

ESSAYS OF
YESTERDAY
AND TODAY

ESSAYS OF YESTERDAY AND TODAY

EDITED BY JOHN A. LESTER

HILL SCHOOL, POTTSTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA

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A NOTE TO TEACHERS

This collection seeks to give students and teachers a good time as they read and study together the great essayists of yesterday and today. A good balance has been preserved between yesterday and today; about one third of the essays were written before 1900 and two thirds since. This collection is unique in that it reaches clear back to ancient Greece and Rome. Some of the most exciting essays in the book are among the oldest. There is Plato's moving narrative of Socrates drinking the hemlock and Pliny's vivid description of his uncle's death beneath the ashes of the erupting Vesuvius. The young student will inevitably compare the drama of these older essays written centuries ago with what is happening today.

Though this volume represents a time span of more than twenty-two centuries, nearly fifty per cent of the essays were written during the life time of the students who will read them.

The purpose of the teaching helps is twofold: first to motivate the reading of the essays, second to lead the student to do something with them. The short introduction to each essay creates in the student a wish, or at least a readiness to read it; it supplies a short biography of the author and mentions his chief writings; it anticipates the hard spots and prepares the young reader to get over them. Following each essay is a set of Things to Do. These are put down in a list without definite labels, but with a well considered sequence. First come comprehension questions, to help the student to understand the essay; next, some questions to aid him in discussing its implications; third, two or three suggestions for related activities; fourth, some possible titles for themes; and fifth, suggestions for further reading in the same author or in related authors.

There are two additional and novel features in this volume. To sharpen the appeal of the book to young readers, Miss Susanne Suba has prepared some twenty-three informal sketches for *Essays of Yesterday and Today*. These drawings, by the artist whose work we have enjoyed regularly in *The New Yorker*, have caught with uncanny penetration the central themes of the essays, grave or gay. In addition to these drawings we have used a total of fifty or sixty epigrams, anecdotes, or student "boners" as fillers after many of the essays. The student may sometimes discover a relation between the filler and the preceding essay.

The wise teacher will use this book as a new experience in group reading. The essays should be presented simply as a series of short prose pieces by able writers, on topics of interest to boys and girls. Attempts to explain the nature of the essay, to classify or to define it, may well be postponed until the student knows, through the experience of reading, what it is he is trying to classify or define — until he has read a sampling of essays wide enough for him to feel differences and make comparisons. Indeed, the teacher will usually find that the best occasions for criticism and comparison arise by the way, spontaneously from the group, in the process of reading.

In what order shall these essays be read? So widely does the reading ability of different high school groups differ that only the teacher of each individual group can wisely answer this question, and then only after he has thoroughly acquainted himself with what the book contains. The essays are organized by themes or interest centers, with a foreword to each of these sections. There is an element of unity in each section, and they are arranged roughly in the order of difficulty. Teachers who prefer to use a different order of presentation may do so by consulting the table of contents; those who prefer to read in chronological order may consult the second table of contents (page x).

After the teacher has established that group attitude of eagerness and curiosity necessary for classroom reading, he may be able to enlist the students in forming a co-operative plan for the use of the book, and utilize the great range in interest and power to read with appreciation which is present in every classroom. With some

groups the appointment or election of a few rapid and sensitive readers as "tasters" to collaborate with the teacher in the planning of the reading has been found most successful. Certain essays possess a peculiar appeal for certain students, and a versatile teacher can use this fact to encourage such persons to become class "experts" in a certain type of essay, for instance the essay on sport, science, music, wild life, or the book review. This spirit of exploration will quickly spread beyond the book itself. Some students may become interested in the essays of a certain period, for instance the early nineteenth century, American essays of the last half of the nineteenth century, American or English essays of today.

The teacher should provide for this extension of interest before the reading begins. The school or town librarian will be eager to co-operate in providing references and in reserving a shelf of selected books. No list of essayists or of selections is appended to this volume because it is believed that this self-propelled exploration is a better incentive. A practice which has been found very successful where it is possible is the co-operative formation on the part of teacher and students of a classroom library of essays, brought from home for the use of the group while the reading is in progress. It is best to have the group select one of their number as class librarian in charge of the books. Before the reading begins the teacher will have provided bound volumes of the recent issues of *The Reader's Digest*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Harper's Magazine*; and as the reading proceeds some students are likely to volunteer as reporters on current issues of these magazines, and of *Scholastic* with its leads to essays published elsewhere.

After the reading is finished the teacher and his group may wish to arrange the essays by types; for instance, in such categories as personal, reflective, critical, expository, didactic, humorous, biographical, etc. However the number of categories may be enlarged it will be found that a lively debate will ensue about the placement of some fifteen of these essays, for the reason that they have right of entry to several pigeon-holes. None the less this effort to classify is useful. It entails a comprehensive review; it requires hard thinking

about the main purpose or nature of each essay; and it inevitably leads us to realize that we are not sorting marbles.

Though the average reading difficulty of this volume is about that of the second year of high school, it includes some frankly difficult pieces. A book of essays offered for high school reading today needs no apology for the inclusion of some hard reading. The tasks and problems confronting America are hard. Their solutions will have to be approved by future citizens now in school. Indeed every high school student is now perforce tragically aware of the importance of national and international events, and it follows that high school teachers, and particularly teachers of English have now an unusual opportunity and duty. The situation strengthens the hands of all those teachers who have been trying to get their students to see in the writing of an essay, not so much a polite exercise in literary urbanity, as a dynamic expression of informed and timely judgment. There are included in this volume notable essays dealing with the foundations of the future, and they can be used as springboards for the thinking and writing of high school students about what they now know to be their own vital interests.

Two final words. All the essays included in this collection deserve to be *read*. The teacher should aim at careful and thorough reading, and should discourage smattering and skimming. Before the group is asked to undertake a new reading assignment, the teacher should take time to create the anticipation, the readiness, and the attitude of mind essential for full success. This preliminary survey of the essay next to be read is especially necessary to obtain the full benefit from the reading of the later units.

For their critical advice the editor wishes to thank Dr. Clara A. Molendyk, Chairman of the English Department, Lafayette High School, Brooklyn, New York, and Mr. Francis W. Griffith, Chairman of the English Department, James Madison High School, Brooklyn, New York. To Miss Susanne Suba he is grateful for her care in designing the typography as well as for her skillful pen and ink sketches.

JOHN A. LESTER

February, 1943

CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

Some teachers may not care to use the essays in the groupings by subject matter. For the benefit of those who prefer a historical approach the following list is given. Here the essays are named in the order of their dates of publication.

AUTHOR	TITLE OF ESSAY	DATE
Plato	<i>Death of Socrates</i>	C. 320 B.C.
Cicero	<i>On Friendship and Duty</i>	44 B.C.
Pliny the Younger	<i>The Eruption of Vesuvius</i>	79
Montaigne	<i>On Himself and His Essays</i>	1580
Francis Bacon	<i>Of Studies</i>	1625
	<i>Of Riches</i>	
Izaak Walton	<i>A Day with the Trouts</i>	1653
Sir Richard Steele	<i>Alexander Selkirk</i>	1713
William Hazlitt	<i>On Going a Journey</i>	1822
Charles Lamb	<i>Selections from Elia</i>	1823
Ralph Waldo Emerson	<i>Self-Reliance</i>	1844
Thomas De Quincey	<i>The Vision of Sudden Death</i>	1849
Robert Louis Stevenson	<i>Aes Triplex</i>	1881
Mary E. Coleridge	<i>Gifts</i>	1900
David Grayson	<i>I Entertain an Agent Unawares</i>	1907
Gilbert K. Chesterton	<i>On Running after One's Hat</i>	1908
Dorothy Canfield	<i>Town and Country</i>	1908
Stephen Leacock	<i>A, B, and C – The Human Element</i>	
	<i>in Mathematics</i>	1910
Simeon Strunsky	<i>Romance</i>	1914
Winifred Kirkland	<i>A Man in the House</i>	1918
H. M. Tomlinson	<i>The Pit Mouth</i>	1919

AUTHOR	TITLE OF ESSAY	DATE
Christopher Morley	<i>On Unanswering Letters</i>	1919
Frances and Gertrude Warner	<i>To Horse!</i>	1921
William Allen White	<i>Mary White</i>	1922
Hilaire Belloc	<i>On "And"</i>	1923
William Beebe	<i>The Jungle Sluggard</i>	1925
Lincoln Steffens	<i>I Get a Colt to Break In</i>	1931
Aldous L. Huxley	<i>Music at Night</i>	1931
Helen Keller	<i>Three Days to See</i>	1933
James Thurber	<i>Wake Up and Live, Eh?</i>	1936
Lin Yutang	<i>The Importance of Loafing</i>	1937
Donald Culross Peattie	<i>Meridian</i>	1937
Dorothy Thompson	<i>America Faces Tomorrow's World</i>	1937
H. J. Muller	<i>How Has Man Been Made?</i>	1937
Clifton Fadiman	<i>She Did Not Know How to Be Famous</i>	1937
William Saroyan	<i>The Circus</i>	1938
Ruth McKenney	<i>A Loud Sneer for Our Feathered Friends</i>	1938
Pearl S. Buck	<i>America's Gunpowder Women</i>	1939
Alan Devoe	<i>The Mystery of Migration</i>	1938
John R. Tunis	<i>Who's Catching?</i>	1939
H. L. Mencken	<i>Introduction to the Universe</i>	1940
Lewis Mumford	<i>All Hands Save Ship!</i>	1940
Stuart Chase	<i>Great Dam</i>	1940
Walter Lippmann	<i>Education vs. Western Civilization</i>	1941
Archibald MacLeish	<i>Look to the Spirit within You</i>	1941
S. I. Hayakawa	<i>Words That Don't Inform</i>	1942

A WORD TO STUDENTS

THE FORTY-SIX essays which follow were chosen in order that in reading them you might share the pleasure which the authors had in writing them. The wide variety of interests represented in a room full of high school students has governed the selection. The authors are of seven different nationalities, and, though they represent a time span of more than twenty-three centuries, considerably more than half the essays were written during your lifetime.

Bring to this reading all your power to understand and to appreciate; your sense of the whimsical and the humorous, for there is plenty to laugh over; bring all your information and independence of judgment, for there are views expressed with which you may disagree and will want to thrash out in class discussion. Emerson says, "Tis the good reader that makes the good book," and it is only fair to an author to understand him before you differ with him. Whatever the class plan for the use of this book may be, get to the bottom of the message the author of an essay has written for you. Hard words are explained at the foot of the page, and it will help you to be certain that you have got the author's full message if after reading an essay, you will carry out the Appreciation Hints printed at the end of each selection.

As you read this book you will come on some essay which particularly appeals to you, and sets you off in search of more like it. The suggestions of further reading at the end of each essay will be helpful, and both you and the rest of the class will benefit from the report you may make about your explorations in more extensive reading. For this collection is only a sampling of a rich field of literature which contains some of the most interesting writing in our language. It is designed to be a gateway leading to a wider landscape and to a greater sensitivity to its beauties.

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FUN - IN SCHOOL AND OUT

BUSINESS and pleasure, work and play, drill and fun — these things won't stay separate. A boy came to class one day and repeated the names of all the islands in the West Indies beginning off the coast of Florida and going all the way to Trinidad. And when he was asked what on earth he had done that for, he said, "Just for fun." Many of the most successful people find their diversion and their work wrapped up in the same package.

The essays in this group illustrate in various ways that fun is where you find it. In the first essay, the sisters worked hard at their bird lore in order to spring that knavish trick on their instructor in nature study. Every one who can play a game well will feel the truth of "Who's Catching" because he knows that the fun we get from playing well is spread out over the hard work of training. Stephen Leacock gets fun out of his recollections of the little red schoolhouse, where urchins figured out problems with slate and pencil. To them the tasks at which A, B, and C pumped and dug and rowed were no laughing matter. And William Saroyan was thinking of his own schooldays when he tells us how Aram and Joey simply had to break out of the classroom and beat it for the circus. James Thurber gets his fun from the grown-up Joeys and Arams — the adult truants who want to make up for lost time overnight. James Thurber's sparkling satire at this education by magic makes excellent reading. Every trout-fisher knows that hard work may be fun, and Walton's scholar experienced both pain and pleasure when he went forth for his first day with the trouts.

These writers would find the boundary line between their work and their fun hard to draw; and that is true in school and out. Einstein must get great fun in finding the equation that satisfies, and so does the student when he has at last worked out the right answer to his problem. Perhaps this sense of satisfaction is part of the quest; at any rate fun is where you find it.

RUTH McKENNEY 1911-

IF WE can trust Ruth McKenney, there is plenty of adventure in modern life for the growing girl. She affirms that, with her inseparable sister, Eileen, she "spent a whole summer in a deserted monastery in Columbus, Ohio, fighting a brood of oversized and somewhat insane bats which flew round our beds making nasty whirring sounds." Indeed if we read much about the carryings on of these two girls, we get the impression that Ruth and her sister in their teens were tomboys so full of life that they *had* to find adventure, and unusual adventure, in life in order to be satisfied with it. So outrageous were some of their acts that the author tells us that *My Sister Eileen*, the book in which they are recorded, is "a considerably censored account of the awful things my sister Eileen and I lived through when we were growing up." And the reason it is censored is that "nobody would believe the very worst things that happened to Eileen and me during our tender years." One might think from the title that it was Eileen who was the ringleader, but they are usually partners in crime. Whatever they might have been at the time, these happenings become, in the telling, not tragedies, but comedies of youth, and like the play *My Sister Eileen* are full of fun and laughter.

All of us can think of some escapade or adventure of our early youth. Some of them cause us to smile as we recall them, others may even bring on our faces the semblance of a blush, but probably all of them have gained in vividness with the passing of the years. We may be sure that this is true of the escapades of the two McKenneys.

At fourteen Ruth McKenney held a night job as printer's devil in a Cleveland print shop. She worked her way, partly by reporting and waiting on table, through Ohio State University, gained wide recognition as a journalist in Ohio, and then, with her sister, migrated to New York. Ruth began to write for the *New York Post*, and later for *The New Yorker*. It was in this magazine that the stories collected in *My Sister Eileen* first appeared. Her volume entitled *Industrial Valley* reflects her experiences of a very different sort in Akron, Ohio.

Ruth McKenney really is Mrs. Richard Bransten. Her latest book is entitled *McKenneys Carry On*, published in 1940.

A Loud Sneer for Our Feathered Friends

FROM childhood, my sister and I have had a well-grounded dislike for our friends the birds. We came to hate them when she was ten and I was eleven. We had been exiled by what we considered an unfeeling family to one of those loathsome girls' camps where Indian lore is rife and the management puts up neatly lettered signs reminding the clients to be Good Sports. From the moment Eileen and I arrived at dismal old Camp Hi-Wah, we were Bad Sports, and we liked it.

We refused to get out of bed when the bugle blew in the morning, we fought against scrubbing our teeth in public to music, we sneered when the flag was ceremoniously lowered at sunset, we avoided doing a good deed a day, we complained loudly about the food, which was terrible, and we bought some chalk once and wrote all over the Recreation Cabin, "We hate Camp Hi-Wah." It made a wonderful scandal, although unfortunately we were immediately accused of the crime. All the other little campers *loved* dear old Camp Hi-Wah, which shows you what kind of people they were.

The first two weeks Eileen and I were at Camp Hi-Wah, we sat in our cabin grinding our teeth at our councilor and writing letters to distant relatives. These letters were, if I say so myself, real masterpieces of double dealing and heartless chicanery. In our childish and, we hoped, appealing scrawl, we explained to Great-Aunt Mary Farrel and Second Cousin Joe Murphy that we were having such fun at dear Camp Hi-Wah making Indian pocketbooks.

"We would simply L-O-V-E to make you a pocketbook, dear Aunt Mary," we wrote, "only the leather costs \$1 for a small pocketbook or \$1.67 for a large size pocketbook, which is much nicer because you can carry more things in it, and the rawhide you sew it up with, just exactly the way the Indians did, costs 40 cents more. We burn pictures on the leather but that doesn't cost anything. If we O-N-L-Y had \$1 or \$1.67 and 40 cents for the rawhide, we could make you the S-W-E-L-L-E-S-T pocketbook."

As soon as we had enough orders for Indian pocketbooks with pictures burnt on them, we planned to abscond with the funds sent by our trusting relatives and run away to New York City, where, as we used to explain dramatically to our cabin-mates, we intended to live a life of sin. After a few days, our exciting plans for our immediate future were bruited all over the camp, and admirers came from as far away as Cabin Minnehaha, which was way down at the end of Hiawatha Alley, just to hear us tell about New York and sin.

Fame had its price, however. One of the sweet little girls who lived in our cabin turned out to be such a Good Citizen ("Camp Hi-Wah Girls Learn to Be Good Citizens") that she told our dreadful secret to our councilor. Our mail was impounded for weeks, and worst of all, we actually had to make several Indian pocketbooks with pictures burnt on them. My pictures were all supposed to be snakes, although they were pretty blurred. Eileen specialized in what she believed to be the likeness of a werewolf, but Cousin Joe, who had generously ordered three pocketbooks, wrote a nice letter thanking Eileen for his pretty pocketbooks with the pretty pictures of Abraham Lincoln on them. We were terribly disgusted by the whole thing.

It was in this mood that we turned to birds. The handicraft hour at Camp Hi-Wah, heralded by the ten-thirty A.M. bugle, competed for popularity with the bird walks at the same hour. You could, as Eileen had already somewhat precociously learned how to say, name your own poison. After three weeks of burning pictures on leather, we were ready for anything, even our feathered friends.

So one hot morning in July, the two McKenney sisters, big and bad and fierce for their age, answered the bird-walk bugle call, leaving the Indian-pocketbook teacher to mourn her two most backward