

# The SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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## LANCELOT TODD: A CASE FOR FICTIONAL INDEPENDENCE

*Samuel J. Rogal  
Illinois Valley Community College*

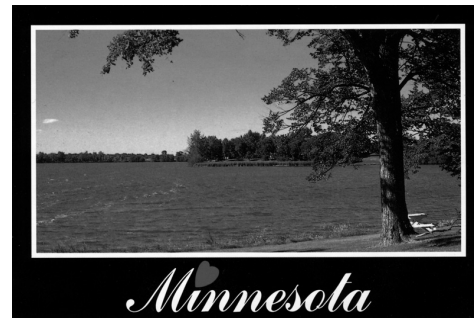
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In a neat package of a single paragraph containing a summarization of Lewis's Lancelot Todd, Mark Schorer determined that Lewis's pre-1920s version of the present-day public relations agent run wild represented a relatively simple instrument of his creator's satire and farce. Schorer labeled Todd "a suave immoralist" and "swindler" who threads his way through a series of short stories with plots that hold no "real interest" and whose principal fictional function focuses upon Lewis's preparations for the larger worlds of George Babbitt and Elmer Gantry (Schorer 239). Although few critical commentators of twenty-first-century American fiction seemingly have possessed the stamina or willingness to challenge Schorer's generalized characterization of Todd, there lies sufficient evidence in the stories themselves to allow for at least a defense of Todd as a character who might somehow stand independent of the likes of Babbitt and Gantry.

Lancelot Todd appears in seven Lewis stories published between August 1917 and June 1919. Perhaps in an attempt to break free from the influence of Schorer's almost intimidating critical reputation, Richard Lingeman, writing more than three decades after the former's biography and allowing Todd nine paragraphs of space as opposed to Schorer's one, advanced the notion that Lancelot Todd's surname might be associated with the German word *tod*, meaning death, while "Lancelot" suggests the image of the tarnished Arthurian knight (106). Enthusiasts of twelfth-century French and German romance will recall that, within the context of the Arthurian legends, Lancelot, brought up by a fairy in a lake, has been associated with Arthur's Queen Guinevere as her rescuer and lover, and he looms large as the father of the purest knight of them all, Sir Galahad. However, Lancelot's adulterous love for Arthur's queen

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Lancelot Todd *continued on page 4*



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## "ANOTHER PERFECT DAY": WEATHER, MOOD, AND LANDSCAPE IN SINCLAIR LEWIS'S *MINNESOTA DIARY*

*Frederick Betz  
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Sinclair Lewis's *Minnesota Diary, 1942–46*, superbly introduced and edited by George Killough, "offers an inside view of a very public person," a "strangely quiet and factual" diarist, who "keeps meticulous notes on weather, writes appreciative descriptions of scenery, mentions hundreds of people he is meeting, and chronicles exploratory trips around Minnesota" (15). "This private Lewis," as Killough further notes, "has a refined desire for natural beauty, and he constantly seeks to capture the unique appeal of each landscape in his view"; indeed, some entries read "more like minimalist nature poems than work by Sinclair Lewis" (15).

Work by Sinclair Lewis refers, of course, primarily to his published novels, which Mark Schorer had concluded were the product of "one of the worst writers in modern American literature, but without his writing one cannot imagine modern American literature" (813). Schorer based this evaluation on his claim that the satirical author Lewis had, in Killough's paraphrasing, "no ability to feel or express lyric joy, had little subjective understanding, and lacked introspection and self-knowledge" (11). Schorer's claim is all the more dubious as he had already published in 1958 excerpts of the "Minnesota

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## The SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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## AMERICAN EXPATRIATES IN INTERWAR EUROPE: SINCLAIR LEWIS'S *DODSWORTH*

Bernhard Wenzl

*IST Austria (Institute of Science and Technology Austria), Vienna, Austria*

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Sinclair Lewis's *Dodsworth* is an international bildungsroman<sup>1</sup> that includes colorful portraits of Americans abroad. First published by Harcourt, Brace and Company on March 14, 1929, it focuses on the personal encounters and cultural experiences of a retired American businessman in interwar Europe. At the instigation of his capricious and snobbish wife, Sam Dodsworth leaves his midwestern hometown of Zenith, crosses the Atlantic on an ocean liner, and travels to the enchanting cities of London, Paris, Berlin, and Venice. With his red Baedeker guide book in hand, he visits such well-known tourist attractions as Westminster Abbey, Notre Dame Cathedral, Sanssouci Palace, and the Piazza San Marco. But the historic sites that he sees prove to be far less significant to his development than the American expatriates that he meets on his extensive journeys across Great Britain and continental Europe.

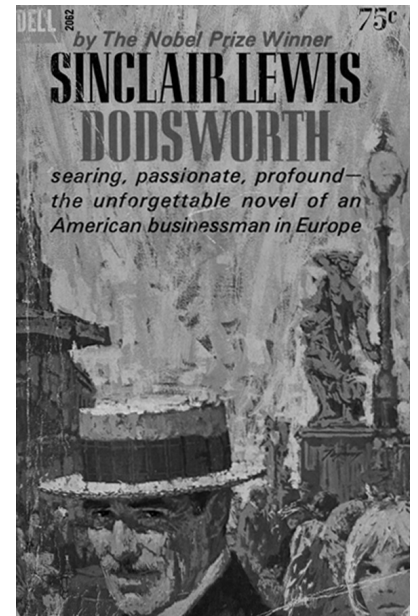
Europe in the Roaring Twenties was a favorite destination for Americans. At a time when the United States was turning into "a puritan-industrial culture" (Earnest 253), travel to and residence in contemporary Europe became fashionable. Even though the Great War had left its political and economic systems shattered, Europe offered more personal liberties and fewer social controls regarding alcohol, sex, and creativity

than America. As European currencies were constantly decreasing in value, U.S. citizens could enjoy an easy life with a handful of dollars at their disposal. With more and more visitors coming over, popular culture and new technology from America were spreading fast in Europe, thereby triggering processes of modernization and internationalization.<sup>2</sup>

So, given the repressive cultural climate at home and the favorable rate of

exchange abroad, it is no surprise that Sam Dodsworth comes into contact with scores of his fellow countrymen.

—————American Expatriates *continued on page 15*



*1962 Dell Edition of Dodsworth*

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## THE SINCLAIR LEWIS SOCIETY ELECTS NEW BOARD OF DIRECTORS FOR 2011–2015

Congratulations to the following people who were elected to serve as officers of the Sinclair Lewis Society for the next four years. The following are the new officers: Frederick Betz, Professor Emeritus, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, has been reelected as president; and Robert L. McLaughlin, Professor, Department of English, Illinois State University,

has been reelected as secretary-treasurer. The new Board of Directors are: Ted Fleener, Waterloo [Iowa] Public Schools; George Killough, Professor, Department of English, College of St. Scholastica; Quentin Martin, Department of English, University of Colorado at Colorado Springs; and Gary Mayer, Professor, Department of Communication and Contemporary Culture, Stephen F. Austin State University. ✍

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## CONTRIBUTORS

*The editor of the Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter would like to thank everyone who contributed to this issue by writing articles or sending in notes.*

Thanks to Fredrick Betz, Margie Burns, Andrew Clemens, Helen Craig, David Eisenberg, Roger Forseth, Ralph Goldstein, Bill Jennings, Jacqueline Koenig, Joyce Lyng, Robert McLaughlin, Roger K. Miller, Jim Moffett, Charlie Pankenier, Tom Parry, Tom Raynor, Samuel Rogal, Dave Simpkins, Levi Stahl, Tom Steman, and Bernhard Wenzl.

Lancelot Todd *continued from page 1*

not only causes him to fail in the quest for the Holy Grail, it also sets in motion the fatal series of events that brings about the collapse of the knightly fellowship of the Round Table.

Lingeman's overlapping of the romantic and Germanic *in den tod gehen* [to go to one's death] upon Lewis's Anglo-American "Todd" does not, by itself, strike a meaningful chord. However, note the opening paragraph of "Snappy Display," following Todd's prefatory description of himself: "Lancelot Todd isn't a whited sepulcher. His taste is too playful for whitewash. He prefers crimson, with polished brass trimmings. But he is one of our best sepulchers, and the inscription on him reads, 'Lancelot lies'" (2: 340). Then, as Lancelot's career rises from amidst the puffery of his professional and social chicanery, he gazes about to discover that "their cars were not striped, but solid black, with slippery black upholstery, so he bought a black expensive car that was so much the real thing that it looked like a hearse" (2: 353-54). Finally, he informs the tall and brisk suffragist, Miss Cordelia Evans, "You are mistaken in supposing that I can really add anything to your splendid campaign. Service, yes, I give that gladly. But I am merely a man-at-arms, following the banner of you, who are our dear Joan of Arc" (2: 355). Nonetheless, Lingeman's notion, while interesting appears to be overextending the issue, since the texts of the stories reveal little that might be termed *tragic* or *noble* about Lancelot Todd.

More to the point, Lewis, once having dubbed his hero with a name, essentially steered his mind's eye beyond that label and, beginning with the simple application of titles and subtitles, stamped his own taxonomic epithets upon Todd: "Corporal of Commerce," "Prophet of Profits," prudent patriot, invigorator of house organs, and "Gladvertiser." To the surprise of no one familiar enough with Lewis and/or his fiction, this jazz-age huckster came from the womb of a small town, began his career as a till-tapping grocery clerk, drifted as a boy-tramp, and began his apprenticeship by writing ads for a small-town weekly newspaper. From there he removed to Boston, where he solicited advertising, joined the "Jolly Bowlers" and the "Young Men's Wesleyan Circle" (2: 343),

and eventually graduated from it all to become "one of the most stirring converts and backsliders in the trade" (2: 342). At that fork in the biographical road, Lewis ceased, for an instant, to laugh at his creation and abruptly threw back the semi-jocular veil to expose the innate rotten core of Lancelot Todd's rotten heart: "He made good. He married the daughter of a real estate business, a girl little and pretty and believing. She died within the year. It was said that she was not sorry to die.... He made ten thousand by that deal" (2: 343).

Recovering, Lewis regained his sarcastic stride by parading upon the boards of his short-fictional stage a mosaic, comic, and recognizably independent Lancelot Todd: a swindler, a coward, and a self-centered money-hungry opportunist who hustles forth to perform his money-grabbing antics, complete with a choral background of equally semi-comic-tragic characters, the majority of them willing and able, in moments of sheer weakness or desperation, to be overwhelmed by the combined forces of Lancelot's mouth and his personality. High among Lewis's list of favored tertiary characters (squires, if you wish to cling to Lingeman's speculation) for his stories ranked the office boy—the age of the "boy" occupying that menial position ranging from fifteen to forty. Thus, in the bowels of Lancelot Todd's organization one would have found Sidney Kalbfleisch ("calf flesh" or "calf meat" for those interested in a translation) of Essex Street, New York City, an apparently studious young man to whom "Every mail brought to his residence a load of advertisements" relative to such literary productions as "The Scandals of Spain," "Live Facts for the Little Ones," and, from the press of the Culture and Hope Book Company, "The World's Most Amusing Yarns." Nonetheless, although "Mr. Kalbfleisch's domicile" occupied "one-third of the dark bedroom in the flat of Mrs. Rebecca Hochwasser," it contained "no visible masterpieces except a February 1915 number of *Ticklish Tales*" ("Might and Millions" 4: 119). By the way, a semantic breeding of the names of Sidney and his landlady yields a piece of calf liver in deep water, which, in

Lancelot Todd *continued on page 6*

## NEW MEMBERS

*Welcome to the new members who have joined the Sinclair Lewis Society since the last issue.*

Alice Broman  
Sauk Centre, MN

Margie Burns  
Cheverly, MD

Tom and Lynne Hutchison  
Springfield, IL

Grace Schrunk  
Blaine, MN



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## “WHAT IF?": *THE SECOND LIFE OF JOHN WILKES BOOTH*

Ted Fleener  
 Waterloo Community Schools  
 Waterloo, Iowa

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In reading this novel, *The Second Life of John Wilkes Booth* (2010), I was fascinated to see the author Barnaby Conrad develop a story line which he was given by Sinclair Lewis in Santa Barbara, California, over coffee in the early morning hours in 1947. Conrad's account of the conversation in the afterword of the book, in which Lewis vividly described his opinions on the possibility of a Booth escape and gave the possible direction for a novel, makes a Lewis fan wish he had been present for the moment. One has to believe that Lewis really felt his story line was a very probable one, something like the modern day allegations of a cover-up in the identity of the assassin of President Kennedy. The premise is that John Wilkes Booth did not die in that barn in Virginia, surrounded by Federal troops. The assumption of a false identity as Booth made his way to the American West is also well formulated. Another interesting perspective is the closeness of the fugitive to historical figures and moments. These include Matthew Brady, Robert E. Lee, the Montana gold rush, and the pomp and sadness of the Lincoln funeral train. To add to the mix of events and people, a very persistent investigative reporter is also a part of the narrative.

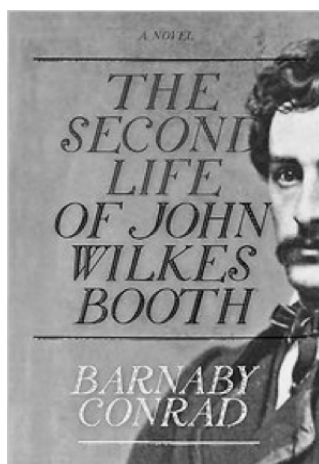
The story was well researched historically. It brings to mind such individuals as Kenneth Roberts and MacKinlay Kantor, who were well known for historical accuracy in their

works. The author does cite historical works he used in the research process. In regard to historical perspective, the well-documented penchant of Edwin Stanton, Secretary of War, to make arbitrary and quick decisions, leads to the possibility of some of the events described being within the realm of possibility. Anyone who had questioned the events leading up to

the death or alleged death of John Wilkes Booth would have been subject to severe scrutiny and possibly imprisonment. For someone to obtain a false identity and disappear into the great spaces of the American West is also a historical fact for many people at that time who were trying to escape from something.

It is impossible to review this book in the detail it deserves without giving away the story line. The plot has some unexpected twists, including hidden talents emerging in Booth. A generous and loving side to Booth is also a part of the portrait that is painted. In what is really an interesting turn, a very believable romantic interest emerges. It is a very well-thought-out

work, with a deep sense of reality. There is a very believable ending with a surprise that is well crafted. The development of the novel was over sixty years in the making, but the result is a very historical and genuine treatment of the enigma that was John Wilkes Booth. It is well worth the time to take to read it and take in the atmosphere of the times and ponder the "what ifs." ✍




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## RANSOM CENTER FEATURES GREENWICH VILLAGE BOOKSTORE DOOR

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A fascinating exhibition at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin focuses on a blue door. As Jennifer Schuessler of the *New York Times* reports in "If This Door Could Talk..." (*New York Times Book Review* Sept. 4, 2011: 31), the Ransom Center is featuring a door that once fronted Frank Shay's bookstore at 4 Christopher Street in Greenwich Village between 1920 and 1925. The Exhibit, "The Greenwich Village Bookshop Door: A Port to Bohemia, 1920-1925," runs from September 6, 2011 to January 22, 2012. The shop closed in 1925 and the door was preserved by manager Juliette Koenig. It is signed by over 240 writers, artists, actors, publishers, and

other community members during a time when the Village was the "epicenter of American modernism." As the Ransom site reports ([www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/2011/book/](http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/2011/book/)), legendary figures such as Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, John Dos Passos, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Vachel Lindsay, Susan Glaspell, Donald Ogden Stewart, and Heywood Brown were all signatories. The exhibit also has information on Shay's business and the Village community of the 1920s as well as artifacts from the archive of writer and customer Christopher Morley. There is also an explanation of how the curators identified 189 of the 240 signatures. ✍

Lancelot Todd *continued from page 4*

turn, provides an interesting exercise for those who hunt for symbols or spend their out-of-class time deconstructing texts.

Close behind Sidney enters Baron Zunino (“Black Snow and Orange Sky”), the son of a Swiss cobbler and owner of the Moujik Shoppe, a fashionable New York City women’s confectionary and millenary establishment. Known, but unseen by his clients as “Cuisette,” the “Baron, despite his butterfly gestures” (2: 426), proves himself “an authority on tableaux, thumb-rings, chow dogs, and tea” (2: 424), but simply cannot turn a profit, and thus seeks Todd’s assistance. Todd purchases the Moujik Shoppe for \$3,000, transforms the place with a Russian revolutionary motif, and then sells the entire operation to a suit company for \$40,000.

Butler “Bert” Ballard (“Slip It to ’Em”), described as a young gentleman debutant with a nine-dollar silk shirt, squirrel teeth, and invisible eyebrows, has inherited control of the family motor car company. He seeks Todd’s advice about creating a higher standard of mechanics for the public and a higher standard of living for himself. Cyrus T. Jasbrook (“Getting His Bit”), a gentleman “who combined an enthusiasm for prettiness and an appreciation of turnovers,” who blows “evangelical incense” from thirty-cent cigars, has gained fame and fortune for the production of “Tonah,” a cure-all “for everything from sabotage to ink stains...a Specialized Remedy...intended only for coughs, colds, lassitude, biliousness, and all diseases of the liver, kidneys, lungs, throat, and stomach.” Accused by *The Digest of the Northern Medical Assembly* of producing “a specialized remedy for that Saturday evening thirst in dry counties” (3: 305–06), Jasbrook sues for libel and hires Lancelot Todd to assume responsibility for publicity of the case. The jury finds for the plaintiff and awards him damages of one cent—the result being that Todd rushes off to see his doctor. Another example is Mr. Eugene Hicks (“Jazz”), “a large, slow-spoken, solemn male, with a face of the general dimensions, shape, and texture of a manhole cover, and a personality like underdone cornmeal mush” (3: 359), who serves as Todd’s principal writer of in-house commercial magazines and newsletters. The parade goes on throughout the Lancelot Todd stories, not a single piece devoid of such secondary understudies who march in and out of Lewis’s well-stocked warehouse of fictional characters.

Exceptions do arise, however, with characters who can penetrate Lancelot Todd’s façade, and even manage to outdo him at his own schemes—or, at least, temporarily humiliate and expose him. Early in the game of con, in “Snappy Display,” Todd hires Benny Simpson, a man the same age as he, as his personal secretary. Then, following the death of his

wife and finding himself in need of feminine comfort, Todd discovers “a pretty stenographer with large eyes and a hundred words a minute and great sympathy for his secret soul” (2: 346). Thus, he fires Benny, intending to replace him with the large-eyed stenographer, but Benny, seemingly grasping the classical literary lifeline strung out by Herman Melville’s *Bartleby the scrivener*, *prefers not to*: “Nope, boss, nothing doing. I like my salary and you amuse me. I decline to be fired” (2: 346). Lancelot turns red and green before assuming an aura of high-mindedness, but Benny reminds him that he retains a carbon copy of one of his employer’s disreputable contract arrangements, and thus carries the round. Simpson eventually rises to the position of Todd’s general manager and hires as a new secretary a Miss Rose Bangs, “a prissy woman of thirty, with tight brown hair and dark blue glasses which Mr. Todd’s aesthetic soul could not endure. She was as inspiring as a pair of rubbers” (2: 357). In the end, Lewis brings down the curtain on the entire piece with the resignation of both Benny and Miss Bangs. The former tells Todd, “By the way, Miss Bangs and I are starting an advertising agency of our own; the kind where we get the good goods before we do the snappy display, dear old chap” (2: 362).

In “Getting His Bit,” Todd sinks to perhaps the lowest level of his shoddy schemes by grilling a rehabilitating Canadian infantry officer, Captain Edward Edgerling, about his war experiences. Todd, having stored all of Edgerling’s graphic details in the vault of his highly active brain, comes across a newspaper item about the success of a lecture by a war correspondent named Fistlethwait Barnes. The juice from the creative tap gushes forth immediately, and Todd embarks on a lecture tour in the guise of a war correspondent who has actually been to the Western Front and seen it all. However, a group of U.S. Army officers, led by Edward Edgerling’s brother, Tom, a New York lawyer in civilian life, quickly uncovers Todd’s scam and develops a plan to thwart him. With their regiment scheduled to leave immediately for France, Tom Edgerling and his colleagues virtually kidnap Todd and drag him off, blindfolded, to a hastily constructed version of an army recruiting station. They frighten him out of his amoral wits by telling him that he will leave with their regiment, on that very night, for France. Nonetheless, Todd proves his resiliency following his release from that humiliating shock. On his way back to his hotel, “feeble in his shame” (3: 325), but slowly regaining his senses after four drinks, he realizes that the officers will be absent from the country for a considerable

Lancelot Todd *continued on page 7*

Lancelot Todd *continued from page 6*

period, and thus he commits himself to the continuance of his lectures. As always, Lewis appears more than willing, eager even, to save his hero for another day of conniving labor.

While on the subject of saving (or *salvation*, perhaps), one might raise the question as to whether any of Todd's apparent failures might result in his professional demise. The answer, simply, comes back with a resounding *No!* Lewis appeared more than willing to save his hero for another performance. For example, in "Slip It to 'Em," featuring Todd's for-profit-only-and-quality-be-damned automotive scheme, the "pontiff of publicity" finds himself, in the midst of a violent storm, behind the wheel of one of his very own third-series Vettura motor cars, equipped with its distinctive "tissue-paper" (3: 117) brakes, attempting to get his latest female of interest, the aging but wealthy Mrs. Gansevoort Cole, to the station before the arrival of her train. Near the station the clutch spring breaks, the car stalls, and glides down an embankment. "They would not make Hartford. But he was glad to have got out alive. And he was reformed, oh, tremendously. He resolved to have the Vettura engineer get out a better fourth series—after his own contract was up" (3: 119). At the very end of the piece, Lewis turned serious again, wrapping his hero in the shroud of the darkest of moments, a figure of pathetic contrition: "The train left them alone. Time crawled past him, imprisoned with her and the detestable car in this pit of silence. He was taut. He wanted to scream. There was no sound of a wrecking car; nothing but the raindrop" (3: 120). End of story.

Nonetheless, Lewis apparently did not want to silence his character for too long a time. Five months later, in September 1918, he unwound him upon the pages of *Metropolitan* magazine, beginning immediately with "Mr. Lancelot Todd, that playful pussywillow of publicity by the brook of commerce, hasn't taken part in the Great War officially, but he has taken part officiously. The only thing that has kept him from rushing out and doing his bit has been a preoccupation with getting his bit" (3: 301).

There exists no doubt that Lancelot Todd lusts after profit, but in so doing, he most certainly reveals high levels of competence and imagination. When he fails—and he usually does at the end of one of his exercises—he does so only because Lewis senses a moral need to take a hammer to whatever cash cow he has constructed or erected. If Lewis's readers could not have appreciated the items on Todd's fiscal agenda, at least they might have laughed at the carefully controlled, but nonetheless absurd, situations into which his creator would cast him. For example, at the outset of World War I, Todd had "given a lot of Spiritual Value to the conflict. By January 1915,

he had already contributed nineteen pages of magazine poetry to war literature, and contributed an extra nineteen hundred dollars to his bank account" (3: 302). While pondering his next move, the light came on when he spotted, on his desk, the business card of a former client, the Hinterland Furniture Company, a firm that manufactured the simplest of canvas and wood stools for camps and porches, each of which sold for seventy-five cents. Through Todd's initiative and inspiration, the item became the "Khaki Khomfort Trench Bench," (2: 303) which Hinterland outlets sold to soldiers' "aunts, office-mates, pastors, and enemies" (2: 304) for \$2.75 each. Todd received, from Hinterland, \$200 per week in profits. The purchasers sent them off to their loved ones training in various camps in the United States, but the seemingly uncooperative soldiers employed them as fuel for bonfires. Sales ceased abruptly, and so did the stream of checks from Hinterland to Todd.

In "Might and Millions," Todd enters the "how-to-do-it" mail-order book business. He begins by purchasing the entire lot, 7,236 sets, of the seven-volume Willpower Business Development Library, written by one "Gershom Towers," from the publisher A. J. Snazebly of Lima, Ohio, for \$2.27 per set—or a total of \$16,245.72. He renames it "The Might and Millions Library" and at the outset visualizes a return of \$5.00 on each set sold. The set sold, at \$10.00 per, "strictly on literary merit. But it wasn't on Gershom's literary merit—it was on Lancelot's! In his circulars he showed epic and lyric genius. If Homer could ever have seen a circular by Lancelot Todd, he would have given up poetry" (4: 126). In the end, Lancelot Todd disposed of over six thousand sets of "The Might and Millions Library" at a net profit to himself of \$29,000. Eventually, Todd tires of the exercise, turns the "Library" over to his general manager, and focuses his attention on a series of advertisements for Old Pal Chewing Tobacco. Then, without warning, Aurilla Bowser, a plump forty-five-year-old, enters his office and demands a job. She turns out to be the mind and the pen behind the pseudonymous "Gershom Towers"; she joins forces with Professor E. Laurence Feedle, head of the School of Stellar Science to "con" Todd out of \$240 in royalties and fees and then heads back to her gift shop in Lima, Ohio. Todd loses a bit of pride and swagger, but not much money. Once again Lewis fed his post-World War I popular magazine readers what they wanted and expected. Certainly, they could not have helped but admire Todd's continued resiliency—his ability to succeed, to experience temporary setbacks (a number of them terribly embarrassing) and, in the end, to rise to the

—————Lancelot Todd *continued on page 8*

Lancelot Todd *continued from page 7*

surface with dollar bills in both of his hands.

No matter what their economic states, those same readers of the Lancelot Todd stories had, within their vicarious grasps, the man for all economic seasons, the man whom they could simultaneously love and despise, whom they could laugh with and at. Indeed, had Lewis nothing better to do with his typewriter, he could easily have gone on indefinitely, from the roar of the 1920s through the economic depression of the 1930s, and on into and after World War II, churning forth Lancelot Todd stories to be published in whatever popular magazines he chose. As long as he could have provided Todd with schemes and surrounded him with his usual chorus of characters, thinness of plot would not have upset his readers.

In the end, Lancelot Todd might have cut the path and hollowed the mold for the likes of Elmer Gantry and George Babbitt, but one cannot state outright that Lewis simply constructed, wholly or partially, the central figures for two novels from a single character in a series of seven short stories. For the exercise of comparison-contrast, the differences in the two fictional forms tend to eliminate expeditious transition and transformation. Most certainly, all three characters seek the so-called “good” life; keep their eyes peeled for well-powdered noses, fluttering eyelids, and attractive ankles; appreciate the function and the value of dollar bills; and mark for themselves thin lines separating professional propriety and total disregard for ethical conduct. Nonetheless, Lancelot Todd lacks the spiritual qualities, either positive *or* negative, with which Lewis endowed both Babbitt and Gantry. Todd has no time for family and friends willing or capable of pulling his spiritual strings in one direction or another. He simply has neither the time nor the patience for struggles of the conscience. He evidences little patience for glad-handing and back-slapping service clubs. Instead, he literally flits from one scheme to another without significantly affecting the lives of those whom his itching palms touch, including his own.

For those who might argue that the short story proves no place in which to develop a character, no place for laying bare the various perspectives of his or her outward personality or inner self, one might consider, as but one example, Ernest Hemingway’s Nick Adams. After all, a total of seven stories provided Lewis more than ample room, had he chosen to do so, in which to construct for Lancelot Todd the means by which to resolve the conflicts created when the infectious drive of ambition contaminates the desire for security and popularity.

Todd rarely struggles with matters of the spirit or the conscience; he rarely thinks in terms of expanding a project beyond the immediate reach of the moment for which he has created it. Todd exists as a burlesque variation of an amoral

independent, as an economic freelancer concerned principally with the development and maintenance of his own artistry. He receives more than adequate support from a corps of equally burlesque secondary and tertiary characters whom Lewis employs to keep him afloat through a series of tissue-thin plots. He finds no Holy Grail because, in actuality, he seeks none. He seeks cash, not redemption. His fictional virtue emerges from the fact that, although he might well stand within the same chronological spheres as Babbitt and Gantry, he really extends his business artistry and fiscal manipulation beyond the boom and the bust of the United States in the 1920s and 1930s. The glamorous and comic aspects of his con artistry reach beyond that time zone; they reach well into the present age. With a bit of creative refinement, both artist and artistry could, with qualification, prove deserving of at least *consideration* for the ideal label of “timeless.”

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## AN APPRECIATION OF *FREE AIR*

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*Levi Stahl, who is the publicity manager for the University of Chicago Press, has a very thoughtful blog about what he's reading—it's eclectic, wide-ranging, and he's just read Free Air for the first time. Here's his take on it. To read more of his writing, go to <http://www.blogger.com/profile/11094919454842047688>.*

I've spent the past few days on the road—in fiction, that is. And they couldn't have been two more different American roads: the contemporary Southern blacktops traveled by the ex-con Sailor Ripley and his love, Lula Pace Fortune, in Barry Gifford's *Wild at Heart* (1991), a celebration of all that is broke-down, displaced, casual, passionate, dead-end, and makeshift in American culture; and the still largely virgin motorways, all potholes and cow crossings, of the wide-open American West of the early automobile era, in Sinclair Lewis's *Free Air* (1919).

I'll have more to say about Sailor and Lula's road, and Gifford's word-drunk, hyper-charged vernacular depiction of it, some-time later. Right now I'm hampered by the fact that the 600-page *Sailor and Lula: The Complete Novels* is the sort of book that as you read it you know you absolutely have to lend

to a friend—and, if that someone is another writer for whom you know you've found a crucial book...well, sometimes you have to lend it when you've still got 400 pages to go.

So I'll stick to Lewis, which, coincidentally, was put into my hands by a friend, and also shares with Gifford an infectious joy in unusual language and over-the-top slang. The book, which tells of a young woman's cross-country drive and the freedom from social mustiness she finds there, is full of everything from Minnesota pidgin German to slang phrases that snap like (and make as little sense as) Damon Runyon or Ring Lardner. The language reaches its apotheosis in this bit of venting by Bill, a Minnesota country boy surprised at the

high-class company an old friend is keeping in his new home in Seattle:

Aw, how d'you get that way? Rats, you don't want to go tagging after them Willy boys. Damn dirty snobs. And the girls are worse. I tell you, Milt, these hoop-te-doodle society Janes may look all right to hicks like us, but on the side they raise more hell than any milliner's trimmer from Chi that ever vamped a rube burg.

That linguistic verve carries through the whole scene, which turns into the novel's most comic:

He wandered for an hour and came back to find that, in a "dry" city which he had never seen before, the crafty Bill had obtained a quart of bourbon, and was in a state of unsteady beatitude. He wanted, he announced, to dance.

Milt got him into the community bathtub, and soused him under, but Bill's wet body was slippery, and Bill's merry soul was all for frolicsome gamboling, and he slid out of Milt's grasp, he sloshed around in the tub, he sprinkled Milt's sacred good suit with soapy water, and escaped, and in the costume of Adam he danced orientally in Milt's room, till he was seized with sleepiness and cosmic grief, and retired to Milt's bed in tears and nothing else.

Is there a word in that passage that's not perfectly chosen? Nearly all seem to do treble duty: they describe the scene, they cast its events in terms just oversized and unexpected enough to render it grand (if not Biblical), and they mesh sonically so that we trip merrily along, laughing all the way. Even the simplest line, "He wanted, he announced, to dance," conveys exactly the right rhythm for its pronouncement: we can see Bill's face, flattened carefully into drunken seriousness, as he raises a solemn finger and takes his first step to a beat that only he can hear.

And that's ultimately what pleased me most about *Free Air*: it's a fun book more than anything else. Lewis is always a satirist, but here the satire is gentle, humane, even loving—there's none of the scorched-earth bleakness that makes the laughs in *Babbitt*, great though they are, so damned hopeless. It's a bon-bon of a book, perfect for summer; take it on the road in your flivver. ✍



“Another perfect day” *continued from page 1*

Diary,” from which Schorer excludes almost completely Lewis’s observations of the weather and descriptions of landscape, even though they occupy most of the diary entries and are composed in strikingly lyrical and metaphorical language.

In April 1942, Lewis rented a summer house outside Excelsior, a small town (founded in the 1850s as a destination for vacationers from Minneapolis and St. Paul) at the southern tip of Lake Minnetonka, a 14,528-acre lake with numerous small bays and islands, which make up about 125 miles of shoreline. Lake Minnetonka (meaning “big water” to local American Indians) was for Lewis what Walden Pond was for Henry David Thoreau, whose *Walden or Life in the Woods* (1854) Lewis had first read in 1907 and now inspired him, as Killough notes, to chronicle his own “experiment in Minnesota living” (1). More specifically, Thoreau’s detailed descriptions of Walden and other nearby ponds, with use of metaphorical language (esp. personification) and particular attention to colors (see, e.g., 146–48, 155, 165, 249–50), must have inspired, as Lewis put it, his own “education of eye to see this land” (76).

In early May 1942, Lewis observes Lake Minnetonka at the “first real sunset in several days: sun a naked gold at setting; lake silver, no longer lead; trunks of trees are, on the side facing sunset, pink, in contrast to the deepened black of rest of trunk. Later, afterglow, clinging so long above the dark woods across the lake that you feel this really *is* The North, solitary and dark and strong, even down here near Mpls [Minneapolis]” (56). A few days later, Lewis noted the “sky a lively blue, trees glowing, birches brilliant against the blue water here at the lake; the lake *gay*, still, mirroring the wooded bluffs across” (58). As “the sun goes down, red,” later that month, “its last trail on the lake is a knife of flame across copper water with silver and then blue-silver water, all calm, beyond. [...] The lake is still light, but a burnt umber shaded to rose. The woods of the now mysterious islands reflected in perfect dark doubles. [...] The dark clouds in sky, apricot to silver, are solid seeming and unmoving/ There is a new moon in sky that behind it still seems blue, and bats flit against clear spaces of sky seen behind silhouetted trees on the shore” (84–85). In late June, the “AM” is “fresh, clear, cool, beautiful—bright and windless, though cool, and the lake in gentle colors, so that now the lakeside is clad in perfect peace” (110). Lewis recorded many more such engaging descriptions of Lake Minnetonka that spring and summer (e.g., 49, 86, 108, 110, 120, 123, 144, 147). Anticipating his move in September to 1500 Mt. Curve Ave. in central west Minneapolis (the lease for which he had signed in July), Lewis notes in late August: “I shall miss this lake, its companionable incessant changes” (148).

Lake Minnetonka served as Lewis’s base for his motoring explorations (in a Buick convertible) around the state in 1942, documented in extensive travel notes kept separate from the Diary and therefore not included in Killough’s edition (16).<sup>1</sup> With few exceptions (e.g., the view from Inspiration Peak “like a great tapestry” [fol. 163]; “lovely hills + demure valleys” S of Lake Minnetonka [fol. 170]; some bluffs N of the Minnesota River “brown + virile as the Far West” [fol. 175]), these supplemental notes are quite unliterary, for here Lewis uses conventional terms rather than metaphorical language to describe landscapes simply as “charming,” “pleasant,” “nice,” “delightful,” “lovely,” “pretty,” “beautiful,” “handsome,” “great,” “grand,” “fine,” “superb,” “excellent,” “impressive,” “magnificent,” “glorious,” “sensational,” “noble,” or “enchanting.”

“To real urbanite,” Lewis notes in a Diary entry for July 2, 1942, “weather doesn’t exist. To the rustic, all important, chief topic of talk, exasperatingly human in its moods” (121). “For me,” he noted shortly thereafter (July 17, 1942), “the hills [in SE Minnesota] have personalities, and strong and cheerful ones. Even just to motor among them cures me of depression” (130). Indeed, Lewis felt especially invigorated when he explored the state on what he called “perfect days” or “p.d.’s,” the abbreviation for what he conceded was an “inexact term” (126), but which he always associated, referring repeatedly to “another perfect day” (passim), with “cool,” “clear,” “cloudless,” “bright,” “brilliant,” “radiant,” “blue and crystal,” “crystal and sapphire,” “golden,” “sparkling,” “exhilarating,” “enlivening,” “serene,” “sweet,” or “Indian Summer,” with the ideal temperature being for him “abt [*sic*] 75” (211). “No place,” Lewis notes in August 1942, “can have more beautiful days than Minnesota when it behaves” (138); in fact, about 27 percent of the days he spent in Minnesota between April and December 1942 and about 25 percent of the days he lived in Duluth in spring and summer 1944, he recorded as “perfect days.” (Lewis spent less time in Minnesota in 1943 and recorded only one “p.d.” in May [173]. In 1945 and 1946, Lewis recorded no “perfect days”!)

During a heat wave in July 1942, however, Lewis complained, quite naturally: “Broiling all day [July 16]; exploration really hard work” (127). “On a dark day” in April 1942, Lewis found that “this round of hillless, almost treeless prairie—steppes—[in S Minnesota] could heap FEAR on a sensitive person,” for there was “no place to hide” (38). Richard Lingeman identifies this as Lewis’s “agoraphobia” or “terror of emptiness” (465), without, however, noting that Lewis adds:

————— “Another perfect day” *continued on page 11*

“Another perfect day” *continued from page 10*

“till get to line of hills Owatonna to Northfield” (38) in SE Minnesota, with landscapes he finds among the most beautiful in the state. Similarly, Lewis notes on his return trip from North Dakota in May 1942: “Breckenridge to Fergus Falls, over 20 miles, billiard flat & not many trees, then suddenly hills begin to swell toward Fergus [...] a most pleasant town” (76), and: “After the flat W of Fergus, how important seem low hills” (76). But on the way in June from Alexandria toward Regal, near Paynesville, Lewis sees “great caravel clouds—frigate clouds,” and asks himself: “Are clouds on the prairie not more beautiful even than those at sea?” (107). The metaphorical characterization of the clouds as “caravels” (small, light sailing ships used by the Spanish and Portuguese in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) or “frigates” (high-speed, medium-sized sailing war vessels of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) is striking. Just as noteworthy, against the background of World War II, are military metaphors Lewis uses, when he observes on July 28, 1942: “Evening, a full moon battling with fast troops of dark clouds—celestial cavalry” (135), or on July 14, 1944: “All morning, battle of clouds, like that going on at St. Lo in Normandy just now” (211).

Indeed, Lewis’s descriptions of weather and landscape are marked by pervasive personification, typical in the depiction of nature in romantic poetry and prose (see, e.g., Noyes), along with synesthesia or cross-sensory metaphors, and a rich variety of colors, shades or combinations of colors, or of objects or liquids (esp. fruits, flowers, plants, minerals, rocks, metals, gems, wine, milk) representing colors. On an “angry day” in May 1942, Lewis sees “tumbleweed galloping across road, agitatedly” (74). “From 11 on” that same day, he notes “a thin grudging sunshine” (75). At Lake Minnetonka in June, Lewis reflects: “A lake is always so alive, compared with hills; yet not contemptuous and menacing, like the ocean” (109). In July, it is “a hot, voluptuous, hoydenish day—the heart of midsummer. 90 here at 3, but on the porch by the lake, the cheerful breeze keeps it pleasant” (126). On a “gray, damp, fairly cool” day in August, the sun is “a red surprised eye, then vanishes” (147). In August 1944, Lewis finds the “sunrises over the lake [Lake Superior]” to be “a riot; water mostly dark blue-silver; clouds every shade, fast changing, and in a ball or long streaks” (217). In February 1946, there is icy rain, “all twigs coated,” and “in increasing wind, gaunt elms writhe, throw their arms abt [*sic*] in agony” (227).

On “a radiant, cool, perfect day” in August 1942, Lewis describes the trees as “such deep, rich, joyous green a[g]ainst the blue water” (149). Earlier that week, he could already taste the “sweet slight tang of autumn” (149). In July 1944, there

is a “lingering carress [*sic*] of golden light in early evening, with sweet smell of bare earth and meadows beyond F. du Lac” (210). On “the perfect day so far” in summer 1944, “the air delicious and alive, softly cool and brisk” (216). In April 1942, Lewis records “another crystal & sapphire day” (42). A week later, the sky is “slate, with apricot-colored clouds nr [near] horizon, and lake [Lake Minnetonka] pure silver exception [except] for the reflection of those clouds at one end” (49). On a June evening, “the sun still up; lake all misty gold foil. Then turns to plum and silver, as sun lower. Then rose and bronze [...]” (94). In August, there is “another p.d., all jade and sapphire” (138). In August 1944, there is an “overwhelming sunrise over the lake, which changes amethyst - silver - blue, p.d.” (220).

Lewis’s literary descriptions of weather (sunrises, sunsets, skies, clouds) and landscape are also reminiscent of nineteenth century romantic and realistic landscape painting (see, e.g., Kerner, Kroeber, Paulson, Updike, “Minnesota Landscapes 1840–1940”). For example, they are evident in the panoramic views (which Lewis calls “vistas,” “prospects,” or “sweeps”) from high ground (mountains, hills, bluffs, headlands, uplands), often with differentiated focus on the foreground, middle ground, and (distant) background. This is most elaborately recorded when, in October 1942, Lewis

stood on a hillock on edge of road looking toward the St. Croix, and realized that just then and there [he] had Indian Summer at its very best: sweet cool-warm air, the sky blue with touches of cirrus and vast cumulus; far off, in Wisconsin [...] the distant blue-gray hills to N without which no scenery; nearby, silver-brown cornstalks and year-old hay stack; across the river, a pale sage-green pasture; just below, on slope going down to river on Minnesota side, the massed trees orange and a dozen shades of green (leaf, sage, silver, yellow); maroon, cherry-red, terra-cotta, with the deep green of unchanged pines [pines?], and white birch trunks the more dazzling against this high color. Then across the river, red barns on uplands. (156)

Romantic as well are Lewis’s descriptions of seemingly unending landscapes, in which the observer is unable to see where the water ends and the sky begins, or where the lake (esp. Lake Superior) appears to be the sea or even the ocean. The romantic attraction to nature is also evident in Lewis’s fondness for secluded, deep, narrow, or “mysterious” or “magic” valleys, hollows, meadows, pastures, woods, lakes, islands,

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“Another perfect day” *continued from page 11*

and channels, or for reflections of landscapes in lakes. “In the downpour” one day in May 1942, “the farther shore of the lake [Lake Minnetonka] disappears in the gray, and our mild lake seems to be the ocean” (86). In the “grayness” along the North Shore in August, it was “hard to tell where sky ends, sea of Lake Superior begins” (140). In the late evening in February 1946, there is the “spectacle of the unending stretch of the frozen lake Superior” (227). At Lake Minnetonka in May 1942, Lewis finds “extraordinarily beautiful: the mysterious channels between isles, distant shore lights” (58). Near Rush City, just W of the St. Croix River, Lewis reflects in June 1942: “A wood pasture, grassy and secret, cupped in small hills, oaks or maples, if possible with moss and mossy stones, seems to be my particular Favorite Scenery” (97). In July, he laments: “My beloved deep meadows not so good now — because they’ve just been cut” (129). In August, he finds that “the lake [Hungry Jack Lake near the Canadian border], being narrow and hemmed in by wooded hills, is so much more hidden, shy, secret, even magic in th [*sic*] morning, before sun has risen high enough to expose it, than a fine broad lake like Minnetonka” (144). Toward dusk at Green Lake (Kandiyohi County) in late May 1942, Lewis notes that the “water exactly mimicks yellow & smoke sky, so that the wooded shoreline, now black, seems a bar of dark cloud across a continued sky” (90).

Lewis’s descriptions of weather and landscape are often pictorial and contrast light and dark (e.g., 56, 143, 147, 218, 224, 228), comparable to chiaroscuro in painting. In October 1942, the sky over the Mississippi River in Minneapolis looks to him like “an etching of satisfying elm boughs against sky pale, then black-streaked green” (163). On a “darkish and varying day” in April 1942 “the prairies and groves [in SE Minnesota] are touched by an apricot light from between silver clouds hemmed with dark clouds,” and “the rays [are] like Biblical pictures” (51). In July 1944, Lewis sees “out over lake [Superior], magnificent dark thunder clouds, with a vast fissure edged with polished copper” (211). In February 1946, Lewis notes a “darkish sky, then pale blue strip against which are pine silhouettes with streak of apricot below” (229). Lewis’s descriptions also abound with ornamental or decorative metaphors. At Lake Minnetonka in June 1942, the “sun drags down with it a tapestry of hot gold” (109). At the end of July 1944, Lake Superior appears to Lewis as “a mosaic in gray” (213). In August 1942, he sees “festoons of crimson cloud — just brilliant wisps” (143). On “another perfect Indian Summer day” in October, he “looks out at a world not of green but of sun thru fretworks of gold and silver” (158). In January 1946, the “sun comes up burly and red faces [faced?] thru feminine chiffons” (227).

Lewis’s nature descriptions are not only consciously artistic, but also have literary references. “The brown low hills below Fergus [Falls] like a moorland,” he notes in October 1942, “feebly makes one think of Hardy’s ‘[The] Return of the Native’ [1878] which now reading, but softer, more sympathetic than Egdon Heath” (153). In May 1942, Lewis asks himself: “when will the Mississippi bluffs, Mpls to La Crosse, have their Irving?” (57), referring to Washington Irving and alluding to the memorable view of the Catskill Mountains in the Hudson River Valley in the famous tale of “Rip Van Winkle” (1819–20) in Irving’s *Sketch Book* (38, 43). In July 1944, the “day starts grandiosely with sun on a wine-dark sea” (212), referring to Lake Superior, but alluding to the “wine-dark sea” in Homer’s *Iliad* (23.143) when Achilles, standing next to the funeral pyre of Patroclus, looks out over the water at sunset (Rutherford-Dyer).

Lewis, the romantic rustic, repeatedly contrasts city and country (121), and reacts negatively to the “ugliness” of Minneapolis, using metaphorical language to describe the parking lots, which look to him “like scabs,” or most buildings, which are “narrow, drab, dirty, flimsy, irregular in relationship to one another — a set of bad teeth” (37). Lewis also reacts negatively to civilization’s corruption of nature or to the intrusion of civilization into nature, when, for example, he notes, with use of another effective metaphor: “The curse of summer life on a lake is the speed boat, on and on like an aimlessly malignant mosquito” (94), or when he notes with alarm: “Whitewater State Park in glorious ravine country, along the Whitewater River [in SE Minnesota], but it’s only 60 acres and, oh God, has a golf course” (129). On the other hand, Lewis is receptive to the ameliorating influence of nature on civilization, when, for example, he notices on an excursion into Minneapolis in early May 1942: “In a week or so, the whole aspect of the city has changed, the streets become pretty and friendly and rather village-like, as the trees have come out — and you realize how many trees there are in the city” (57). Duluth, however, Lewis found in June to be “as individual and beautiful as ever — more magic than when I last saw it, now that Skyline Parkway [is] completed” (98); but, as Killough points out, “Duluth was also not the urban East; it was quite definitely a Minnesota town” (5), located, as Lewis further noted, on the “really sensationally beautiful” North Shore, where “the hills seem mountains; the headlands are gorgeous” (99).

Lewis is a self-confessed “Provincial” (55), who distinguishes himself from eastern urbanites (like Lucius Beebe at the *New Yorker* or H. L. Mencken in Baltimore), who would

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“Another perfect day” *continued from page 12*

find sentimental verses on a headstone in the Elysian Cemetery (E of Mankato) “all very funny” (64), or from tourists, who “really see only the conspicuous much-advertised Points of Interest to which their attention is definitely called” (97) or who “gather at stated ‘view’ on road down to Taylor’s Falls” and need “signs telling them where to look at the obvious” (157). But Lewis is also a self-critical observer, questioning whether “the writer, loving or thinking he loves, the hills busy taking notes about them instead of looking at them” (117), or whether note-keeping is “interfering with seeing the very country of which make notes” (130). On occasion, he is prone to sentimentality, when he notes, for example, “the stilly lake [Lake Minnetonka] half silver, half rosy, and against it the trees silhouetted, every twig, every shrub, clear,” which he finds “so beautiful,” but has, with “a sound of distant singing,” the effect of “Edelkitsch” (120), or when he confesses that he finds the “full clear moon; inky tree shadows on new-fallen snow; lights from little houses in valley twinkle clear; sounds from it audible—a door closing, a sleepy dog, a car” to be “all perfect Kitsch and very satisfying” (229).

More seriously, Lewis wonders in April 1942: “Can love of land—and perhaps animals—take place of all love of human beings?” (44), or in June: “Is it only as one grows older that he loves ‘scenery’—an escape from human involvements” (134). Dorothy Thompson, whom Schorer characterized as his “collaborator” in writing his biography of Lewis (xviii), had finally given in to Lewis’s demands and received her divorce from him in January 1942 (Schorer 684); in *Gideon Planish*, the next novel he wrote, while exploring Minnesota and keeping his diary, Lewis caricatured her in his portrayal of the “Talking Woman,” Winifred Marduc Homeward, which Schorer thought was “something less than a cartoon, and not at all funny” (697). But Lewis was “involved” with another woman at the time, his much younger east coast girlfriend (born 1921), Marcella Powers (see Schorer 646–47); in an entry for October 4, 1942, excluded by Schorer (in 1958), Lewis ends the previously quoted description of the panoramic view from above the St. Croix River with the comment: “Perfect ripe beauty and peace—perfect but for the lack of a girl” (157), no doubt with Marcella in mind. So, when a friend (Harry Piper, partner in a Minneapolis investment firm) asks Lewis in May 1942, “why, after so long away,” does he “return for considerable stay in Minnesota,” he tries to explain that “in New York, because of distance from Provinces, one does not return to native heath often” (60). When Lewis asks his friend in turn why he stays here, Piper replies: “Looking at Nature is the one pleasure left, in this crazy world,” but admits that “he must have hunting to take him out to Nature” (60); Lewis wryly comments:

“Fishing, hunting, they seem enormously important to all the men here” (60). Similarly, when another friend (Belles Rogers, a Minneapolis grain company executive) declares in November 1942 at a social gathering in Deephaven, on the eastern shore of Lake Minnetonka: “I don’t care much for Nature” (164), Lewis comments on this expression of human indifference to Nature with terse irony: “How that must hurt Nature!” (164).

Lewis may have had occasional self-doubt as observer and note taker, but his descriptions of weather and landscape give the “Minnesota Diary,” despite its lack of any sustained narrative, literary and artistic quality. Indeed, such metaphorical description of weather and landscape is rare in the short stories or novels set in Minnesota. John T. Flanagan overlooks this aspect in his study “The Minnesota Backgrounds of Sinclair Lewis’ Fiction.” It is perhaps no coincidence that Flanagan did not consult the “Minnesota Diary” but rather only Schorer’s 1958 publication of excerpts (3). Nevertheless, there are striking examples of such nature description in both the early and late fiction of Lewis, which suggests a lifelong influence of Thoreau.

In “A Woman by Candlelight,” for example, “the storm passed; the world was a level plain of snow, which covered the track from embankment to embankment, all achingly brilliant with sun from a blue porcelain sky” (81). “He [Wilbur Cole] followed fenceless roads that were close in amid the grain, while overhead rolled the bellying clouds” (92). And “Darkness trembled; the fields awoke in choruses of insects; the tremendous prairie sunrise boomed across the land; the early goldenrod was cheerful beside a red barn; a meadow lark fluttered up to a fence wire and caroled—and Wilbur came riding into Gopher Prairie” (104). In “The Tamarack Lover,” “the snow was almost three feet deep on the level, but the sun was out, tumultuously brilliant on that unstained crust, and the sky was hard and smooth and unfriendly, like a plate of blue enamel” (70).

In *Free Air*, inspired by a trip (recalled in the “Minnesota Diary” [76]) which Lewis took in a Model T Ford to the far west in 1916 with his first wife Gracie, the character Claire Boltwood, while still driving in Minnesota “across flat wheatlands, then curving among low hills,” was “transported by Armadas of clouds, prairie clouds, wisps of vapor like a ribbed beach, or mounts of cumulus swelling to gold-washed snowy peaks” (67), and in the mid-afternoon “rose crept above the golden haze of dust” (69), before she “rumbled over the bridge across the Red River into North Dakota” (70).

Of Lewis’s later stories, “Harri” is, according to Flanagan (who, however, mistakenly gives 1935 as the year of publication), “perhaps the richest in details of the Minnesota

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locale” (7). Although Flanagan notes that here Lewis takes ample “opportunity to sketch the regional landscape and to praise the Leaf Mountains and Inspiration Peak” (7), he gives no examples of Lewis’s metaphorical landscape description. The view from Inspiration Peak, described as “a great tapestry” in “Minnesota Hills & Valleys,” is characterized in “Harri” as “that Paisley-shawl valley of lakes and meadows and woodland” (44) and also compared to “sequins fallen on an old paisley shawl” on a plaque quoting Lewis on Inspiration Peak (“Inspiration Peak”). And although Flanagan notes that the title character is “a sinister opportunist who preys on both her suitors and her benefactors” (7), he ignores Lewis’s satire of Harri as “a view collector of merit” or as “an expropriator of landscapes”: “Many a glade with an oak tree and a curving brook, which had lain there for millions of years unnoticed and secure, was first startled into self-consciousness and anxiety by Harri’s scream of ‘Oh, how sweet!’ and it was never the same again” (73).

Harri is an anomaly, however, for other characters in Lewis’s late Minnesota novels reflect the author’s own awe of weather and landscape, as described in his “Minnesota Diary.” In *Cass Timberlane*, for example, Cass and Jinny sit

in their car on the Skyline Boulevard, looking far down on the city of Duluth and the blue-and-silver vastness of Lake Superior, that blazing shield of inland ocean. Across this narrowed end of the lake, the Wisconsin shore rose into hills, and on the Minnesota side, to the eastward, the cliffs behind the smooth uplands of the Hollister Hills were cut by ravines meant for a western Rip Van Winkle. (208)

In *Kingsblood Royal*, Lewis commemorates his summer 1942 sojourn in Excelsior, where Neil Kingsblood’s maternal grandparents, Edgar and Julie Saxinar, live in a “bungalow right on the romantic waters of old Lake Minnetonka, with views” (53). Above his own (fictitious) city of Grand Republic, Neil observes “the pines on the hillside were against an apple-green strip of sky with a tapestry of apricot and purple draped above it. Pines and sunset recalled to him old canoe journeys on the [nearby] Northern lakes” (294).

In *The God-Seeker*, finally, Aaron Gadd

was won to this open, wind-scoured West by the sunshine after a deep snowfall, when the birches were webs against the streakless blue and the lonely pine trees seemed to be holding out drooping, white-mittened hands in appeal for friendship. In the late afternoon, the slopes were rose and gold before sunset

but mauve under the trees, and a diffused pink glow spread over the whole world and the snow-robed trees were glorified. (251–52)

*The God-Seeker* reveals striking similarities between Gadd and Lewis in their reaction to different Minnesota landscapes (see, e.g., 98, 124–25, 127, 132, 238, 399), but it may be through a secondary character in *Kingsblood Royal* that Lewis most tellingly expresses his awe of Minnesota landscapes, when he has Sophie Concord confess to Neil Kingsblood: “When I look at Lake Superior or the Root River Valley or the Mississippi bluffs below Red Wing, I get all trembly” (190–91).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Entitled “Minnesota Hills & Valleys,” these notes provide useful information on Lewis’s trips and the locations and landscapes he most admired (see esp. fol. 164): the hills and rivers (Root, Cannon, Crow, Minnesota, Whitewater) in SE Minnesota (esp. Fillmore and Houston Counties), the bluffs along the St. Croix River from Taylors Falls to Stillwater, the bluffs along the Mississippi River from Red Wing to Winona and La Crosse (WI), the lakes in Stearns (e.g., Lake Koronis), Kandiyohi (e.g., Eagle Lake), and Pope (e.g., Lake Minnewaska) Counties, the Leaf Hills (esp. Inspiration Peak) and lakes (e.g., Lake Christina) in Otter Tail and Douglas Counties, the Park Region extending North to Detroit Lakes and Park Rapids, and, finally, the North Shore of Lake Superior, from Duluth to the Canadian border.

<sup>2</sup> The fictional name for the wild upland area near Hardy’s birthplace in Dorset County in Southern England and “a virtual character in many of his novels” (Wright 75, 261).

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————— “Another perfect day” *continued on page 15*

“Another perfect day” *continued from page 14*

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American Expatriates *continued from page 3*

A. B. Hurd is the first American that Dodsworth meets after his arrival in Europe. Being the London manager of the Revelation Motor Company, Hurd is mocked as:

a round-faced, horn-spectacled, heavy-voiced man who believed that he had become so English in manner and speech that no one could possibly take him for an American, and who, if he lived in England for fifty years, would never be taken for anything save an American. He looked so like every fourth man to be found at the Zenith Athletic Club that traveling Middlewesterners grew homesick just at sight and the homesicker when they heard his good, meaty, uninflected Iowa voice. (Lewis 60-61)

Even though he has worked in the English capital for six years, bought a country house at Beaconsfield, and gained some understanding of British culture, he still is thoroughly American. With his liking for smutty stories and hearty food, Hurd appears to Dodsworth as a decent American fellow: talkative, sociable, and easy-going. At the Savoy Grill, where he takes Dodsworth and his wife Fran for lunch, he assumes the role of an experienced tour guide, lecturing them on the English customs: “But say, you must be sure to not make one mistake that even a lot of high-class Americans make when they first come over. Don’t ever boast about how much money you make—” (Lewis 63). But Hurd himself becomes so excited about explaining the British way of life to the Dodsworths that

he belies his own instructions and evinces typically American conversation and behavior patterns without noticing.

The next American that Dodsworth encounters in London is Merle Ouston. Born in Nashville, Tennessee, and married to a member of the English aristocracy, she is ridiculed as follows:

Lady Ouston was a beautiful woman and very commanding. She had a high, quick, passionate voice and many resolute opinions. She was firm and even a little belligerent about the preferability of Jay’s to Poirer in the matter of frocks, about the treachery of the Labor Party, about the desirability (entirely on behalf of the country) of Sir Francis’s becoming Prime Minister, about the heinousness of beer-drinking among the working classes, about the scoundrelism of roast chicken without a proper bread sauce, and particularly about the bad manners, illiteracy, and money-grubbing of the United States of America. (Lewis 82)

When Lady Ouston hosts a dinner in her stately home on Eaton Square, she addresses the Dodsworths and launches a scornful attack on the rudeness, materialism, and standardization of Americans. Sam Dodsworth, who has never been a flag-waving patriot, is deeply offended and feels the urge to stand up for his native country. Even Fran forgets about her

— American Expatriates *continued on page 16*



American Expatriates *continued from page 15*

social ambitions for a moment and assists Sam in his retort, sensing Lady Ouston's eagerness to conceal her origin from provincial America. Back in their hotel suite at the Ritz she remarks with surprising judiciousness, "I'll bet you anything that fool woman was born an American! Convert! Professional expatriate! She's much too English to be English" (Lewis 85).



*Florian's, Piazza San Marco, Venice, where Sam Dodsworth has dinner.*

Some days later, when Dodsworth is invited to a bachelor dinner at the Dindonneau restaurant in Soho, he gets to know major representatives of U.S. companies. When they profess their love for America but state their preference for living in Europe,<sup>3</sup> Dodsworth is in a state of shock. So far he has regarded expatriation<sup>4</sup> as no option for respectable hard-working Americans:

hybrid cosmopolites with a fancy for titles and bacarrat, eccentric artists who were fond of mistresses and chess, idlers who needed some one with whom to loaf, might prefer to live abroad. But that this should be true of the gallant thirty—good salesmen, up-and-coming authorities on cash registers and motor tires—was disturbing to him, and mystifying. (Lewis 95)

As if to put Dodsworth's mind at ease, Doblin, manager of the Lightfoot Sewing Machine Agency and leader of the American business colony in London, identifies the lack of leisure and privacy as the main reason for staying on in Europe, declaring that "Oh, there's more ease in living here! Your neighbors don't spy on you and gossip and feel it's their business to tell you how to live, way we do at home" (Lewis 97). Additionally, he casts serious doubts on American industry practices as keys to economic success, claiming that the English succeed in working efficiently whereas U.S. businessmen tend to waste too much time running around and making

a show. With his belief in the Protestant work ethic crushed, Dodsworth starts questioning the merits of his former career as a car manufacturer.<sup>5</sup>

When the Dodsworths cross the English Channel, they step into a different world. While London had always been home to American traders, entrepreneurs, and industrialists, Paris in those days was flooded by thousands of U.S. citizens including many artists, bohemians, and socialites.<sup>6</sup> The narrator satirically remarks, "Paris is one of the largest, and certainly it is the pleasantest, of modern American cities. It is a joyous town, and its chief joy is in its jealousies. Every citizen is in rivalry with all the others in his knowledge of French, of museums, of wine, and of restaurants" (Lewis 117). The American expatriate community in the French capital is presented as having an internal stratification with a strict social hierarchy:

Americans really domiciled in Paris for years, and connected by marriage with the French noblesse. Americans long domiciled, but unconnected with the noblesse. Americans who have spent a year in Paris—those who have spent three months—two weeks—three days—half a day—just arrived. The American who has spent three days is as derisive toward the half-a-day tripper as the American resident with smart French relatives is toward the poor devil who has lived in Paris for years but who is there merely for business. (Lewis 117-18)

But no matter to which social group they belong, most of them read the international edition of the *New York Herald* and the *Chicago Tribune*, drink cocktails in American bars, watch Hollywood movies, listen to hot jazz musicians from Chicago, and dance the Charleston in Montparnasse and Montmartre night clubs. With so many expatriates in town, contemporary Paris was transformed into a cosmopolitan city that blended French civilization and American culture.

It is in the Café Novgorod that Sam and Fran Dodsworth come across a man whom they know from their midwestern hometown. A dandy and art collector, Lycurgus Watts is caricatured as

the professional amateur of Zenith. He was a large-faced man, as wide as a truck-driver, but he had a whiney, caressing voice, and he giggled at his own jokes, which were incessant and very bad. He was reputed to be fifty years old, and he looked anywhere from twenty-five to a hundred. He came from what

————— American Expatriates *continued on page 17*



American Expatriates *continued from page 16*

was known as a “good family”—anyway, it was a wealthy family. His father had died when he was ten. He had lived and traveled with his widowed mother till he was forty-three, and he told every one that she was the noblest character he had ever known. Compared with her, all young women were such hussies that he would never marry. But he made up for it by a number of highly confidential friendships with men whose voices and matriolatrny were like his own. (Lewis 129-30)

When Watts begins showing off his knowledge of the current movements in painting and the best places to wine and dine, Dodsworth, who has always had a strong aversion to poseurs, is greatly annoyed and wants to leave the café.

Dodsworth’s patience is even more strained when he makes the acquaintance of Endicott Everett Atkins at a tea party in Watts’s richly decorated studio. Apostrophized as “Dean of the American literary colony here” (Lewis 131), whose intellectual interests comprise French novelists, Austrian furniture, Italian painting, and English country life, he is presented as a parody of a famous American expatriate and realist writer:

Mr. Endicott Everett Atkins was reputed to resemble Henry James. He had the massive and rather bald head, the portly dignity. He spoke—and he spoke a good deal—in a measured voice, and he had a small bright wife who was believed to adore him. He also was blessed, and furthered in his critical pursuits, by having no sense of humor whatever, though he knew so many sparkling anecdotes that one did not suspect it for hours. He came from South Biddlesford, Connecticut, and his father, to whom he often referred as “that dear and so classical a bibliophile,” had been an excellent hat-manufacturer. He owned a real house in Paris, with an upstairs and down, and he spoke chummily of the Ambassador. (Lewis 131-32)

As Dodsworth overhears Atkins praising Fran for taking an educational trip across Europe and blaming average American tourists for their ignorance, he gains a sudden insight: “The American highbrow abroad is just like the Puritan back home—the Puritan says that if you drink anything at all, he’ll disapprove of you, and the expatriate here says that if you drink anything but Château Haut Something-or-other at just the right temperature, *he’ll* disapprove of you” (Lewis 134). After Atkins has accepted the Dodsworths into his smart set, Sam comes to hate pretentiousness and begins looking out for the company of less-affected people.

Dodsworth is overcome with joy when he happens to meet a like-minded American in the New York Bar. Serving as the roving foreign correspondent of the Quackenbos Feature Syndicate, Ross Ireland is a forty-year-old journalist from Iowa who has spent the last three years traveling around the world.<sup>7</sup> His far-reaching



*Interior of Florian’s.*

journeys have taught him to appreciate genuineness abroad and at home. Now he is on his way back to America with a short stopover in Paris. Confronted with so many showy American expatriates, he dismisses the French capital as a playground for dazzlers: “Paris is nothing but a post-graduate course in Broadway” or idlers: “Paris is a town for Americans that can’t stand work” (Lewis 144). Full of homesickness, he is carried away with feeling for his native country and goes as far as to state, “I like my America straight. I don’t want it in the form of a lot of expatriates sitting around Paris cafés” (Lewis 144). Weeks later, as Dodsworth approaches New York harbor on an ocean liner, his patriotic ardor gets the better of him, inducing him to exalt the skyscrapers of the city in enthusiastic words. He also expresses his anticipation over meeting some of his old friends for a drink, thereby evoking the corrupting influences that Europe can have on Americans:

Why say, even about drinking—I’ll admit I like a sidewalk café better than I do a speak-easy, but once I round up my old bunch at Denny’s and have a chance to stick my legs under the table with a lot of real home-baked he-Americans instead of these imitation-Frog Americans that loaf around abroad—Boy! (Lewis 152)

Once Fran has dumped him for an impoverished Austrian nobleman in Berlin, Dodsworth returns to Paris and runs into American loafers. Lonely and broken-hearted, he passes his time drifting aimlessly through the city. One day he sits in the

————— American Expatriates *continued on page 18*

American Expatriates *continued from page 17*

Café Select and observes a group of young Americans at the next table. Elsa, a twenty-year-old flapper with bobbed hair who claims to have come to Paris to study novel-writing, and her three companions are part of what the narrator derisively terms “the Parisian Hobohemia” (Lewis 296), arty people who follow the latest cultural trends and frequent the newest social hotspots. When Elsa comes over, acts the innocent, and talks Dodsworth into ordering a bottle of Pol Roger champagne, he intends to take advantage of her and plays the unsuspecting tourist. But Dodsworth soon finds himself surrounded by her smart friends who start gossiping about artists to make Dodsworth feel like a Philistine, a real Babbitt.<sup>8</sup> Although “he discovered a way of parrying these young geniuses—by admitting, before they hinted it, that he was a lowbrow, but that he ranked higher among the lowbrows than they among the highbrows” (Lewis 300), Dodsworth is more and more reduced to the role of the dumb entertainer who buys Elsa and her associates alcoholic drinks before they abandon him altogether.

On his restless travels across Europe, Dodsworth comes to Venice and meets Mrs. Cortright on the Piazza San Marco. Far from being an American newly arrived in Europe to dabble in the arts, she is depicted as a paragon of cosmopolitanism<sup>9</sup>:

Edith Cortright had been born in Michigan, daughter of a banker who became Secretary of the Treasury of the United States. In Washington she had married Cecil R. A. Cortright of the British Embassy, and gone with him to the Argentine, to Portugal, to Rome, to Roumania, where he was minister, and on many vacations home to England. She was about the age of Fran, fortyish, and she had been a widow now for three years, wandering from England to Italy and back. (Lewis 222)

Pleased to see a familiar face, Dodsworth accompanies her on her errand and is startled at how much he enjoys her kindness and amiability. When she treats him to a refreshment in her elegant apartment in the Palazzo Ascagni next to the Grand Canal, to his delight “Mrs. Cortright showed herself so superior to Expatriate Americanism that she dared to be American and to offer iced tea” (Lewis 335). They fall to talking about their reasons for living in Europe. She echoes what another American expatriate had once explained to Dodsworth in a SoHo restaurant:

I suppose America terrifies me. I feel insecure there. I feel everybody watching me, and criticizing me unless I’m buzzing about Doing Something Important—uplifting the cinema or studying Einstein or

winning bridge championships or breeding Schnauzers or something. And there’s no privacy, and I’m an extravagant woman when it comes to the luxury of privacy. (Lewis 337)

Instead of feeling upset at her view, Dodsworth even shares it because he too has come to abhor the hustle and bustle of America on his last short-term visit back home. Weeks later in the lovely village of Posilipo near Naples he is struck by her unconventional view of the essential difference between Americans and Europeans. Standing in the age-old grove of the Villa Ercole, she defines their divergent attitudes to nature as the key distinctive feature. In contrast to the common belief that Americans are children of nature and live closer to the earth, Edith makes the following assertion:

That’s the strength of Europe—not its so-called “culture,” its galleries and neat voices and knowledge of languages, but its nearness to earth. And that’s the weakness of America—not its noisiness and its cruelty and its cinema vulgarity but the way in which it erects steel-and-glass skyscrapers and miraculous cement-and-glass factories and tiled kitchens and wireless antennae and popular magazines to insulate it from the good vulgarity of earth! (Lewis 360)

Edith’s words clarify the internal cultural debate that Dodsworth has long been engaged in on the issue of America being superior or inferior to Europe.

Lewis’s novel concludes with Sam Dodsworth at the Ritz in Paris determined to give up life abroad and go back home. His far-reaching journeys across Europe and his instructive encounters with Americans as diverse as Ouston and Atkins have almost transformed him into “one of these wishy-washy expatriates, homeless, afraid of life, living on the Riviera as though they were in a sanatorium for neurotics” (Lewis 17). But his time in Posilipo has not only strengthened his affection for Edith but also awakened his will to tie up loose ends and make a fresh start in life. As soon as his divorce from Fran is finalized, Dodsworth intends to leave Europe and return to America with Edith by his side. In an effort to balance activity and leisure, he even plans to settle on a real farm and take up a new career as a designer of two-story caravans. All in all, Sam Dodsworth has gained so many valuable experiences with American expatriates in interwar Europe that he can be repatriated with a matured and enriched self.

————— American Expatriates *continued on page 19*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> While Parry and Puzon emphasize the genre of the bildungsroman, Fleming, Dooley, and Grebstein stress the international theme in their critical studies of *Dodsworth*.

<sup>2</sup> Interwar Europe underwent Americanization: "There was a vogue for American jazz and ragtime, American film (and film-stars), American entertainers, American books, American aviators, culminating in the high excitement of Lindbergh's transatlantic flight to Paris in 1927" (Bradbury 305).

<sup>3</sup> That brings to mind Lewis's own ambivalent attitude to his native country: "I love America, but I don't like it" (Lingeman 392).

<sup>4</sup> Lewis's choice of "Exile" as a working title is evidence for the importance of the theme of expatriation in *Dodsworth* (cf. Hutchisson 168-69).

<sup>5</sup> Wagenaar makes the following observation: "As Dodsworth repeats again and again, the demands of 'daily life' in America are so heavily dominated by the Puritan work ethic that our dreams, though suppressed in our everyday dealings with each other, acquire in the depths of our psychic life a degree of intensity they would never attain in another culture" (243).

<sup>6</sup> Scholars have given divergent numbers, ranging from 25,000 (Bradbury 337) to 32,000 (Jackson 77).

<sup>7</sup> Note that Ross Ireland has been identified as "the idealized embodiment of romantic pioneering spirit" (McCoy 27).

<sup>8</sup> Lewis makes three mentions of Babbitt in *Dodsworth*. These acts of intertextual self-referentiality indicate the enormous success of his 1922 novel, with its eponymous protagonist having become a byword for a materialistic person who conforms to prevailing middle-class standards.

<sup>9</sup> Puzon claims that "Edith offers a model of the Europeanized

American woman" (578-79).

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## DEPARTMENTS

### SINCLAIR LEWIS SCHOLARSHIP

At the Annual Symposium of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature there were two presentations on Sinclair Lewis. On May 13, 2011, Ed Dauterich of Kent State University presented "Grand Republic: Sundown Town" on *Kingsblood Royal's* portrayal of northern racism. On that same panel, Doug-

las Sheldon, also of Kent State, presented "The Split Identity of the Midwestern Character: Front as Reaction to Perceived Threat, Fear of Rejection, and Desire for Acceptance as Seen in the Writing of Sinclair Lewis." This presentation focused on characters in *Main Street* and *It Can't Happen Here*.

Members of the Sinclair Lewis Society may wish to consider the SSML Annual Symposium as an outlet for their research. The Symposium welcomes papers on Lewis as well as all other

Midwestern writers. It is held every May in East Lansing, Michigan. The call for papers for the 2012 Symposium is on the SSML Web site: <http://www.ssml.org/>

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*Modern Fiction Studies* (55: 265–92) featured the essay “Damning Fundamentalism: Sinclair Lewis and the Trials of Fiction,” by Everett Hamner, which examined Lewis’s views on faith, religion, and doubt. He contends that many of the readers of *Elmer Gantry* were unable to distinguish between realism and satire and so overreacted to the novel as a condemnation of religion in American society. He also compares it to *Arrowsmith* as Martin Arrowsmith in the novel is as faithful to doubt as fundamentalists are to Gantry’s professions of truth.

## SINCLAIR LEWIS NOTES

A new unabridged audio version of *Babbitt* was released by Blackstone Audio on May 1, 2011. It is read by Grover Gardner, who has also done recordings of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Gulliver’s Travels*. It retails for \$29.95 and is available through [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).

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*In Bed We Cry*, a 1944 novel by the actress, novelist, and radio personality Ilka Chase, has two Lewis references. The novel, which was turned into a Broadway play the following year, starring Miss Chase, focuses on Devon Elliott, the owner of an international cosmetics empire and the love she bears for two men: her husband, Tim, a chemist who finds it necessary to leave their marriage and focus on life-saving research for wounded soldiers; and Kurt, an Austrian refugee with a very wandering eye. About midway through the novel, a woman asks Tim about his wife and why he would leave her. “‘Look,’ she said, ‘maybe I’m no Dorothy Thompson for brains, but isn’t your wife Devon Elliott?’” (208). A second reference occurs after Pearl Harbor and Tim comments that the attack is “certainly an eye-opener for the It Can’t Happen Here boys” (219).

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Julia Keller, in her Sunday Lit Life column for the *Chicago Tribune*, wrote her annual pick for Great American Novel of the year, “Stars, Stripes, and Stories: Picking the Great American Novel—again—is sure to set off some fireworks” (July 3,

2011: 4.4). In past years she has chosen novels as varied as *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis (1991) to *Main Street* (1920) by Sinclair Lewis. Her idea is that what “makes the United States unique, and so marvelous, complex, mysterious, and irreplaceable” is that there are so many wonderful books to choose from. Her picks this year are *The Shadow Country* by Peter Matthiessen (2008), *The Rise of Silas Lapham* by William Dean Howells (1885), and *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* by Carson McCullers (1940) with the nod going to McCullers because “It has everything: a sensitive, idealistic young girl; a brilliant black man, embittered by racism; a labor organizer; a doomed love affair between two damaged men.”

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*Arrowsmith* has had a long history of inspiring people to follow careers in medicine. A recent example is the strange case of Dr. Raphael M. Klapper. “He came to the United States in 1952 to escape the postwar chaos of Poland, and fell in love with medicine after reading the Sinclair Lewis novel *Arrowsmith*, which centers on the travails of a Midwestern doctor” (*New York Times*, Jan 30, 2011: A26). Dr. Klapper had a successful career in the United States as an ophthalmologist and died in 2010 of pancreatic cancer. Six months later, the Conservative Party in the Bronx nominated him for the state Senate and he won over 800 votes, all without campaigning or even living.

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Quality Paperback Book Club has reissued *Elmer Gantry* in a new edition, described as “the classic novel about a golden-tongued evangelist who lives a life of hypocrisy, sensuality, and self-indulgence.”

## WEB NOTES

I am an historian and this fall I am teaching a senior/grad seminar on American Writers as Social Critics at UNCW. My students will read Lewis’s *Main Street* as an exploration of “the New Woman” and I could use a recommendation of one or two recent literary criticism articles that analyze Lewis’s writings about women. Do you have any suggestions for me? [Here are a couple of suggestions given your topic. There’s a book called *Sinclair Lewis: New Essays in Criticism*, ed. by James Hutchisson (Whitson, 1997). There are a number of excellent articles on Lewis in there including the following ones on *Main Street*:



“‘Extremely Married’: Marriage as Experience and Institution in *The Job*, *Main Street*, and *Babbitt*,” by Clare Virginia Eby and “‘A Scarlet Tanager on an Ice-Floe’: Women, Men, and History on *Main Street*,” by Caren J. Town.

Also of interest would be “Women in Three Sinclair Lewis Novels,” by Nan Bauer Maglin, which explores *The Job*, *Main Street*, and *Ann Vickers* in terms of “the choices and pressures that women felt personally and socially during the first third of the twentieth century.” This essay is reprinted in *Sinclair Lewis: Modern Critical Views*, ed. by Harold Bloom (Chelsea, 1987). “Pioneers of *Main Street*,” by James Marshall, looks at Carol’s rebellion as a form of twentieth century pioneering in *Modern Fiction Studies* 31.3 (1985). A more sociological approach is “‘Main Street’ on *Main Street*: Community Identity and the Reputation of Sinclair Lewis” by Amy Campion and Gary Alan Fine in *Sociological Quarterly* 39.1 (1998): 79–99.]

I have an autographed book, *Nine Plays by Eugene O’Neill*, that has inside the flyleaf, in ink, “to Melba Dean love Christmas 1937 Sinclair Lewis.” Who was Melba Dean? [Thanks for the interesting question. I don’t know offhand. Lewis knew Alexander and Virginia Dean, who directed the South Shore Players in Cohasset, Massachusetts, in the 1930s. Melba may have been related to them. Lewis acted in a production of *It Can’t Happen Here* in Cohasset in the summer of 1938 so the timing would be about right.]

I’m interested in Lewis and why and when he dropped his forename “Harry” from his published name as a writer? I would greatly appreciate your helping me fill in this blank in understanding one of my all-time favorite writers. [Many thanks for writing. Lewis thought that Sinclair sounded more appropriately formal for a serious writer than Harry. He wrote under the name Harry S. Lewis while in college, although in 1905 he wrote a critical piece for the magazine *The Critic* under the name of Sinclair Lewis. That may be the first formal use of his name. In 1912 Lewis wrote a boys’ novel, *Hike and the Aeroplane*, under the pen name of Tom Graham. He didn’t want to use his official writing name for what he considered fluff. His family continued to call him Harry while most of his friends called him Red.]

Also, it occurs again to be honest: did Sinclair Lewis ever comment on or write anywhere about his namesake and I’d expect polar opposite, none other than the Harry Sinclair? And, as my Dad was a redhead, called Red, can you tell me more about SL’s nickname? [I can’t find any reference to Lewis

having written on Harry Sinclair. That seems more like something Upton Sinclair would do. Lewis’s hair was red, “like a new copper cent,” when he was young. He was also called Ginger and Bonfire before Red.]

Sinclair Lewis was a great man. I never get tired of reading *Main Street*. I love to write, and although I may never get published, he gives me hope.

## ENCOUNTERS WITH LEWIS

Helen Craig writes: By the way, I knew Sinclair Lewis, Dorothy Thompson, and their son, Michael. They lived on the next property down the mountain road from my great aunt whom I summered with as a child. I was nine when Michael was five years old. He had a British and a French nanny. They often quarreled about whether he was to speak in one language or the other. He had a beautiful Persian cat with kittens. Sinclair’s elder son used to chase a baroness all over the property. Dorothy Thompson Lewis was very sweet to me when I would bring in some heavy cream for her cooking. Lots of guests. I was supposed to play with Michael but he wasn’t a very nice child. I think he was very spoiled.

Andrew Clemens writes that he found the following letter in the effects of his aunt Miss Lulu P. Bunce. He surmises that she had written Sinclair Lewis asking for permission to edit one of his works.

February 6, 1948

Dear Miss Bunce:

I greatly disapprove of all this predigestion of books for feeble intellects. If children in high school cannot read, then it is the task of the school to teach them to do so. I resent the whole school of anti-culture represented by the Readers’ Digest.

That sounds rather ill-natured. I really don’t mean it to be—I mean to state a point of view quite impersonally.

Sincerely yours, Sinclair Lewis

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## SAUK CENTRE NEWS

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The annual meeting of the Sinclair Lewis Foundation, held February 14, 2011, at the Interpretive Center, celebrated the activities that were held in 2010 to celebrate the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Main Street* and the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lewis winning the Nobel Prize for Literature.

In June, the Minnesota Preservation Alliance kicked off its Minnesota Main Street Program in Sauk Centre with a showing of the film of *Elmer Gantry* at the Main Street Theater.

In July, the Foundation co-sponsored the Sinclair Lewis in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conference which included speakers, panel discussions, and presentations of papers by Lewis scholars, as well as a staged reading of D. J. Jones's new play *Kingsblood*, a showing of the film of *Ann Vickers*, and tours of the Boyhood Home and the Congregational Church, which the Lewis family had attended.

In October, the 20<sup>th</sup> annual Sinclair Lewis Writers Conference was held, hosted by Dale Connelly of Minnesota Public Radio. Guest poets Robert Bly and Freya Manfred read their poetry, and musicians John Gorka, Meg Hutchinson, John Hermanson, and Ellen Stanley (Mother Banjo) entertained. The presenters at the conference itself the next day included international storyteller Kevin Kling as the keynote speaker, poet Thomas Smith, songwriter Ellen Stanley, and *Sauk Centre Herald* editor and publisher Dave Simpkins on the writing habits of Sinclair Lewis.

A special thank you was given to Daniel Chabris of Madison, Connecticut, who, in 2010, donated to the Sinclair Lewis Foundation a beautiful and valuable framed wedding

picture of Sinclair Lewis and Dorothy Thompson and a copy of their wedding announcement that had been sent to Lewis's secretary Lou Florey. This gift is a treasured addition to the Sinclair Lewis Interpretive Center.

Visitors to the Lewis attractions came from throughout Minnesota, 40 of the 50 United States, and many foreign countries including Canada, Kenya, Slovakia, China, England, Sweden, Spain, Denmark, Japan, Germany, Brazil, and France. Many of the comments made in the guest book urged the city not to sell the Interpretive Center, but to invest in it since it provides a point of pride for Sauk Centre and a reason for many people to stop there.

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The *Minneapolis Star Tribune* focused on Sauk Centre in its Travel section of June 26, 2011 (G5). The article, "Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*," by Joy Riggs, starts out in typical fashion. "Made famous by Nobel-Prize-winning author Sinclair Lewis, Sauk Centre embraces the legacy of its native son. Lewis's novel *Main Street*, published in 1920, initially angered residents because of its satiric depiction of life in the provincial, fictional town of Gopher Prairie, modeled after Sauk Centre. But the town eventually forgave him. Now, visitors can tour Lewis's boyhood home and stroll down a quaint yet modern Main Street that features a historic hotel, an art deco movie theater, and family department store." The article was written to coincide with Sinclair Lewis Days and has visiting details on the Interpretive Center, the Boyhood Home, and the Palmer House. Local businesses including Mead's Department Store, Main Street Coffee Co., the Sauk Hop Diner, Jitters Java Café, the Ding Dong Café, and Sunsets on the Lake, a restaurant on Fairy Lake, were also mentioned.

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—Collector's Corner features catalog listings from book dealers as a sampling of what publications by Lewis are selling for currently. [Thanks to Jacqueline Koenig for her contributions to this section.]

### Joseph the Provider Books Bought & Sold

P.O. Box 90  
Santa Barbara, CA 93102  
Phone: (805) 683-2603  
Email: joepro@silcom.com

130. Lewis, Sinclair. *Cass Timberlane*. New York: Random House, 1945. \$150.



## COLLECTOR'S CORNER

First edition. This copy is in the green dust jacket (one of several color variants, no priority). Hardcover. A fine copy in a fine dust jacket (two tiny, closed tears).

131. —. *Gideon Planish*. New York: Random House, 1943. \$150.

First edition. Hardcover. A fine copy in a fine dust jacket.

132. — . *The Job*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1917. \$950.

First edition, first issue, of the author's fourth book. This copy is signed by Lewis on the front free endpaper. Hardcover. Fine (lacking rare dust jacket).

133. — . Broadside. "A Letter to Critics." Brattleboro: American Booksellers Association, 1931. \$1,000.

Three-column broadside. Elephant folio. One of a total 375 copies printed by the Stephen Daye Press. Designed by Vrest Orton. These broadsides were given away and few seem to have survived. Included is a letter from Lewis (TLS, dated October 5, 1931) in which Lewis grants the Stanford University Press permission to reprint the broadside. It is unlikely that such an edition came to pass because Lewis bibliographer Harvey Taylor was unable to locate a copy and Lewis asks specifically in his letter that five copies be sent to Taylor. Rare. Hardcover. A fine copy (with only the very slightest of creasing) in a specially designed cloth portfolio.

134. — . *The Man Who Knew Coolidge*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1928. \$175.

First English edition. This copy is in a variant binding of red cloth instead of the more usual blue. Hardcover. A fine, tight copy in a fine, bright dust jacket (price-clipped) with some internal tape strengthening at the edges.

135. — . *Mantrap*. Berlin: Rowholt, 1928. \$375.

First German edition. This copy is inscribed (in German!) by Lewis in the year of publication to the father of his friend, Ferdinand Reyher, who had been a guest at Lewis's wedding just the week before to Dorothy Thompson. Printed wrappers. Near fine.

### **Ralph Sipper Books Bought & Sold**

10 West Micheltorena Street  
Santa Barbara, CA 93101

Phone: (805) 962-2141 Fax: (805) 966-5057

Email: ralphsipperbooks@cox.net

311. Lewis, Sinclair. *Selected Short Stories of Sinclair Lewis*. New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1935. \$500.

First edition. Laid in a contemporary TLS from Lewis to critic Gilbert Seldes, thanking him for reviewing the book favorably. Hardcover. Fine in a fine dust jacket.

312. Lewis, Sinclair and John C. Moffitt. *It Can't Happen Here*. New York: Federal Theatre Project, September 18, 1936. \$2,000.

Original playscript. Mimeographed. Laid in is the original theater program for the WPA production. Adapted from Sinclair Lewis's novel of the same name. An additional playscript was

copied by MGM's script department on February 4, 1937; this version omits a single scene from the play in anticipation of the writing of a filmscript. Printed wrappers. Both items very good (the latter with a tear to the front cover that is mended with archival document tape). Housed in a quarter-leather clamshell box.

### **Robert Dagg Rare Books**

3288 21<sup>st</sup> Street, #176

San Francisco, CA 94110

Phone: (415) 821-2825

Email: mail@daggrarebooks.com

### AUGUST MISCELLANY

78. Lewis, Sinclair. *Our Mr. Wrenn: The Romantic Adventures of a Gentle Man*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1914. \$9,500.

First edition. A rare double inscribed copy with the following inscription on the front flyleaf: "To Nana—Josephine Foster — friend & best of old flames, from the author. Sinclair Lewis." Then additionally inscribed on the front pastedown: "To Nana, from one of the most adoring of her boys. HSL." With the bookplate of the noted collector Arthur Swann laid in loosely. A clean, near fine book in the very scarce dust jacket, which shows only minor wear at extremities with some slight soiling and a few small internal tape repairs. A superb copy of the author's first work of adult fiction. Enclosed in a custom slipcase with chemise.

79. — . *Mantrap*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1926. \$1,850.

First edition. Review copy with rubber stamp on front flyleaf: "ADVANCE COPY." A fine book in an unusually bright crisp dust jacket that has had two long tears to rear panel, and one shorter one to spine panel, expertly repaired with Japanese paper. Split at front and rear flap folds have similarly been reinforced. Nonetheless, an exceptionally fresh copy of a scarce jacket with virtually no paper loss.

80. — . *Elmer Gantry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927. First edition. \$850.

First issue binding with G on spine resembling a C. Near fine copy in a very good dust jacket, bright and crisp but with two longer closed tear to front panel, a shallow chip at top of rear panel and some rubbing to spine panel. Nice copy of this classic novel of religious fundamentalism.

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