

## Book Reviews

*Robert M. LaFollette.* By Belle Case LaFollette and Fola LaFollette. (New York: Macmillan, 1953, two volumes, pp. xx, 1305. Illustrations and index. \$15.00.)

No honest history of the United States of the last sixty years can be written in which Robert M. LaFollette will not have a conspicuous place. Brilliant, eloquent, dynamic, dramatic, tireless, courageous, and incorruptible, even by ambition, he early became a symbol of militant democracy in his never-ceasing war on privilege and corruption, and his self-sacrificing devotion to the rights of the common man. He had to pay the penalty of his audacity, as all crusaders must, in the venomous hatred of powerful forces strongly entrenched behind their money bags. For years, he and Bryan were assailed as irresponsible demagogues for sponsoring and urging measures that were finally accepted, and largely because of the fight they made to awaken the average citizen to a realization of his rights and stake in government.

The long-awaited biography of this picturesque crusader by his wife and daughter has finally appeared in two attractive volumes. The authors were eminently qualified for the task because of their intimate association with LaFollette and their complete sympathy with his ideas, ideals, and methods. They have painted a vivid portrait that almost literally breathes. Here we have his struggles against corruption and privilege described graphically and dramatically in detail. More than that, we are given his intellectual and emotional reactions in the midst of his Homeric battles. Thus, after he has experienced a combat in the Senate, we are permitted to sit at his hearth in the midst of his family listening to his inmost thoughts on the events, measures, and men involved. Brandeis, Pinchot, and liberals of that calibre drop in to talk things over and we hear the conversation. The book is in this sense unique. It has the intimacy of a secret diary or a book of frank memoirs, and yet it is written with a scrupulous fidelity to the record. No one can lay the book aside without feeling that he has been behind the scenes of dramatic and historic events, or without a realization that he has been in the company of a very great liberal, democrat, and statesman.

During his brief period in the House of Representatives, LaFollette began to learn something of the devious ways of

exploitation by the privileged. The railroad lobby began to doubt the young man who insisted on governmental regulation and the limiting of transportation costs to reasonable profits on the actual investment. The reactionary Senator Philetus Sawyer, of his own state, was annoyed when the new congressman refused to support a plan of turning over public lands to the railroads for speculation. He opposed a ship subsidy bill and the Old Guard lifted its eyebrows. But on the tariff, at this period, he was decidedly a regular. He made the principal speech against the Mills bill for tariff reform, and he supported the McKinley bill which resulted in his defeat in the popular protest that followed.

The real LaFollette emerges during his retirement when he broke dramatically with the old line party bosses in Wisconsin. It had long been the custom for state treasurers to loan on interest the public money they had deposited in the banks and to pocket the profit. A Democratic administration had brought proceedings to force the restitution of the pilfered money. Since this involved the bondsmen as well as the official, Senator Sawyer, who had been a bondsman for numerous officials, was threatened with the loss of \$300,000. The case was scheduled for the court presided over by LaFollette's brother-in-law. When Sawyer crudely offered LaFollette a perfumed bribe to influence his relative and was indignantly rebuked, he offered a retainer which was also refused. Disregarding the warning of his friends that a public exposure and denunciation would alienate the powerful party machine, LaFollette dramatized the exposure and denunciation and denounced the bosses. It was then that the LaFollette of history threw down the glove at the feet of Privilege.

His selection as governor of Wisconsin for three terms and the war he waged on corruption and for the regulation of railroads and the reforms he wrought are described in detail. It was during his tenure as governor that he took his case before the plain people on the Chautauqua circuit. In powerful, plain-spoken speeches he awakened the long-slumbering people to their power and stake in government. "Bob believed," say his biographers, "that his Chautauqua lectures were his most practically effective work for the progressive movement."

When elected to the Senate his great national service began. From the beginning he was a thorn in the side of the reactionaries among his colleagues. When he exposed the

hidden jokers in legislation in speeches beyond refutation, their hatred became fantastic. They filed like pouting school boys from the chamber when he rose to speak. He broke definitely with his party in a devastating speech against the Aldrich-Vreeland currency bill. When he was filibustering to defeat it, some ptomaine was slipped into his glass of milk and egg, and had he not detected the poison with the first sip it would have ended his career.

Thence, throughout his career, he followed his own line. He never depended on the decision of a party caucus to determine the dictates of his conscience. His speeches, factually sound, were veritable treatises. He could be attacked on these speeches but seldom could he be refuted. A goodly part of the metropolitan press assailed the speaker and ignored the speech. But he had so dramatized his fight that he became the acknowledged leader of the progressives.

With the organization of the National Progressive Republican League came the movement for his nomination for President in 1912. The story of Theodore Roosevelt's ardent flirtation with the League, his pretended sympathy with the LaFollette candidacy, the manner in which he used it under cover to pave the way to his own nomination, the treachery of some of LaFollette's friends, is told in detail. It is a rather shabby tale.

The pitiful story of LaFollette's breakdown in Philadelphia was used ruthlessly to end his candidacy. Utterly exhausted nervously by incessant campaigning, worried to distraction by the knowledge that his daughter was going under the knife in a serious operation, and facing an audience clearly hostile, he lost the thread of his speech and launched into an intemperate attack upon the press. Woodrow Wilson, who admired him, sat sad-faced with the realization that LaFollette was momentarily abnormal. Though LaFollette speedily recovered and resumed campaigning, the announcement of Roosevelt's candidacy blighted his prospects. This story is told in detail. The biographers do not defend his action, but they explain it.

He respected Wilson and for a time was his valuable collaborator. He voted for the Underwood Tariff which his fellow partisans thought treasonable. He applauded and supported Wilson's declaration that American marines would no longer be employed as debt collectors in Central America and

that our interference in the internal affairs of South American republics would end. He supported Wilson's Mexican policy up to a point.

Then came the World War. Like Bryan, a man of equal courage and conscience, he hated war. Like Bryan, he thought the arming of merchant vessels and the refusal to warn Americans against traveling on the ships of warring nations carrying munitions made our involvement inevitable. He opposed the declaration of war. War hysteria had swept over the country. Whatever may be said of his attitude, it was honest and supremely courageous. The hue and cry raised against him was not honest. When newspapers, and even the Associated Press, twisted what he said in St. Paul into something he did not say, the crusade against him went beyond decent limits. He was quoted as saying that we had "no grievance" against Germany when he actually had said the opposite. The press roared against the "traitor," and plans were made for his expulsion from the Senate. The beginning of libel suits brought speedy retractions. The Associated Press apologized. A little later, Rollin Kirby, whose fierce cartoon did infinite harm, wrote to express his admiration for a man who had made "a brave fight against an overwhelming tide of chauvinism and war hysteria."

One notes with mixed feelings the reason the expulsion plan was dropped—his vote was needed against the League of Nations. But the biographer's detailed intimate account of the attempt to stamp LaFollette as a "traitor" is one of the highlights of a fascinating and provocative book. It is a book Americans may well meditate upon in our own day when liberals are suspected and hysteria is making a mockery of the American way of life.

*New York City*

Claude G. Bowers

*Letters of Sherwood Anderson.* Selected and edited with an introduction and notes by Howard Mumford Jones, in association with Walter Rideout. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1953, pp. xxv, 479. Illustrations and index. \$6.00.)

Professors Jones and Rideout have done a service for American literature in culling from the correspondence of