

# THE IDES OF MARCH

A Report by Clifton Fadiman

“**A** FANTASIA on certain events and persons of the last days of the Roman republic,” is how Thornton Wilder describes his new book, *The Ides of March*. To many it will seem his finest work to date, even though it makes no attempt to echo the perfect simplicity of *Our Town* or the cunning narrative suspense of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. It seems to me to involve itself with knottier human mysteries than did either *The Bridge* or *Our Town*; and it solves unusual technical problems with breathtaking virtuosity. It is a beautiful and moving book.

The narrative deals with the eight months or so preceding the assassination of the Dictator Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. Wilder develops this narrative in what at first glance seems a somewhat complicated manner. The story is told largely in the form of letters and extracts from journals and diaries. There are quotations from broadsides, official memoranda, inscriptions, etc. Yet what seems at first to be an oblique and even confusing way of telling the story turns out, if the reader pays close attention, to be most effective indeed, for it enables us to peer directly into the minds of a dozen complex characters.

The center of the book is, of course, Julius Caesar. Mr. Wilder's portrait of him will more than bear comparison with Shaw's. The problem is the portrayal of greatness; and to my mind Wilder's Cae-

sar is more convincingly great than is Shaw's. We are given a rounded portrait of a man designed by nature for statesmanship on a large scale. The reader will easily understand that it is not Mr. Wilder's aim to write an historical novel, but rather to examine in a dramatic manner the inner essence of dictatorship. *The Ides of March* thus becomes sadly relevant to our own Caesarian times.

This Caesar is a mystery to the other characters. The beautiful and fatal Clodia



“Last year the Queen of Egypt began requesting permission to pay a visit to Rome. She was a remarkable girl. . . . She will have become a still more remarkable woman. Conversation will be a pleasure again. Oh, oh, oh, I have sat holding that catlike bundle on my lap, drumming my fingers on ten brown toes. . . . And yet she is lying, intriguing, intemperate, indifferent to the essential well-being of her people, and a light-hearted murderess.”



*"... we surprised Cleopatra struggling and protesting in the embrace of a very drunken and ardent Marc Antony. There is no doubt that she was protesting, but there are degrees of protest and one could gather that this protest had been continuing for some time in a situation where escape was not difficult..."*

Pulcher, who had loved him and perhaps still does, cries: "Why do you live? Why do you work? Why do you smile?" The point is that Caesar is no Hitler, no Stalin: he is a grown man, grown far beyond any interest in mere power. What he would like to be, perhaps, is Plato's ideal philosopher-king; but he is unable to give himself philosophically satisfying answers to the deepest riddles of life. He feels, as he wrestles with the unknowable, that others have certain clues he does not pos-

sess. Catullus, the great poet seems to Caesar to possess a wisdom that even the great Dictator lacks, a wisdom given Catullus through his frenzied absorption in love and poetry. Caesar sees in Catullus what he lacks.

Caesar and Catullus are the two poles of the story, but the minor characters are hardly less interesting: the aristocratic, cruel, perverse Clodia, who breaks Catullus' heart in the course of her general revenge on men; Cleopatra, a mixture of innocence and shrewdness, a natural genius who, as Caesar notes, does not know what to do with her great gifts; Caesar's friend, Lucius Mamilus Turrinus (surely a complete invention?), whom we never see, but whose character we get to know intimately as we read the journal Caesar addresses to him; Cicero, a little pompous, more than a little academic, yet a fascinatingly complex mind; Caesar's wife, Pompeia, oppressed by the necessity Caesar lays on her to be great beyond her nature; the statue-like Brutus; the straightforward, conventionally "Roman" Asinius Pollio; Marc Antony, the perfect Yale undergraduate; the wise actress-courtesan, Cytheris; and dozens of other characters, each illuminating some aspect of the troubled, extravagant, tense society of the time, yet none remote from us, none a "historical personage."

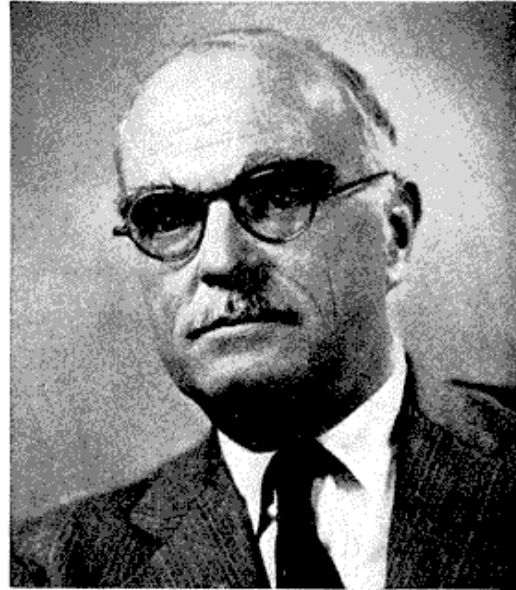
In other words, this is a book by an educated human being, sensitive to the weight and import of two thousand years of European tradition, unwilling to throw it aside in a fit of barbaric egoism, anxious to incorporate it into his work. To my mind *The Ides of March* is one of the most truly civilized novels by an American I have read in some years.

# THORNTON NIVEN WILDER

By Rosemary C. Benét

A LONG time ago, my husband and I were talking about what makes a good prose style and how one can go about acquiring one. "I never knew but one man who was born with a fine prose style," he said, "all set like Minerva out of the head of Java, and he was a friend of mine at Yale, Thornton Wilder." This was 1921, and I had heard a good deal about remarkable Yale men. "I never heard of him," I said. "Well, you will," said Steve firmly . . . and how right he was!

We saw Thornton shortly after that. It is a pleasure to set down in a too-changing world that he has changed very little since that moment. It is a nice combination, for though his work has matured with the years, increased in depth, wisdom and skill, he himself has stayed much the same. He was young-looking, dark-haired and had a clipped mustache then; he was alert, quick moving, interested in everything, and possessed of a tremendous zest for life—and he still is. I suppose Thornton is the perfect example, to go into the current psychological terms, of an integrated extrovert and introvert. The scholar in the ivory tower, on the one hand, a scholar with a definite philosophy; and an active, urbane, gregarious gentleman on the other, who likes to dine out, is fond of travel, is interested in people, and keeps his enthusiasm for life. I remember once in a group, a general discussion boiled up about whether or not we would live our lives over again if we had to do so without any change of pattern. Some of us were a little lukewarm at the idea, but Thornton spoke up in a way I never forgot and said categorically, "Life in itself is a gift."



Thornton Wilder not only writes in well-rounded periods, he speaks in them, too. This, I have been told, is a direct inheritance from his father, Amos Parker Wilder, who was American Consul General in China for eight years, and later secretary to Yale in China. His father had an impressive manner and great fluency that made one irreverent undergraduate say that whenever Mr. Wilder greeted him on the street he felt like a gathering of five hundred Chinese. The Wilders are a devoted family, a congenial, close-knit group. There are five children, Amos, the eldest, who is a Congregational minister and teacher of theology, has written several books, then Thornton, Charlotte, a poet, Isabel, also a novelist, and Janet, a scientist. Four of them write and two of them are in *Who's Who*, which is certainly higher than the usual average for the Mendelian law of inheritance of ability.

Thornton was born one of identical twins, April 17, 1897, in Madison, Wis-

consin. He thereby refutes the theory that no famous man has ever been a twin. Though Parker, his twin brother, did not survive, his shadow may be seen in the sensitive study of the twin relationship in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. Thornton was a delicate child at first, "had to be fed lime for a year and be carried on a pillow," but he is hale and hearty at fifty. His father was editor of the *Wisconsin State Journal*, but in 1906, when Thornton was nine, the family moved to China where his father was consul general in Hong Kong for three years, and at Shanghai for five years. Thornton attended schools at Chefoo, China, and later in Berkeley, California, and at the Thacher School in Ojai. He was a student at Oberlin from 1915 to 1917, served as a corporal in the Coast Artillery in 1918, and received his A.B. from Yale in 1920. He did graduate work at the American Academy at Rome in 1920 and 1921, and took a Master's degree from Princeton in 1925.

About this period began his other career which runs parallel with writing. T.N.W. is an excellent teacher. He likes to teach and does so with conviction and fire. He was an instructor at Lawrenceville for seven years, teaching French "because it left him free to wander where he wished in the paths of English literature." Subsequently he taught for six terms at the University of Chicago, this time in the field of comparative literature. His deep interest in the French language may partly account for his meticulous sense of form, his lucid, clear style. It is interesting that both he and that other great stylist, Willa Cather, had this French background.

His first great success came with *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* in 1927, though *The Cabala*, with its picture of a group of sophisticates in Rome, had already caused comment when it came out in 1925. Both books were marked by erudi-

tion, and once brought forth the gibe that his universe "was a museum not a world." That comment was proved completely untrue when he wrote *Our Town*, with its simplicity, its warm, universal, human appeal to heart as well as mind.

Writing comes first, but he is an example of the well-rounded man. He is musical, plays the piano, has done some composing. He has taken an active part in two wars. This last time, as a Major in the Air Corps, he did notable work in Tunisia, Algeria and Italy. He likes to travel, has lived in France and Italy, in Hawaii and China. He sketches well enough to illustrate his letters in lively fashion. He is popular with hostesses as an extra man at dinners. (His picture came out in *Life*, showing him in white tie and tails at some great gathering). He has made a name for himself teaching. He can and does interpret the work of both James Joyce and Gertrude Stein admirably for his friends. His excellent introduction lately to *Four in America* is an example of this feat of scholarship. He is good company, can talk to all ages, likes children though he is a bachelor, is interested in practically everything. He used to keep voluminous notebooks full of accurate details for future use—and probably still does.

If in *The Ides of March* he takes liberties with history, we can be sure he knows just what he is doing—what he is putting in and what he is leaving out and where he is inventing. There is a sound background of scholarship here, and two years of his life were spent in southern and central Italy, one studying archaeology; the other just lately in the war. He says, "This is my second novel about Rome and I certainly would love to do one about that city in the Renaissance, too!"

It is hard to do Thornton Wilder justice in this short space. After all, he took a whole novel to do Julius Caesar!