

Book Report

HERE ARE two books on men who are worth reading about and whom we knew as warm personal friends.

Oscar Hammerstein, the subject of the biography *Getting to Know Him*,* by Hugh Fordin, built a vastly successful career as playwright and librettist on his ability to celebrate the great simplicities of life. He believed in children, sunny mornings, love at first sight, happy surprises, good humor and good deeds. He had no interest in the cheap sex and casual violence that were to become the thematic staples of many of his later contemporaries. He unabashedly extolled the essential decency of people and never got tired of lyricizing their capacity to extricate themselves from absurd and painful situations.

For a long time—especially during the first two decades of his career—the drama critics flayed Hammerstein because they thought him too sentimental, too addicted to what they regarded as implausible triumphs over the bleak realities. Eventually, however, almost all of them came to sing his praises. Even the toughest of them had to admit they felt better about belonging to the human species after seeing his musicals.

I knew him through his interest in world federalism. He had been a member of the Writers' War Board during World War II. The WWB was formed originally at the request of the U.S. Treasury Department for the purpose of stimulating the sale of War Bonds. When the war ended, most of the members of the WWB felt that the atomic bomb on Hiroshima had changed not just the nature of war but the entire future of humanity. They felt that the time had come to create a world order that could deal with the basic causes of war and put an end to the atomic arms race "before the arms race put an end to the human race." In this way, the Writers' War Board became the Writer's Board for World Government. Oscar Hammerstein was one of its most dedicated workers. He wrote a play for the World Federalists called *The Myth That Threatens the World*. The reference here was to the outmoded notion that national security could be achieved through absolute national sovereignty. Special performances of the play, in which many stars from the Hammerstein-Rodgers musicals were members of the cast, were staged by the World Federalists in the United States and abroad.

Oscar Hammerstein's friendship was one of the greatest privileges of my life. He was a magnanimous human being, deeply caught up in the main currents of his time, endlessly creative, instinctively friendly and trusting. Hugh Fordin gave himself an overwhelming assignment when he decided to write Oscar Hammerstein's biography. Yet the largeness of the man and his outlook is beautifully captured in this book, which does full justice to its subject. It will be read with warm appreciation by all those whose spirits are lifted every time they hear or hum a Hammerstein tune.

It is an extraordinary coincidence that John McAleer's biography of Rex Stout,† the renowned mystery story writer and creator of Nero Wolfe, should be issued at about the same

time as the biography of Oscar Hammerstein. Rex and Oscar were the best of friends. Stout was the head of the Writers' War Board and the Writer's Board for World Government. Like Hammerstein, Rex Stout believed that a safe world would not come into being by itself. He believed it would have to be designed. Such a design involved the development of effective authority that only world law could provide. Stout's religion was human freedom, and he evangelized in every way open to him, seeing world law as a basic precondition for freedom on earth.

Rex Stout had a wide circle of friends. He teased them unmercifully, gave them a rough time in political discussions, and loved them all with openness and ebullience. He had a voice that in tonality and power rivaled the full diapason of the great organ at Strasbourg. If you argued with him about politics, you could almost feel the thunder build up inside him; when it reached a point where it could no longer be contained, out would come, "The hell you say!" If there were hills around, the sound would boom and echo through the valleys. And then he would suddenly turn soft and grin at you and suggest a game of chess.

His two greatest hates in life were Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin. Long before Nazism was recognized in the United States for what it was, Rex Stout's diapason was at full vibrato. With William Allen White, he helped organize the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies. With Ulric Bell, he helped transform that group into the Fight for Freedom Committee. He was totally without ambiguity or circumspection in every personal commitment. He had a natural capacity for leadership. In addition to his chairmanship of the Writers' War Board and the Writer's Board for World Government, Rex was president of the Author's League. Despite it all, he plied his profession with almost volcanic energy. John McAleer gives us the accounting: 51 books, 75 novellas and short stories. Stout's works have appeared in 26 languages. Total sales of all his titles exceed 100 million copies. When he died, in 1975, he had more books in print than any living American writer.

Most readers think of him only in connection with his mystery stories. Yet Mr. McAleer reminds us that he began as a serious avant-garde novelist who was compared with D. H. Lawrence and William Faulkner. Very few people know that he began as an accountant; he was nineteen when he did bookkeeping for Theodore Roosevelt on the President's yacht, *Mayflower*. When he was twenty-three he managed a hotel; by the time he was thirty-one, he was a successful banker. In the interstices of his business career, he managed to write his serious novels. Not until he was forty-seven did he turn seriously to mystery stories, inventing two immortal literary characters, Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin.

Mr. McAleer sees Rex Stout against a large setting. Stout regarded the detective story as "an advanced base from which he could promote realizable forms. ... He realizes that extremism of the right menaces civilization fully as much as extremism of the left. ... Within his brownstone, [Nero] Wolfe maintains a comic system of order that is overlaid on the heroic social order civilization depends on."

This is a superb book. Mr. McAleer comes to it with impressive credentials. His previous books include a biography of Theodore Dreiser and a work on Thoreau. All friends of Rex Stout, Nero Wolfe, and Archie Goodwin are in his debt.

—N. C.

*Random House; \$15

†Rex Stout: A Biography; Little, Brown; \$15