



BOOKS

Stevinus and Eustace Tilley

EARLY TALES OF THE ATOMIC AGE. By Daniel Lang. 223 pp. Doubleday & Co., Inc., Garden City, New York, 1948. \$2.75.

The old Lowlander Simon Stevinus was so pleased by his ingenious solution of the problem of equilibrium on an inclined plane that he made the diagram the title page of his book, and inscribed around it a magnificent phrase: "A wonder, and yet no wonder." He neatly expressed the nature of learning; he told what a physicist feels about the novelty and the growth of his science. In the spectacular development of atomic energy the typical physicist does not fail to see a truly wonderful achievement, and yet he regards it as comprehensible both as a part of science and as an act of man, with all the richness of human life. In the small book here under review a New Yorker writer, using the full power of the writing and reporting techniques so well developed in that journal, tries in a dozen loosely connected chapters to report on the atom and its people. These sketches, slightly edited versions of those which have appeared in the New Yorker from time to time since the late fall of 1945, drift over a wide range of experience. They tell the story of the wartime career of an inspector and gager at the electromagnetic plant at Oak Ridge, and of the grapplings of the board which prepared the Lilienthal Report; they tell of the launching of a V-2 which was "a keeper," and of the troubles and successes of the Federation office in Washington, with Willie Higinbotham, Joe Rush, Mike Amrine, and the rest of the reluctant lobby. But Mr. Lang, and the New Yorker editors whose aid he acknowledges, have not worked in the spirit of Stevinus. They pitch their tent show in the middle of a mystery and stay there. The title of the book, and Mr. Carl Van Doren's explicit introduction, are tip-offs; the sense of the legendary and the mysterious is never very far behind the otherwise spare and clean writing which is the expected New Yorker product.

There is no want of good detail. Any physicist-veteran of the Manhattan District, and nearly anyone who has ever had to spend an evening with such an old soldier will want to own this collection. Here in cold print and cool prose you will find the small talk and reminiscence of all the Project. Here is the story of Professor Wigner's misleading a guard without telling a lie, here the gags about Oak Ridge's making dehydrated water for overseas, here the story of the senator who complained that the scientists never had "good, plain names" (his own name is simply Hickenlooper!). There are more serious stories, too. There is the visit of the Lilienthal consultants to Louis Slotin's lab at Los Alamos not long before his death, and the impression that Slotin's shy and quiet understanding made on those men while he explained

the "facts of death." There is the account of the state of mind of the people at Los Alamos last winter and of the rather different attitude of the Brookhaven people, trying hard to get a lab going at Upton. It is all good reading, and it is the raw material, at least, for a layman's understanding, not of nuclei and neutrons, but of the people who work with them and their circumstances.

But it is not understanding, it is only the raw material. The present reviewer is in the position of subject and narrator of Mr. Lang's chapter 4. It was made very plain to me that such pieces are written with a rigid method; moreover, that it is a contrived one that gives little insight. The piece fairly recounts what I told Mr. Lang through several afternoons. But then, and now again on rereading, the prejudgments were clear. The idea that science is awry and incomprehensible and the effort to milk the topic of all its irony still stand out. The notion that the shadow of an obstruction could tell you the height of the glowing ball of fire does not seem very difficult, and surely is understandable to anyone who has seen the sun shine through a window on a July afternoon. But Mr. Lang wouldn't listen to me when I told him about it, and writes about it as "a little trigonometry." He worked very hard to get Higinbotham to say something obscure but ingenuous, and finally wormed out of him a paragraph full of conversion factors which would, so Mr. Lang says, represent Willie's ideal of political argument. He drove up to Los Alamos over that magnificent highway, with its unmatched view of the Sangre de Cristos and the Black Mesa, and calls it a "not particularly attractive journey." Maybe he never looked out of the righthand windows or maybe he was too anxious to make the beautiful setting of Los Alamos itself the point of some more irony. Either way, it is not good reporting.

The New Yorker specificity and precision are here, too, but they are a little forced. There are at least three misspelled proper names in the articles. This is high for the painstakingly edited New Yorker, but the subject matter is unfamiliar to them. The birds of Los Alamos—the "Western tanager and the chestnut-backed bluebird"—were certainly not recognized by Mr. Lang. He must have dug them up in New York, perhaps from a good reference book. The fine old Spanish colonial dance, the *varsoviana*, he calls again by a reference-book name, the French "*varsovienne*." I am sure that word never was heard west of the Pecos. In the magazine version he described a sighting gadget used to help locate the rockets in flight with the naked eye as "little more than an empty wooden picture frame." But in the book version he shortens the piece, cutting out the understandable description and leaving only the reference to "another piece of tracking equipment, known as the 'sky screen.'" This is accurate, it is concrete, but surely it does not represent perceptive reporting. It is a little thing, but an important symptom.

Physicists will enjoy this book, because it is about them and their neighbors and their bosses. But more than that, it illuminates the nature of reporting. When the New Yorker printed Mr. Hersey's account of Hiroshima it printed good reporting. Cool and quiet as was Hersey's work, it had none of the impersonal and detached air of