

Croce, who profess to believe that no histories (except their own, perhaps) will outlast the generation which produced them, and the followers of Ranke, who thought that a history of absolute and eternal value could be written, a humble votary of Clio may prefer to pronounce a plague on both their houses and read them all for whatever they can give him.

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American Life in Autobiography: A Descriptive Guide. By Richard G. Lillard. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1956. Pp. 140. Index. \$3.75.)

Although this book contains an annotated list of over four hundred American autobiographies, Mr. Lillard makes it clear at the outset that he is not working in the service of "experts in research." "It is my intention," he writes in his "Note on Purpose and Method," "that this descriptive guide be useful to present day readers of all sorts who consult lists of books and welcome annotations. This is a selected list of general interest of books that I have read and thought worth someone else's time—granting wide variations in taste and reading skill." Mr. Lillard deals primarily with twentieth century American autobiographies (including twentieth century editions and reprints of older books); one of his prime requisites for listing a book is its availability: "I have wanted to list books that are available, that library patrons can get hold of." He has "ignored autobiographies, however good," that have not been published in "complete, separate volumes," for he realizes that "only graduate students with their eyes on degrees will look up such material." He has annotated only books which he has read; he admits candidly that he has not mentioned books which he "never heard of."

Mr. Lillard groups the autobiographies under broad occupational headings such as "Actors and Show People," "Doctors," "Musicians," and "Society Leaders." (He shrewdly lists Polly Adler's *A House is Not a Home* under "Businessmen, Financiers, Industrialists"). In his introductory essay he sets forth criteria of judging autobiography: formula writing, details of trips, racing too fast, name dropping, and

covering up are some of the "ways of going wrong"; a consistent point of view, a frame of reference, "sadness: admission of error and failure," "empathy from the start," and "a sense of progression or change" are ways of going right. He then annotates in terms of these criteria.

"In compiling my working list," writes Mr. Lillard, "I used several bibliographies of autobiography, plus my own accumulated notes, but mostly—and repeatedly—I followed a system of examining the books on the shelves of libraries." We may at this point question the value of such a "system" and of what has resulted from it. Mr. Lillard does not pretend to bibliographical thoroughness even for twentieth century American autobiography; he has given data "on editions and reprintings" only as these "came to hand." Is he, then, interested only in sharing with "readers of all sorts" the results of his personal readings in autobiography and in aiding their judgment with a set of elementary criteria of good and bad? Is his self-imposed job that of passing on the interesting things he has encountered in his readings?

Insofar as the answer to these questions is yes the book assumes the nature of a browser's corner, neat and orderly to be sure, but only of chance value. A more accurate title would be *A Descriptive Guide to Some American Autobiographies I Have Read*. But the book will serve in a more predictable way. Mr. Lillard's earlier *America in Fiction* (which he compiled together with Otis W. Coan) was "designed to aid students of American civilization—adults using the facilities of public libraries, college undergraduates, and young people in the eleventh and twelfth grades." Mr. Lillard's "readers of all sorts who consult lists of books and welcome annotations" is, basically, the same group. The book will aid these people: it will be regarded as indispensable by the high school senior and college undergraduate with certain kinds of research papers to write, by the adult whose study group hands him an assignment on American artists or musicians. But it will seem indispensable to these people precisely as a tool of research. *American Life in Autobiography* will be to the amateur researcher what a thorough bibliography is to the graduate student and expert. It is thus unfortunate that Mr. Lillard writes off the work of the expert as "recondite" and mentions the research of graduate students as if it involves worlds other than the one we all

live in. If he is doing anything more than presenting a browser's corner he ought to demonstrate belief and seek to arouse interest in the idea of research. We cannot all be graduate students and experts, but we can respect their work if we are properly instructed, if we are made to understand its relevance. It is regrettable that Mr. Lillard feels no responsibility to promote even the beginning of such an understanding.

But Mr. Lillard suggests that he has an interest in American autobiography beyond what we have been discussing here. In his introductory essay he seeks to see autobiography as a vital part of American historical life. "The better American autobiographies," he writes, "are structured around a perception of change on two levels, the social on one and the personal and intellectual on the other." He tries, in short, to explain the nature of American autobiography as something that will let us know more fully the nature of our national character. Unfortunately, he does not develop such an explanation, potentially a matter of great significance. Would that each section or grouping in the book had an accompanying essay in which Mr. Lillard examined the image that the representative autobiographies present to us—the self-image of the public official, the religious leader, the social worker, the artist. Would that we could see defined the variations on the central theme of change as they exist in the autobiographies of each group. Would that we had a historical survey tracing the development of the self-image of any one of these groups. For these are things we need to know, things which would enable us to deal with autobiography more surely and more intelligently than we do now.

Mr. Lillard takes no more than a first step toward seeing American autobiography as a functioning part of American life. He does not attempt to go further. But in taking the first step as if it might, after all, be the whole journey, he leaves us with the certain knowledge of how far he did not go.

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