

# In Print

## Edith, Osbert & Sacheverell

In this day of instant celebrity, where people with as little claim to interest as Margaret Trudeau become media darlings, it's difficult for us to understand the major role played by a group of English eccentrics just after World War I. But without question, a handful of men and women dominated their cultural scene with a vibrancy that still fascinates. Some were very talented, like the mistress of Bloomsbury, Virginia Woolf. Some were merely beautiful, like the very wealthy and very controversial Nancy Cunard. What they shared was the limelight, and none claimed that focus more passionately than the Sitwells: Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell.

Their names alone conjure up images of strange, bizarre people; although the poems and plays they left behind are rarely known to anyone outside devoted English Lit majors, the Sitwells' greatest contribution to art was their own lives — their ability to seize the moment and play it for what it was. *The Sitwells: A Family's Biography* by John Pearson (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, \$15.00) ably illustrates what set this trio apart. Aside from their formidable appearance (Virginia Woolf once described Edith as "a clean hare's bone that one finds on a moor with emeralds stuck to it") and their serviceable writings, their lives intertwined with all the artistic titans of their day, from D.H. Lawrence to T.S. Eliot to Serge Diaghilev. They lived a richly textured life on a grand scale in a manner totally foreign to today's standards. It seems almost inconceivable that Edith and Osbert lived into the Sixties.

The children of a repressively belligerent father and a naively impulsive mother, the Sitwells broke barriers of class and breeding to claim their place in the sun. Edith's story is particularly touching. She was considered so ugly as a child her father refused to look at her; in accordance with Victorian standards, she was put in a back brace and a nose brace to try to "correct" her natural failings.

It's perhaps Edith's story of rebellion and growth that holds the most interest today: she seems a prototype for women struggling to find a place for themselves against formidable odds. She made the climb admirably. She became a major celebrity, a Dame of the British Empire and a darling of society. She also became a first-rate critic and essayist. Sacheverell married and raised a family; the homosexual Osbert lived abroad, where such irregularities were considered more acceptable.

This is an enviable biography, written with clarity, wit and drama. Pearson (who once collaborated on a weekly newspaper column with 007 creator Ian Fleming) draws us into an extraordinary story without drowning us in too many details, despite the book's length and density.

*The Sitwells* is a book to be savored by those already fascinated with England's eccentrics, and by those wanting an introduction.

Jacoba Atlas

## Catholics & Poets

Well, there's a lot of Catholics running around loose out there (this reviewer, for one), and there's a lot of poets, though not so many as there are Catholics of course, and if you stop to consider these two facts together then it isn't exactly surprising to think that there's even a fair herd of folks on the prowl in open space who are both Catholics and poets. Eugene J. McCarthy, that Eugene J. McCarthy, isn't exactly a Catholic and a poet, but is or was a Catholic and a man who *strives* to be a poet (and, it must be said, falls about as far short of that goal as he did of that other noble goal he had, back around 1968). Geoffrey Hill is more than a Catholic and a poet: He is a Catholic poet — a man who draws vocabulary, rules of reasoning, and lineaments of spiritual integrity from his faith.

Hill's new collection, *Tenebrae* (Houghton Mifflin, \$7.95), includes four sequences of poems and six shorter works. The language is spare and almost cold sometimes (the way the stone floor of an old church is cold — inspiring a hint of chill but seeming at the same time somehow solid, reassuring —), but can be stunningly intricate with its internal rhymes and clattering rhythms. ("...The red-coat devotees, mêlés of wheels," appear in one sonnet; in another, "On blustery lilac-bush and terrace-urn/bedaubed with bloom Linnaean pentecosts/put their pronged light;..." Hill has been called "the strongest British poet now alive" and "the monumental English poet of the latter 20th century." I believe that his concerns are far too, shall we say, parochial for that, and that his studied simplicity sometimes nags banality — but his care and purity are impressive, and the human elegance with which he limns the sublime deserves respect.

The best that can be said about ex-senator McCarthy as a versifier is that he is kind-hearted, right-thinking, and well-

read. His new collection, his second, is *Ground Fog and Night* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, \$8.95). Many poetasterly forms are represented therein: doggerel, pastiche, the laundry list (in this case a catalogue of books found in an old hotel), bleeding-heart drivel (as in "My Lai Conversation," which I regret to report includes such lines as "Why did you carry water to the wounded soldier, now dead?/Your father./Your father was enemy of free world" and "Good-bye, small six-year-old Vietnamese boy, enemy of free world")... The faults here are all the usual faults of failed poets — flat language, hoary metaphor, leaden rhythms, lack of ironical distance, dogged literalness — and most of all, most fatally, the apparent inability to make the leap, to go beyond mere words into the scary, thrilling poet's realm of the nearly inexpressible.

Morley Jones

## Trivia, Variety, Necrophilia

"Why am I writing this book?" asks William Saroyan in *Obituaries* (Creative Arts Book Co., \$7.95), a haphazard recollection of the showbiz personalities registered in *Variety's* Obituary list of 1976. "To save my life, to keep from dying of course. That is why we get up in the morning."

There aren't many people with the audacity and the verve to explore, with the written word, that single aspect of life which is beyond all known experience: death. And there aren't many people like 69-year-old Saroyan, whose reflections upon life's Final Mystery have undoubtedly been growing along with his anticipation of it. *Variety's* Necrology Pantheon serves as the springboard from which one of America's (and Armenia's) finest writers, or so he would love to be considered, lets his mind, and his pen, ramble meanderingly and for the most part disrespectfully about living, dying and looking for a meaning in both. From Agatha Christie ("the Dame thrived on champagne and oysters") to Howard Hughes ("he finally became grotesque") to Adolph Zukor ("during all of his long years he did nothing, really, at all") we follow Saroyan's reminiscences of former friends, enemies and even those, not on the list, who enter the scheme by association.

Underlining the effort, of course, is a thinly disguised mockery of logic which fits the subject matter most mirthfully. To theorize about the inconceivable through language is simply ludicrous. What can you say? Accordingly, Saroyan plays with the reader, teasing our sensibilities with satire aimed at the absurdity of both Death and *Variety's* selectivity within its all-

## Ampersand of the Month

This beguiling Ampersand duck was submitted by Stephen Ralston who's studying architecture at Texas Tech University. He gets \$25 for his ducky inspiration. Any other would-be artists out there in Readerland are encouraged to submit their original Ampersands of the Month. The rules: be neat, use black ink on white paper, write your name and address on the art work, and send to Ampersand of the Month, 1680 N. Vine Street #201, Hollywood, CA 90028. And learn patience; we're just getting around to our favorites from last year (but we're notoriously fickle; flashy new ampersands may get booted to the front of the line, so take a chance). We keep all art, because we never know when we may want to use one, or two, or three.

encompassing dimension. Platitudes like "it is intelligent to be happy" or "death is inappropriate" are uttered in full recognition that they are as trite as they are truthful.

The book, like life itself, is full of things which are beside the point. *Obituaries*, after all, is merely the contemplation of a writer approaching the twilight of his earthly existence; he may be a superbly crafted and supremely confident man of letters but he is still a mortal who, unfortunately, has no answers. "Reader, take my advice, don't die," writes Saroyan in his typically solicitous fashion. "That's all, it doesn't pay."

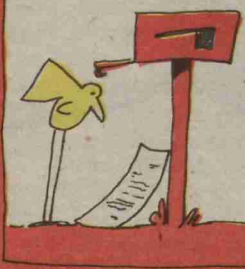
William W. Bloomstein

## Soft Cactus

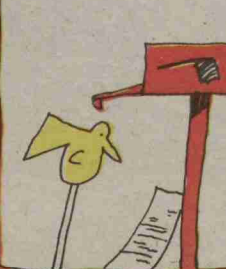
*Cactus Pie*, a collection of short stories by Gerald Green, is described on the book jacket as "Ten Spiny Funny Savory Slices of American Life" (Houghton-Mifflin, \$9.95). More like eight, really, as one's set in Mexico and another in Italy. Most of them appeared originally in *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Argosy* and *Seventeen*, and they are all slick and slanted to these respective readerships. I didn't care for them because although Gerald Green is a clever writer, there is no magic — here, at least — in the way he turns a phrase. The characters are more often caricatures, especially where there is heavy-handed regional or ethnic dialogue. He is at his worst with Southern or yokel types; he's OK with Jewish

## Boyd

DEAR MR. BOID:



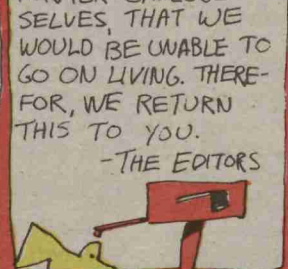
WE, THE EDITORS, THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR THE MANUSCRIPT YOU SENT US.



IT WAS ADMIRABLE; HOWEVER, CERTAIN PARTS EVOKED IN US SUCH MELANCHOLY RECOLLECTIONS OF OUR MISSPENT YOUTH, THAT THE ENTIRE BOARD WAS IN DESPAIR FOR A WEEK.

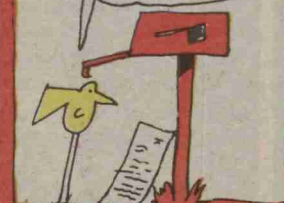


WE FEEL THAT PUBLISHING YOUR STORY WOULD BE SUCH A BITTER REMINDER OF OUR FORMER CALLOUS SELVES, THAT WE WOULD BE UNABLE TO GO ON LIVING. THEREFORE, WE RETURN THIS TO YOU.



P.S.—WE HOPE YOU CAN FORGIVE US FOR OUR FAILINGS.

I KNOW THEY'RE LYING, BUT WHO CARES?



6/1/87