

**HELLO, DARKNESS:
The Collected Poems of
L. E. Sissman**
Atlantic-Little, Brown,
1978, 313 pp. \$9.95
L of C 78-54091
ISBN 0-316-79311-6

*L. E. Sissman wakes at dawn,/ Showers, shaves,
calls William Shawn/ (Busy), boards his motor
bike,/ Stops at a truck stop truckies like.*

Why the terse staccato rhyme? Poet running out of time. Advertising executive and *Atlantic* columnist Sissman (he added that extra syllable to his name in the lines quoted) contracted Hodgkins disease in 1965; modern medicine could give him only a decade more. His poetry and preoccupations matured instantly: silence and small things, hospitals, parties, sunlight, friends, embalmed moments snatched from time—these are his staples. John Updike found an “antic exactitude” in Sissman’s work. Others have compared him to T. S. Eliot or Ogden Nash. Perhaps more people would read poetry if more poets wrote like Sissman in—to take another example—“Concerto for the Left Hand Alone” (for cartoonist Charles Saxon):
Late, late, when BAI played Wittgenstein/ Interpreting Ravel, one hand behind/ Him in the First World War, I thought of you—/ The hand that waited and the hand that drew/ My gauche hand drawing on the drawing pad,/ A sinister, undextrous fiddler-crab/ Claw caught and fixed in the links of your hand,/ Left high and dry ashore upon the sand/ Of a lost world where all is withershins,/ And every left hand sidles for its sins.

**THE MIDDLE PARTS OF
FORTUNE: Somme and
Ancre, 1916**
by Frederic Manning
St. Martin’s, 1977
(released 1978)
247 pp. \$8.95
L of C 77-72368
ISBN 0-312-53185-0

This memoir-novel of World War I trench life was first published anonymously in England by London poet-essayist Frederic Manning in 1929, thirteen years after he survived the Battle of the Somme as a private. It was hailed as a masterpiece by Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, T. E. Lawrence, and Ernest Hemingway (who excerpted it for his 1942 *Men at War* anthology). It is full of the talk and look of the men in and out of the trenches: “There is a gulf between men just returned from action and those who have not . . . as unbridgeable as that between the sober and the drunk.” Manning’s nominal hero is Lance Corporal Bourne, an educated chap who resists pressures to go to officer school, lives through the Somme, and dies, finally, hit by a stray German bullet during a

raid. His real heroes are Bourne's fellow soldiers: "If a man could not be certain of himself, he could be certain of nothing. The problem which confronted them all equally . . . did not concern death so much as the affirmation of their own will in the face of death; and once the nature of the problem was clearly stated, they realized that its solution was continuous, and could never be final."

Science & Technology

ON HUMAN NATURE

by Edward O. Wilson
Harvard, 1978
272 pp. \$12.50
L of C 78-17675
ISBN 0-674-63441-1

ENDURANCE OF LIFE:

**The Implications of
Genetics for Human Life**

by Macfarlane Burnet
Cambridge, 1978
230 pp. \$16.95
L of C 78-54323
ISBN 0-521-22114-5

Critics—there were many—of Wilson's *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (1975) have been stirred up again by the Harvard biologist's insistence that "the question of interest is no longer whether human social behavior is genetically determined; it is to what extent." At the heart of Wilson's genetic hypotheses is the proposition that the traits of human nature were adaptive when the species was evolving over the 5 million years prior to civilization; consequently, genes that predisposed their carriers to develop these survival traits spread through the earth's population. Examining human aggression, sex, altruism, and religion on the basis of sociobiological theory, he detects a "hard biological substructure" of human nature that gives rise to genetically influenced predispositions (among them, the subordination of women to men). Can cultural evolution completely replace genetic evolution? No, says Wilson. For the time being, "the genes hold culture on a leash." Future generations may choose to tinker with the essence of humanity by molecular engineering, but Wilson seems in no hurry to see it tried.

Nor does Australian geneticist and Nobel Laureate Sir Macfarlane Burnet. A scientist who perhaps even more than Wilson views the genetic forest steadily through its trees, Burnet writes clearly for the nongeneticist: "Birth is the most blatantly mammalian of all human functions. It is painful, messy, and undignified." The infant emerging "greet[s] life with a cry"—and with his genetic lot. He may