Atop Parnassus

John McClure Spreads Soonerland’s Fame With Lyric Pen

By George Milburn, ’30

John McClure is a name that is juggled with precision in New Orleans. Literate Orleanians, most of whom are congregated in that little section of the city known to sailors as Frenchtown and to Iowaians tourists experimenting with high school French as “Vieux Carré,” literate Orleanians read John McClure’s Sunday book page “Literature and Less” more devoutly than most folk read Sunday school quarterlies.

And when the conversation slips among the vellities and carefully caught regrets of French Quarter studios, the eventual question is, “Well, what does Jack McClure say about it?” or “Did you read what John McClure wrote about it last Sunday?” Because he is so often present in name and so seldom present in flesh, one is likely to have a feeling that John McClure is something approaching omnipotence.

The word “Oklahoma” carries with it connotations which do not attach themselves to the name of any other state in the midlands. That is why, when “Oklahoma” is included in an introduction, one grows to anticipate the query, tinctured with polite surprise, “Oh, so you’re from Oklahoma?” In New Orleans this question is treaded by, “Do you know John McClure?”

One night the man with whom I had been having dinner leaned back in his chair and said, “Tonight we’ll stay up and visit John McClure.”

All night he sits at the horse-shoe table on the fourth floor of the Times-Picayune building editing copy. Between 2 and 3 o’clock in the morning there is a lull in the news of the world. That is the time when secretaries of state are patting out uneasy pillows, when the Chinese armies are calling it a day and the Chicago gangsters are calling it a night. That is the time when John McClure has a brief spell for drinking a cup of coffee and for conversation with his friends.

That first night we talked of hunches and of Paris before the war and of Cabell and the archaic style and of esthetic credos and of the modern novelist’s obsession with freakish characters and of a fellow-copyreader’s recent success and very little about John McClure.

That night, over the thick cups of an all-night lunchroom he told us of his long search for an old book on esthetics and he said he had found in it one sentence which was the epitome of that science: “He has made of virtue a lovely form.”
of a troubadour nigger named Phillip
who sang and played the bass viol at the
Red Dot, of James Stephens and the
stories in his book "Etched in Moon-
light," then wet from the press, and of
Burton Rascoe's articles in the Nation
on Oklahoma and of hobo technique.
He told us which foot to land on in
jumping off a moving train. He told us
how to avoid detection in the
"blinds."

OK, if John McClure is an au-
thority on esthetics, he does
not fit at all the present con-
ception of an esthete. He has
seen places and he has seen things
and he has gone and has seen in the
most interesting of all ways. He is a
charter member of "Quo Vadis," the
first hobo fraternity on the University
of Oklahoma campus—an order which
has long since undergone a most ridic-
ulous metamorphosis. It is now a stu-
dent travel organization with printed
letterheads and an address on the mail-
ing lists of Cook's tours and the Santa
Fe general passenger agent.

When McClure was a University of
Oklahoma sophomore in 1913 he went
to Europe with another student, Henty
McCullough of Arapaho. The two
tramped in the Harz mountains in
central Germany and down the valley
of the Rhine. They went to Paris,
where they lived for a year on the
Left bank.

He returned to the University
of Oklahoma in 1914, before the
outbreak of the European War.
In 1915 he was graduated with a
B.A. degree.

In 1915, also, his first book, a
collection of verse, "Airs and Bal-
lads," was published by a house
that was then the youngest and
luest of all American publishers,
Alfred A. Knopf. The slip-cover
on this cool, thin volume, now
more than rare, bears the
stark biography of the author. It
includes a touching notation, how-
ever, and that is that he had
at that time hoboed several thou-
sand miles on freight trains
through the southwest.

"Airs and Ballads" is composed
of sixty poems, most of which had
been printed in current magazines.
The bulk of them had been ac-
cepted by Mencken and Nathan's
old Smart Set. McClure never
loses an opportunity to express his
gratitude to those twin literary
swashbucklers. Some of the poems
had been printed in Harriet Mon-
roe's Poetry: A Magazine of Verse;
in Alfred Kreymborg's Others and in
the University of Oklahoma Magazine.

HILE the verse of "Airs and
Ballads" is meticulously fin-
ished, the naïve note in it is
always predominant. All around
him poets were striking out with a
hysterical unrestraint, rebelling against
the precise Elizabethan manner. But
John McClure isolated himself, cling-
ing to Paul Verlaine and the symbol-
ism of a generation before. There are
Celtic cadences in "Airs and Ballads"
due, very possibly, to his introduction
to William Butler Yeats early in his
university training. He credits Miss
Adelaide Loomis, one of his first Eng-
lish instructors, with this.

From the first shy "Apology" in the
collection to the last intensely human
poem, "Lass of Galilee," a narrative
which interprets Jesus more satisfac-
torily than have twenty centuries of
theological dissertations, John Mc-
Clure is an aristocrat turned joker.
He is always patient in his word
choice; his impulses are never un-
reined. He is a Villon for whom cir-
cumstances never combined to turn
rascal.

John McClure is one poet in whom
you will not be disappointed, meeting
him after reading his verse. There is
something about him so reminiscent
of the Irishman, James Stephens, that
one who has seen the two men is al-
most sure to remark it. It is the way
a curly forelock falls, or the way a
smile twists, or something like that.
His is the face of a sensitive Celt, and
he immediately puts you in the
mind of his own poem, "The Celts."

"We are the grey dreamers
With nets of moonlight
That always go a-hunting
About the fall o' night,
That softly go a-hunting
In quest of strange birds
With a thin net of moonlight,
A grey net of words,
That steal through dim forests
By dark Lethe-streams
With pale smears of moonshine
And grey bait of dreams
Until we catch the price catch
The queer bird we get,
The dreamy, fluttering soul o' the
world
Caught in a sliver net."

While he was a student in the un-
iversity, before the publication of his
"Airs and Ballads," McClure had ed-
ted for Knopf a book of convivial
verse, which he called, "The Stag's
Hornbook." This book is still in print
in the Knopf pocket series, and it re-
nains the standard anthology for po-
ems and songs of that type.

After he was graduated in 1915
he stayed at the university, where
he worked as a librarian for a
year. Grace Bimford Smith, whom
he married in 1918, was employed
as a cataloguer in the university
library at that time. He became an
instructor in English a year after
his graduation. America declared
war and he went into the army.
His battery in the 54th field artil-
ery, did not go overseas.

He was discharged from the ar-
my in 1919, when he accepted a
position as associate editor on the
quondam Southerner Magazine.
The Southerner suspended publi-
cation within a short time, and in
the fall of the year he and Mrs.
McClure took over Allison's old
book shop in New Orleans at 509
Royal street.

If you have been disappointed
in the "antiquarian" book shops of
Chicago, or in so-called old
book shops in other modern cities,
go to Allison's when you are in
New Orleans. It was still open
for business last summer. The
building in which it is located is a
four-story one, built about 1790, and
probably is the oldest "skyscraper"
(Turn to page 101, please)
Atop Parnassus
(Continued from page 79)

standing in the United States.

John McClure's friends in New Or-
leans say that he trusted everybody
and that he was not a successful book-
dealer.

He was made an associate editor of
the late lamented Double Dealer Mag-
azine in 1921, and later became man-
aging editor.

Within a short time the Double
Dealer became known everywhere for
its discerning editorial policy. New
writers were discovered monthly, and
many celebrities then unknown made
their first appearances in print in the
Double Dealer. News letters from Chi-
cago (then being hailed as the literary
capital of America by H. L. Mencken)
and from Paris were printed as regu-
lar departments. The best fugitive
verse and fiction found haven in the
magazine. Soon the Roman medallion
of the double-faced god, Janus, became
a familiar adjunct to the literary tables
of readers who were taking experi-
mental tastes in the new spirit.

But that half-decade was the lull
before book-of-the-month clubs and
no adroit business manager had ever
had that revelation leading to the
printing of colored cigarette advertise-
ments on the back page of a literary
magazine. The Double Dealer never
chose to compromise its editorial poli-
cy and its last issue appeared in 1926.

Meantime John McClure had been
holding another position, as well as
that of managing editor of the maga-
zine. Since 1921 he had been doing the
regular shift as copyreader on the
Times-Picayune desk, where he is em-
ployed at present. For the last four
years he has edited the book page for
that newspaper, the largest in the
south. In that time he has established
an enviable reputation for his critical
judgment.

McClure's verse appears from time
to time in the more intelligently edited
magazines of this country, and readers
of the American Mercury are familiar
with his dialogues on esthetics, printed
occasionally in that magazine.

For these dialogues, McClure has
created two characters, Scamander and
Polycrates. Of these Scamander is the
"feeder" or "yes man" and Polycrates
is the one who takes the thesis
produced by his friend, examines it,
dissects it, and finally states his opin-
ion. Through such an arrangement
McClure gains an unusually clear per-
spective, and he deftly avoids didactics
and the dogmatism associated with it.

It is not likely that there is a busier
man in New Orleans than John Mc-
Clure. He says that he has almost no
time for writing now. For the past four
years he has been assembling notes on
books which "may or may not be writ-
ten."

While he is not a man likely to make
such a statement, one may readily in-
fer that he has had a certain definite
understanding with himself about lit-
ery prostitution, and that he prefers
to grind at a newspaper copy desk,
rather than to write hack work and
imperil his sincerity.

McClure tells of a casual organiza-
tion which was on the campus when
he was a student at the university. It
was called "The Grub Street club," and
out of it have come at least three well-
known American writers. Among its
members were Marie Mauk, Mena Lee,
Ebert Boylan, Paul Eldridge, and Wal-
ter Campbell. That was before the time
of Lynn Riggs.

He took little part in collegiate so-
cial activities. When he admits to be-
ing a member of Phi Beta Kappa, he
always qualifies the admission with some statement about having taken
"pipe" language courses. He was also
a member of the journalists' fraterni-
ty, Sigma Delta Chi.

One is more likely to associate John
McClure with the medieval university
than with the rigidly systematized in-
sitution it has now become. He seems
a man for the quiet life. It would be a
gaucherie to put his volume of verse
on the shelf alongside "Slabs of the
Sunburnt West." In the French Quar-
ter of New Orleans he has found his
spiritual home.

Have You
A Friend--
in Norman whose college days
you would like to preserve
with a creditable photograph?
—Or perhaps you have often
wished for a picture of your
fraternity, sorority, or school
home to hang on your wall.

It costs very little to pre-
serve these fond memories.
Just inform Wilson Studio of
your particular desire—that's
all!

Wilson Studio
Norman
Photographer