An International Literary Quarterly

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Anatomy of Excellence

O.U.'s Secret Pride
Books Abroad:

O.U.'s Secret Pride

a literary quarterly that is world-renowned is virtually unknown in its own home town

If you were to visit the basement offices of O.U.'s *Books Abroad*, you would probably be greeted enthusiastically by the dynamic new editor, Dr. Robert Vlach, who would offer you a chair, a piece of candy and an impassioned lecture on his favorite topic—the prophet-in-its-own-country status of his publication. To illustrate his point he would first suggest that you imagine—just for a moment—that you are back in college taking another quiz. As usual you aren't quite prepared—but then it's multiple choice, so you tackle the first question:

*Books Abroad* is

1. A student organization sending used textbooks to underdeveloped countries.
4. An American literary quarterly concerned primarily with comments on current foreign books.

Now if you were to answer as most of those whom Dr. Vlach has quizzed, the "used textbooks" idea would sound logical and you would check No. 1. But you'd be wrong, since the second question reads:

This international literary quarterly has been published since 1927 by

1. Yale University.
2. Trinity College.
3. O.S.U.
4. O.U.

There should be no doubt on this one. Your alma mater isn't likely to call your attention to a review published by O.S.U. or any other school—so it has to be No. 4 again—by O.U.

But hold on a second. If this were true, you—who spent some years in Norman—would have noticed such a review. It has been published by the University of Oklahoma for 35 years and is considered—quite rightly—to be one of the greatest items of pride within the University. And yet you probably have never seen or even heard of it.

When Dr. Vlach first came to O.U. three years ago, he gave his imaginary quiz to anyone on campus who would give him the time and when the "used textbooks program" was the most commonly held misconception, he was puzzled.

"I had met *Books Abroad* long before I was completely certain whether Okla-

Dr. Robert Vlach, editor of *Books Abroad* and associate professor of modern languages, joined the O.U. faculty in 1959. A native of Czechoslovakia, Dr. Vlach speaks eight languages. He holds a bachelor's degree, 1936, from Classical College, Prague, Czechoslovakia, and a doctorate, 1947, from the University of Prague. He has taught Czechoslovakian, Polish, Russian and French languages in Europe and came to O.U. from Bennett College, Greensboro, North Carolina, where he taught Russian, German and French. While living in Hamburg, Germany, Dr. Vlach was the editor of a literary paper, *The Harvest*, and he has been a correspondent for the largest publishing house in Czechoslovakia.
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December, 1961
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derstanding was almost all that Dr . House
had to go on 35 years ago when he launched
Books Abroad, a project which was to bring
both prestige to the University and inter-
national prominence to himself. Dr . House,
now editor emeritus of Books Abroad and
David Ross Boyd professor emeritus of
modern languages, had been at O.U. for
16 years when he finally persuaded his de-
partment to undertake the publishing ven-
ture.

Such a publication had been talked
about for a long time," he recalls,"but
nothing had been done about it. American
book reviews rarely paid any attention to
foreign publications, although there were
millions of people in this country who
spoke or read German, Spanish, Italian and
other languages .

It occurred to a group of us amateurs—
all school teachers, not even journalists—
that we might fill a need, in a small way,
with this publication. We made many mis-
takes, and we were amateurish for a num-
ber of years .

The first edition, a 32-page review and
bibliography of recent foreign publications,
was published in January, 1927, on ordinary
bulletin paper, and distributed without
charge. Dr. House and his colleagues had
sent letters to 200 publishers in 24 coun-
tries asking for books to review.

"We held our breath, but soon books
were arriving in a steady stream," Dr .
House remembers. "Spain was very enthu-
siastic. I'll never forget the day on ship-
ment arrived from a Spanish publisher. It
was addressed to my home, and the mail-
man was the picture of disgust as he had to
haul in a huge sack crammed with heavy
volumes ."

Soon Books Abroad was drawing a more
impressive response for its pioneering ef-
fort in the field of contemporary world
letters. One of the most memorable days
in Dr. House's life was the day when
recognition came from France—a country
which likes to consider the cultural sphere
her own privilege and monopoly. The rec-
ognition came in the form of the most
coveted French decoration, the Legion of
Honor. The Belgium government also deco-
rated the Oklahoma professor and later
House was nominated for the Nobel Prize. 

Today, 12 years after his retirement from
the faculty, Dr. House at 83 still maintains
an active interest in the publication he
-founded. Mrs. Bernice Duncan, now Dr.
Vlach's associate editor, first worked for the
quarterly under Dr. House, whom she re-
calls as "a gentleman of the old school, cour-
teous and scholarly, who encouraged me in
a sensitivity toward language and style ."

Dr. Ernst Erich Noth followed Dr. House
to the editorship in 1950 with Dr. Bernard
Fleischmann occupying the position from
1959 to 1961 .

All of the editors of Book Abroad have
been travelers—as much as limited budgets
and a few private grants have allowed. In
1952 the Rockefeller Foundation thought
enough of Books Abroad's Silver Anniver-
sary to finance Dr. Noth's trip to 12 Euro-
pean countries to commission writers and
critics to do survey articles on the situation
evolution of the world's literatures dur-
ing the past 25 years. Dr. Fleischmann made
a similar tour in 1960, and Dr. Vlach has
already visited Mexico to encourage the
writers and critics of that country to be-
come a part of the quarterly's far-flung con-
tributing staff.

Leading Mexican newspapers regarded
his visit as a sign of increasing interest in
Mexican culture by the United States. "In
the face of Russian and especially Cuban at-
ttempts to win sympathies of not only well-
established but promising young authors,"
O.U.'s Secret Pride

continued

Vlach says, "Mexican writers appreciate every sincere gesture from the United States."

Dr. Vlach is an ambitious man with great plans for the expansion of Books Abroad's influence throughout the world and here at home as well. His campaign to bring this world-renowned publication into local prominence has become a one-man crusade.

"I have come to the conclusion that if Books Abroad is an item of pride of this university, as stated in my contract, it is an absolutely secret pride," Dr. Vlach says. "As the new editor, I asked if I was bound to this secrecy too, and to my astonishment got the answer that I was not—so I intend to make the great revelation of a 35-year-old secret."

And if Dr. Vlach succeeds in his efforts to increase literary awareness at home, he should also be able to present to his readers a wider range of international literary news.

"I intend to place the same emphasis on Slavic languages that is presently given by Books Abroad to Spanish, Italian, French and German," he explains. "There are many Slavic writers presently in exile who must be given attention. Dr. Bernard Fleischmann, my predecessor, took the first great steps in pointing the way for such writers by contacting scholars interested in Slavic literature. I have only to develop this. It's the business of Books Abroad to promote international friendship through literature, so why limit its appeal? There are so many written languages it's actually necessary to have a reviewer in every country.

"More Americans are interested now in foreign peoples and more foreign countries want to make themselves known to America. It's the perfect time to disseminate information around the globe."

Books from Sooner Authors

THE OSAGES: Children of the Middle Waters
By John Joseph Mathews (University of Oklahoma Press)

Don't expect to read The Osages in a single evening. This massive 826-page volume is the result of 30 years of painstaking research and few of the historic details have been omitted. Author Mathews, '20ba, himself an Osage, has recorded the oral history of his people from the days before the white man's invasion to the present. Much of his success in gathering the needed information can be traced to his own Indian heritage and to the eagerness of the Osage people to preserve their history. In addition to endless conversations with the old men of the tribe, the 65-year-old Mathews spent many research hours in the Phillips Collection at O.U.'s Bizzell Memorial Library pouring over everything that had already been written on his subject. Mathews' style is informal, his devotion to his task evident in every word and his book an epic contribution to the heritage of his people.

—CJR

TWILIGHT OF HONOR
By Al Dewlen (McGraw-Hill)

This fast-paced novel of courtroom drama and the morals of the newly-rich in the Texas Panhandle was given a regal sendoff for its public debut in December. The 328-page book had a McGraw-Hill fiction award of $10,000 and the honor of being a Book-of-the-Month Club selection as references. Dewlen, who studied professional writing at O.U. during the early 1950's, has woven a tense story around the grisly motel murder of Jess Hutcherson, an epic-type figure of modern High Plains history—a highly individualistic, eccentric and wealthy oilman. The court-appointed lawyer for the accused murderer takes it upon himself to see that his client isn't railroaded to the electric chair. The lawyer searches for justice in the clouds of a community vendetta and also has a battle royal with the concepts of justice and personal morality. The solution to the conflict is truly shocking. Dewlen is completely at home in writing this story—a hold-over from his days as a court reporter. A resident of Amarillo, he knows the Panhandle people well and portrays them vividly. Based vaguely on the details of an actual crime which outraged the Texas Panhandle, the book does have some similarities to the best-seller Anatomy of a Murder but is by no means an imitation.

—HM

PONY TRACKS
By Frederic Remington
Edited by J. Frank Dobie (University of Oklahoma Press)

This little volume, which first appeared in 1895, contains 15 sketches of life in the frontier cavalry and infantry from the days following the Civil War to the turn of the century. The profuse illustrations by author-artist Remington add to highly readable accounts of scouting parties and Indian skirmishes along the western frontier. In the accounts there is an underlying respect and admiration for the hard, wiry men who lived in Remington's West, for their humor, for their resignation to the fact that life held little more comfort than a good smoke, and that it might be snuffed out in an instant. One can almost hear the creak of the army saddle on the cow pony, feel the chill freezing on the greatcoat and taste the coffee, "black as evil," as the camp breaks up in the morning. The moving journalistic style gives the tales the immediacy of today's newspaper, and a realistic glimpse at the "pony tracks" and more important, the men who made them.

—RDC

Next in the Sooner

In the coming issue, the Sooner Magazine will bring you an article written especially for alumni magazines by the world's best-known historian, Dr. Arnold Toynbee, on the question of America's neglect of its creative minority. The issue will also feature another in the "Anatomy of Excellence" series, spotlighting the O.U. Reasearch Institute. The story of the University's on-the-job training program for prospective teachers will round out the main articles, with the regular features — Conversation Piece, Cobean, and Roll Call.