

Last Voyage

HELIX. By David Loughlin. New York: Harper & Bros. 1947. 242 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by J. R. H. COUSE

A STORY-LINE can seldom be thought of in terms of visual design. But this tale of a modern ship and the men who drive her is trimly described in its title. The story goes in a true spiral, like a rope in fancy coil.

It is mainly about three engineers: the chief, Al Seligman, an old-timer whose technology isn't adequate to the complex needs of his newly assigned berth; his first assistant, young Ed Greenwater, experienced and knowing in the ways of the S/S *Cape Harting's* turbines; and the second assistant, Paul Jessup, really an amateur sailor, a shipping company clerk of college education, gone to sea for the sailings.

The tale is a simple but compelling one about a ship's last voyage. Out of New York bound for West Africa, the three engineers nurse her complicated machinery as high-pressure jobs always have to be coddled. And by the time they reach Africa, they labor among more dynamics than the mechanical ones. Because by then it's apparent that only young Greenwater can solve their recurring problems in keeping her propeller turning. And that makes the chief feel like a hammer-mechanic, driving him into the solaces of his bunk and his bottle, while Jessup despises himself for having to steer between the chief's shame and the first assistant's righteousness. And when Greenwater takes advantage of his own illness in refusing to save the chief from humiliation in his job, it's Jessup who takes charge of the engineroom, guided by no better skill than recollection of Greenwater's habits. When disaster is imminent from forces outside the ship, Jessup refuses to dwindle back into pitiful size; and he achieves a truly tragic stature in remaining at his post as the ship is sunk. It is a melodrama of proven happening, the evil coming in out of the sea to destroy Jessup just as it may unexpectedly smash any other small, bright world and all its marvelous machinery.

The story is well composed in all those parts. It is only as fulsome in its excellent mechanical expositions as its characters make necessary, a proportion between actors and scene of action that can be mechanically described as a turbine-job in emotional power. Of them all, it is Jessup who most truly follows the spiral of the tale, with his superior officers

showing irregular wakes as they diverge and converge upon his course; which makes it more exact to describe the story as the convolution of Jessup's ego.

This first novel can be approved as fine engineering, in and on the main.

Navy RHIP

OFF MY SEA CHEST. By Lewis H. Conarro. New York: Henry Holt & Co. 1947. 283 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by ROBERT A. LOW

NAVY Brass isn't going to enjoy "Off My Sea Chest."

Lewis H. Conarro came out of the Navy a Lieutenant Commander, USNR, after some four years of service. Now he has written his version of the inefficiency, red-tape, injustice, and confusion that went into the Navy's prosecution of World War II. "Off My Sea Chest" is a compilation of episodes and characterizations, sharply satirizing the Navy of square pegs and round holes, where, according to the author, merit and initiative had little or no bearing on rank or responsibility.

Here are a few of the author's Academy types who find their way in and around and up the ladder of success within our Naval service:

Bandyshanks, the cruiser exec ("on the back row when God gave out legs") who believed that inspiring hatred was the quickest means to a fourth stripe.

Captain Composite, the skipper of the *Potomac Prowler*, an old battleship converted for use as a gunnery training establishment, who played the "numbers game" with the utmost skill and dexterity.

Lieutenant Priggish, whose four years in the "Prig Factory" on the Severn (the U. S. Naval Academy) have taught him that in the Navy "it's a matter of dog eat dog."

Mr. Conarro explains the meaning of RHIP (Rank Has Its Privileges) and contends there are few privileges that rank does not take. For example there are these phenomena of the Navy's global war:

Staff officers who maintain their flags on sea-going ships which never go to sea to earn the ten per cent additional pay given for sea duty; admirals who throw sizzling parties at taxpayers' expense; and the countless officers, both reserve and regular, who made Government station wagons and jeeps their personal property.

I feel a hot flush of shame [Mr. Conarro writes] every time I con-

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sider the blatant inequalities of privilege, favoritism, and injustice which separated the officer caste from what Annapolis considers common sailors.

After three years with the fleet . . . I came to the conclusion that we fought for democracy under the most arbitrarily mis-run system an enlightened people could possibly have produced.

The author suggests that if discipline is to mean anything, it must be based on mutual respect between officer and enlisted man. Among regular Naval officers he found a kind of "lordly tolerance" toward their men. For this attitude, Mr. Conarroe has one answer: two years in the enlisted ranks as a prerequisite for every Annapolis appointment.

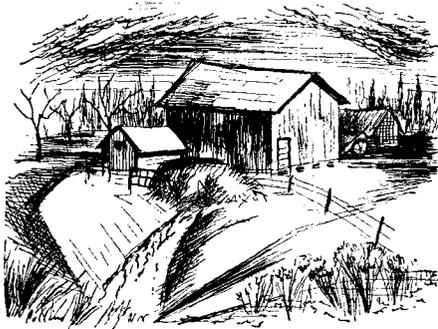
The author has been a reporter and advertising copy writer. He knows

how to write boldly and colorfully, and in this book spritz Naval jargon adds salt to his already peppery style.

This book lends comparison to Thomas Heggen's widely acclaimed "Mr. Roberts." From the point of telling an amusing story, "Off My Sea Chest" holds its own. But Mr. Heggen was content to tell his story and leave the moral interpretation to the reader. Mr. Conarroe, on the other hand, overstates his case, editorializing on situations which speak very well for themselves. Mr. Conarroe's case against the Navy might have been more effective had he followed Mr. Heggen's example.

The author has plenty to get off his sea chest. And despite his vitriolic outbursts, he has written a highly readable, often hilarious first book.

Epigrams and Music



ROOMS IN A HOUSE and Other Poems 1931-1944. By Nathaniel Burt. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1947. 119 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by ROBERT HILLYER

MR. BURT is both musician and poet, an excellent combination. When he is at his simplest and most melodic, his lyrics are beautiful. "Dews of Youth," "Suggestion," "Bird in Hand," and "Latitude Zero" are memorably fine. He can be charming and fantastic, as in "Old Mattie," "Boardwalk," "Mr. Simpkins," and "Mischief," without lapsing into embarrassing whimsicality. Sometimes he turns a well-wrought epigram. In the sonnet, both Shakesperian and Petrarchan, he is fluent and effective. When we add that such a poem as "Tower of Roland" has the magic of incantation, we have accorded him an almost Draytonian variety.

Throughout the book we observe an unobtrusive kinship with other poets, notably the Elizabethans, Donne, Housman, De la Mare, the Imagists, and (especially in the "Sea Piece") James Stephens.

Mr. Burt has not, however, been

sufficiently stern in sorting out his poems. "Europa," a brief deviation into French, is very shaky. "Aloha . . . Aloha . . . Aloha . . ." merely adds its bit of proof that anatomy is nearly always melancholy. "Romantic Movement" should have been scored, not versified. "Rooms in the House" could not, I suppose, be omitted, for it is the most ambitious piece in the book, and the author has thought well enough of it to make it the title poem. But it is not good. Here he is consciously the musician; the work has too much machinery. The mood and general method are right out of the earlier Aiken, perhaps of "Nocturne of Remembered Spring." Dreams drift by, crepuscular and cloudy, broken by stabs of realism or Elizabethan echoes broken for ironic effect. There is some "Waste Land" in it, and, with a bow to the decade, a few surrealistic incongruities. There are, too, lovely impressions and passages scattered throughout the composition, because Mr. Burt cannot escape being a good poet; but, on the whole, it is a self-indulgent performance.

In the lyrics, where Mr. Burt is at his best, we walk with him in poet's weather, keenly aware, through the passing moment, of the longer seasons, life with its music and death with its silence. There are fragments with overtones of completed experience. "Round for Four Voices" and "Shore Leave" are two more selections I cannot pass by without mention, two out of many which I shall remember. Such poems are enchanting. There are enough of them to earn for this new poet a large and welcoming audience.