

Books of the Times

By JOHN CHAMBERLAIN

"THE Collected Lyrics of Edna St. Vincent Millay."

Say it ain't true, Joe, say it ain't true.

For the title's an epitaph for Only Yesterday.

Edna was the Twenties.

But the Twenties these days are selling at a discount
In the cut-rate shops of the intellect.

Oh, yes, there was Harding and the Ohio gang.

(Today the worst thing you can say about a Presidential candidate is to call him, patronizingly, an Honest Harding.)

And there was Silent Cal, the voiceless sage of Ascutney.
Who sat and sat and was agin sin,

The prexy who solved his problems by never reading those who criticized him.
A cheese-paring Puritan in Babylon.

And there was Nervous Nellie Kellogg, who thought to abolish war by a sweep of the fountain pen.

And the Greatest Secretary of the Treasury Since Alexander Hamilton, the financier who got ready for the decade of deficit finance by handing it back to the rich for their greens fees.

Of course there was Babe Ruth, who whammed them out of the lot, while Gene Tunney proved himself superior to the bleachers by quoting Shakespeare.

And after the Wonderful Nonsense had compounded itself overnight like General Motors,

After the euphoria of the marathon dancers and the proud imbecility of the flagpole sitters had worked their way into the deathless prose of the cub reporter,

After the scornful counterpoint of the expatriates saying Good-bye Wisconsin had blown in on the east wind from Paris,

And Gertie Stein, the Mama of Dada, had become immortal by saying ga-ga.

After the Stock Market had blown its top

And the apple sellers had gone into the streets.

There was the Great Engineer.

But was all this the Twenties?

Sitting here, reading Edna Millay, I presume to doubt it.

The Blue-Flag in the Bog did not draw sustenance from the rancid cliché-earth of history as she is writ.

No song of a Second April came out of a satirist's idea of Spring.

The note of innocence going back and forth all night on the ferry did not come out of a prime preoccupation with Jersey lightning.

Statistically speaking, you historian, just how many small-town Ohio boys cashed in on the schemes of Harry Daugherty?

How many voters ratifying the decision made in a smoke-filled room can be blamed for lacking the glandular reactions of Cassandra?

Is a Sense of History, with capital letters, com-

patible with normal appetites and a blood pressure of one hundred plus your age?

How many Americans were flagpole sitters, dance marathoners, gamblers on margin looking for a sure thing?

Sure, there was Tom Thumb golf and the Florida boom.

But there was also Babbitt discovering himself in the last pages of a hopeful satire that had more thoughtful direction than the otherwise estimable works of John Marguand.

There was bath-tub gin, the end of an experiment noble in motive.

But, statistically reckoned, how many Nineteen Twenty souses are sitting in the hospital with incurable troubles of the innards?

The census-takers tell us that the American population is some one hundred and thirty-five million, some of whom have pellagra, hookworm and the general debility of Hidden Hunger.

But not many of them are suffering from cirrhosis of the liver.

It is not that I would commend a world that raced toward war, a world that killed the poor shoemaker and the poor fishmonger preparatory to killing millions of kulaks, Jews, Poles, Chinese and Spanish Republicans.

The Twenties, with the help of the Teens, the Tens, the Nineties, the Eighties and the Seventies, indubitably matured the holocaust.

Nervous Nellie Kellogg could not hope to strangle what had already been born at Kittyhawk and mustered into the Castle Order and the Sons of the Wolf before it had become of age.

But, reading Edna Millay, I am moved to reflect that no history can be truthfully written in terms of cliché.

Edna knew that young lovers do not depend on the headlines.

The Shropshire lad (or his sister) sighs in any age or climate.

And as for Justice Denied in Massachusetts, the poet knew that the results could not be good.

Surprising, in retrospect, how grave the voice of the girl of Renaissance who wanted to touch all living things!

Sure, the Twenties were terrible, the Twenties were cock-eyed, slam-bang, loco-weed crazy and cuckoo.

But a new-born creditor nation does not become creditor-minded overnight.

In Dakota one sees the effects of ignoring the Dobrudja and the Banat only in the result. The Twenties were bad, but the critic's implied arrogance about the Forties can lead to even bigger mistakes.

The only safety is to be humble, and quick in the head and light on the feet.

Meanwhile I want to sing the Twenties as the Little Golden Day,

Thoreau and Emerson were dead, but there were Cather and Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood Anderson and Robert Frost mending his tumble-down wall.

Above all there was Edna Millay.

Trade note, or talking cold turkey to the customers: Edna's Collected Lyrics are enough cause for thanks this new Thanksgiving Day.

*COLLECTED LYRICS. By Edna St. Vincent Millay. 383 pages. Harper. \$5.



Edna St. Vincent Millay