

ESENIN: A LIFE. By *Gordon McVay*. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1976. 352 pp. Photographs. \$10.00.

Though Sergei Esenin's poetry was in disfavor in the USSR in the 1930s and 1940s, his popularity there within the last decade has attained the proportions of a personality cult of a film star or a folk hero. Two five-volume editions of his poetry appeared in the 1960s, along with numerous editions of selected poetry and a flood of critical articles, memoirs, dissertations, translations, plays, two full-length films, recordings, picture postcards, ex libris, postage stamps, and other Eseniniana. Yet, until McVay's recent book, no full-length study of Esenin's life or works had appeared in English since de Graaff's 1966 book. Gordon McVay has done his scholarly homework impeccably and thoroughly. He has carefully covered the vast amount of Esenin scholarship published both in the 1920s and in the last decades. If this extremely well researched and highly useful study does have a drawback it is that McVay almost becomes an Intourist guide, leading the reader from quote to quote through the labyrinth of Esenin literature, with a minimum of personal commentary.

Through his exhaustive biographical resources McVay tries to unravel the clues to Esenin's complex personality—the peasant poet of the village, the problems with religion and the revolution, the drunken brawls and confused love life, the all too familiar years with Isadora Duncan (the cover illustration of the book shows Esenin with Isadora, though this relationship may not necessarily have been the most important aspect of his life), and Esenin's literary circle—an area McVay treats particularly well. McVay devotes relatively little attention to the poetry, for which he cannot be faulted, because his task was to write a biography, not a literary study. Yet this problem is particularly important for a poet who himself stated that his autobiography was contained in his poems. When McVay does try to deal with the poems he suffers from his self-imposed limitations; two pages on Esenin's first collection *Radunitsa* is not nearly enough to give the reader an idea of the importance of these poems.

McVay hints at, but does not make explicit, those elements in Esenin's complex life which make him so popular with today's Soviet reader—his struggle to accept the revolution, his alternating moods of lyrical hope and deep despair, his patriotism, love of nature, nostalgia for the past, and the total absence of didactic norms telling the reader how to live. Such biographical and literary explanations of Esenin's personality are all the more important because, as even his most ardent admirers—including Mr. McVay—would probably admit, Esenin lacks the subtlety, technical richness, literary allusions, and depth of a Pasternak or a Mandelstam.

In refreshing contrast to the political tendentiousness that mars Soviet Esenin studies such as those of Iushin, Naumov, and Prokushev, McVay does not need to spend most of his energy in an effort to prove that Esenin was a true believer and a consistently loyal supporter of the regime. If anything, McVay goes to the other extreme, when, in his discussion of the revolutionary period, he asserts that "Esenin's poetry of this period is generally too vague to deduce any definite political stance" (p. 96), a position which might arouse objections from Western as well as Soviet critics. McVay deals tactfully, and in an interesting manner, with certain aspects of Esenin's life which are by definition off-limits to Soviet researchers, such as his relationship with Trotsky and his alleged homosexuality, although the readings of a homosexual interpretation into several of Esenin's poems (p. 67) are certainly debatable. McVay is objective and to the point when he describes Esenin's frequently debated relationship with the tsar's court during his military service; and, by stressing Esenin's wide reading and cultural background, he successfully demolishes Soviet myths of Esenin, the illiterate peasant, whose genius stems solely from folk culture. In the light of most Soviet works on Esenin, McVay's disinclination to speculate or generalize from his wealth of facts is both a plus and a minus.

McVay avoids simplistic interpretations of Esenin as the peasant poet longing for the past world of the village, noting, as several critics have done, that, although he may have mourned the village, he lived in the city (p. 142). But he does not take Esenin's nostalgia and self-pity to a deeper psychological conclusion—that Esenin's tragedy may have been primarily that of a man without a home in any part of society, a man totally and irrevocably alone. Esenin's obsession with the theme of the prodigal son in his later poetry stresses the poet's idea of homelessness—that there was no place for him at all in Soviet society, a conclusion which led to his suicide in 1925.

McVay explains Esenin's extreme swings in behavior as a struggle against death (pp. 147–48), although his struggle with anomie may be more to the point. In the last chapter McVay, through carefully juxtaposed memoir material and quotation, skillfully brings his hero to his foredoomed end. But once again, McVay gives everyone's opinion on the reasons for Esenin's suicide except his own.

The book includes an excellent set of photographs (some previously unpublished), a very useful select bibliography, and notes. Unfortunately, McVay does not footnote his numerous quotations in the text, leaving the reader to rummage around in the bibliography in order to locate them. Yet despite such minor problems, this is not only an extremely useful research tool but a fascinating and entertaining account of Esenin's life as well.

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FOR WIKTOR WEINTRAUB: ESSAYS IN POLISH LITERATURE, LANGUAGE, AND HISTORY PRESENTED ON THE OCCASION OF HIS SIXTY-FIFTH BIRTHDAY. Edited by *Victor Erlich et al.* The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1975. 621 pp. 180 Dglds.

Most of the Polish-American academic establishment is represented in this book. The *Tabula gratuloria* includes forty-one names, from the eminent and distinguished to those who are somewhat less so, but who may expect to join the ranks later. Victor Erlich declares in his preface that other scholars were invited to contribute but were unable to do so for various reasons. Some of the contributors have already died. In any case, the contributors were drawn from a wide and cosmopolitan range: literary historians, linguists, and historians, from Harvard and Yale to Brussels, London, Warsaw, Lublin, and Belgrade. The majority of essays reflect Weintraub's own interests: Jan Kochanowski, Adam Mickiewicz, and comparative literature.

We have long since ceased to expect anything strikingly new or original in a Festschrift. At a reported price of \$70.00 (the publisher fails to state it anywhere), this one is more outrageously expensive than most publications of its kind. No individual is going to buy a copy, and libraries can surely find better ways of spending funds. Yet the compilation of such volumes is a well-intentioned gesture, and Festschriften will no doubt continue to be published, to the gratification of all concerned.

It would be invidious and indeed impossible for this reviewer to award "grades" to such distinguished scholars for their work. Most of the contributions in literary history are decidedly old-fashioned, as befits this particular establishment. (This epithet is not intended to disparage, for in the past forty years, since Weintraub published his *Styl Jana Kochanowskiego* in 1932, "old-fashioned" literary scholarship has laid very solid foundations for later scholars and literary critics.) Examples include George Grabowski's essay, "Samuel Twardowski's *Wojna domowa*, literary context and aspects of genre" (pp. 189–99), Evelyn Jasiulko Harden's "The dependence of Apollo Korzeniowski's *Komedia* on Griboedov's *Gore ot uma*" (pp. 209–26), and Stojan Subotin's "Wokół zagadki wpływu *Satyra* Jana Kochanowskiego na *Satyra* M. A. Relkovicia" (pp. 504–15).