one poet in whom you will not be disappointed, meeting him after reading his verse. There is

most sure to remark it. It is the way a curly forelock falls, or the way a smile twists, or something like that. His is the face of a sensitive Celt, and he immediately puts you in the mind of his own poem, "The Celts."

*"We are the grey dreamers
With nets of moonlight
That always go a-hunting
About the full o' night,*

*"That softly go a-hunting
In quest of strange birds
With a thin net of moonlight,
A grey net of words,*

*"That steal through dim forests
By dark Lethe-streams
With pale snares of moonshine
And grey bait of dreams*

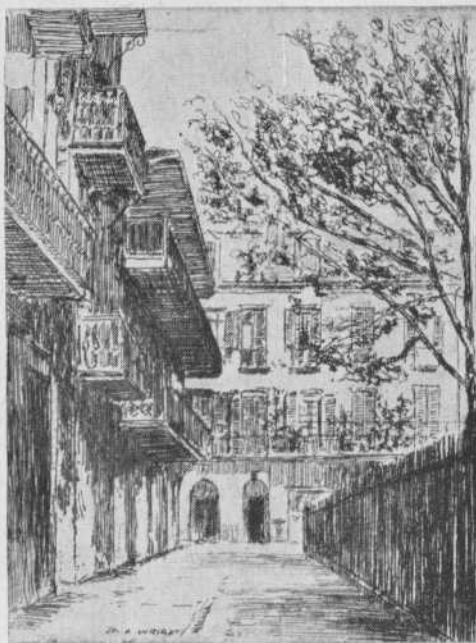
*"Until we catch the prize catch
The queer bird we get,
The dreamy, fluttering soul o' the
world
Caught in a silver net."*

While he was a student in the university, before the publication of his "Airs and Ballads," McClure had edited for Knopf a book of convivial verse, which he called, "The Stag's Hornbook." This book is still in print in the Knopf pocket series, and it remains the standard anthology for poems and songs of that type.

After he was graduated in 1915 he stayed at the university, where he worked as a librarian for a year. Grace Bimford Smith, whom he married in 1918, was employed as a cataloguer in the university library at that time. He became an instructor in English a year after his graduation. America declared war and he went into the army. His battery in the 54th field artillery, did not go overseas.

He was discharged from the army in 1919, when he accepted a position as associate editor on the quondam Southerner Magazine. The Southerner suspended publication within a short time, and in the fall of the year he and Mrs. McClure took over Allison's old book shop in New Orleans at 509 Royal street.

If you have been disappointed in the "antiquarian" book shops of Chicago, or in so-called old book shops in other modern cities, go to Allison's when you are in New Orleans. It was still open for business last summer. The building in which it is located is a four-story one, built about 1790, and probably is the oldest "skyscraper" (Turn to page 101, please)



WHERE JOHN M'CLURE LIVES

The house on Orleans alley where John McClure lives is shown above. The French quarter centers around the cathedral, the garden of which is bordered by the iron picket fence.

something about him so reminiscent of the Irishman, James Stephens, that one who has seen the two men is al-

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standing in the United States.

John McClure's friends in New Orleans say that he trusted everybody and that he was not a successful book-dealer.

He was made an associate editor of the late lamented Double Dealer Magazine in 1921, and later became managing editor.

Within a short time the Double Dealer became known everywhere for its discerning editorial policy. New writers were discovered monthly, and many celebrities then unknown made their first appearances in print in the Double Dealer. News letters from Chicago (then being hailed as the literary capital of America by H. L. Mencken) and from Paris were printed as regular departments. The best fugitive verse and fiction found haven in the magazine. Soon the Roman medallion of the double-faced god, Janus, became a familiar adjunct to the literary tables of readers who were taking experimental tastes in the new spirit.

But that half-decade was the lull before book-of-the-month clubs and no adroit business manager had ever had that revelation leading to the printing of colored cigarette advertisements on the back page of a literary magazine. The Double Dealer never chose to compromise its editorial policy and its last issue appeared in 1926.

Meantime John McClure had been holding another position, as well as that of managing editor of the magazine. Since 1921 he had been doing the regular shift as copyreader on the Times-Picayune desk, where he is employed at present. For the last four years he has edited the book page for that newspaper, the largest in the south. In that time he has established

an enviable reputation for his critical judgment.

McClure's verse appears from time to time in the more intelligently edited magazines of this country, and readers of the American Mercury are familiar with his dialogues on esthetics, printed occasionally in that magazine.

For these dialogues, McClure has created two characters, Scamander and Polycrates. Of these Scamander is the "feeder" or "yes man" and Polycrates is the one who takes the thesis produced by his friend, examines it, dissects it, and finally states his opinion. Through such an arrangement McClure gains an unusually clear perspective, and he deftly avoids didactics and the dogmatism associated with it.

It is not likely that there is a busier man in New Orleans than John McClure. He says that he has almost no time for writing now. For the past four years he has been assembling notes on books which "may or may not be written."

While he is not a man likely to make such a statement, one may readily infer that he has had a certain definite understanding with himself about literary prostitution, and that he prefers to grind at a newspaper copy desk, rather than to write hack work and imperil his sincerity.

McClure tells of a casual organization which was on the campus when he was a student at the university. It was called "The Grub Street club," and out of it have come at least three well-known American writers. Among its members were Marie Mauk, Muna Lee, Ebert Boylan, Paul Eldridge, and Walter Campbell. That was before the time of Lynn Riggs.

He took little part in collegiate social activities. When he admits to being a member of Phi Beta Kappa, he

always qualifies the admission with some statement about having taken "pipe" language courses. He was also a member of the journalists' fraternity, Sigma Delta Chi.

One is more likely to associate John McClure with the medieval university than with the rigidly systematized institution it has now become. He seems a man for the quiet life. It would be a gaucherie to put his volume of verse on the shelf alongside "Slabs of the Sunburnt West." In the French Quarter of New Orleans he has found his spiritual home.

The Alumni

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