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BOOKS

The Eccentric Editor

THE YEARS WITH ROSS, by James Thurber; Hamish Hamilton, English price 18/-.

(Reviewed by A.S.F.)

WRITING a profile of Harold Wallace Ross, founder-editor of the *New Yorker*, is a project about as straightforward as explaining Einstein's theories to Li'l Abner or Li'l Abner's to Einstein. An appearance of lucidity might be contrived by listing his acts and attributes in three columns headed Genius, Uncertain, and Idiot—if a decision could be made about which item belonged under which. James Thurber, who worked with Ross for 25 years and knew him as well as most, attempts no such foolishness. Instead, he exhibits by turns the affection, bafflement, admiration, exasperation—the total uncertainty—which Ross aroused in him in life.

Thurber's nearest approach to a generalisation is that, "The *New Yorker* was created out of the friction produced by Ross Positive and Ross Negative." Ross Negative was the man who tried to make an executive editor out of James Thurber; Ross Positive was another man who had the good sense to let E. B. White alone. But a gratuitous score or so of other Rosses clutter this pure dialectic. One was the Ross seeking his Miracle Man, "a dedicated genius, out of Technology by Mysticism, effortlessly controlling and co-ordinating editorial personnel, contributors, office boys, cranks and other visitors, manuscripts, proofs . . . and bringing forth each Thursday a magazine at once funny, journalistically sound, and flawless."

Another Ross was the perfectionist who, if the Empire State Building was mentioned in a piece, was not satisfied till a checker had telephoned to verify that it was still there. Yet another Ross only once found the nerve to sack a man, then tried to atone for his act by calling his best artist, Peter Arno, and sacking him too. Then there was Ross the Gee-Whiz Guy, marvelling at Admiral Peary's 36-ton meteorite, dearly loving a great big glittering exclusive fact. And what is to be made of a man who courageously placed in



HAROLD ROSS
 "Who he?"

his humorous magazine the drawing of a woman holding up her child so that, over the heads of the crowd, it could witness a lynching? The same man, this, who refused a picture of two Arab fighters leaving a body-strewn field, one saying, "Some of my best friends are Jews."

Ross had the perception to have Thurber redraw Carl Rose's cartoon of a fencer cutting off his opponent's head and crying *Touche!* "Thurber's people," he said, "have no blood." He was also the first to see the film possibilities of *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. Yet for nearly 15 years he was too obtuse to notice that his best writers earned about as much as a "ribbon clerk's salary," though in fairness it must be said that his private secretary robbed him of 70,000 dollars without his noticing that either.

Asked why he published "stuff by that fifth-rate artist Thurber," Ross had the wit to defend his own. "Third-rate," he corrected. But he was generally slow in repartee as well as markedly short on learning. He once poked his head into the checking department to inquire,

(continued on next page)



AUTHORS and publishers at a recent Christchurch literary luncheon: From left, Albion Wright (Pegasus Press), Errol Braithwaite ("Fear in the Night," see "Listener" of October 9), Gordon Slatter ("A Gun in My Hand"), and Dennis Donovan (Caxton Press)

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