

Even the Far Ends of the Earth and Sea Were Familiar

SIR HUBERT WILKINS: His World of Adventure. By Lowell Thomas. Illustrated. 296 pp. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company. \$5.95.

By EVELYN STEFANSSON

THE quiet Australian, Sir Hubert Wilkins, during an incredibly active life of seventy years, explored the ends of our earth, not only on land, in air and on sea, but beneath the sea as well. Save for the greatest of all explorers, the Norwegian Fridtjof Nansen, whose birth centenary we celebrate this year, Wilkins' list of "firsts" is probably the longest of any man in the last hundred years of polar history. He was an extraordinary man and a true pioneer. Yet during his lifetime, except for his fellow explorers, and a relatively small number of colleagues, friends and admirers, his genius was seldom fully recognized, and was sometimes misunderstood.

George Hubert Wilkins was the thirteenth child of the first white man born in South Australia. He grew up in the wild bush on an isolated station surrounded by sheep, cattle, horses, kangaroos, wallabies and dingos. With superb self-confidence and sharp curiosity, he made good friends of his only neighbors, the Australian aborigines, from whom, even as a child, he had the wit to learn. He came to respect and admire their intellect, skill and morals, and the lessons they taught served him well later with the Eskimos.

Few men brought so dazzling an array of talents to a life of exploration. Wilkins acquired competence in many fields and supremacy in several. His career was a long one, spanning time from the dog sledge to the snow cat, from open-cockpit, two-seater planes to jets, from battery-powered to nuclear subma-

rines, and throughout it the word pioneer recurs to us repeatedly, in many forms, like a fugue theme. In addition to being a flyer and photographer, he was also a naturalist, meteorologist, engineer, navigator, newspaper correspondent, lecturer, teacher, hunter, polar traveler and writer—albeit he was always more interested in the activity of the next exciting assignment than writing up the last. He was musical, and possessed a rare sense of humor; but surely his most important trait was an unshakable serenity, which enabled him to act instantly and wisely in his innumerable encounters with death.

At 20 Wilkins left home to become a motion-picture newsreel photographer for Gaumont. He took the first movies ever shot from an airplane and was the first man to photograph unfaked

moving pictures of battle, in the Balkan War of 1912. As a war correspondent he had a series of terrifying and hilarious adventures straight out of the Arabian Nights. He learned to pilot a plane. In London he met Sir Ernest Shackleton, offered his services as an expedition member and dreamed of fulfilling a boyhood wish of going to the Antarctic. Months later, having given up hope of joining the distinguished British explorer's group, he received a cable (while he was on an assignment in Barbados) offering him a berth on an Antarctic expedition. Overjoyed, he instantly cabled an acceptance. Only much later, when he reread the original cable, did he discover that it read Arctic, not Antarctic, expedition. That was how he found himself in 1913 going, not south with Shackle-

ton, but north with Vilhjalmur Stefansson and the Canadian Arctic Expedition.

To the amusement of both crew and scientific staff, the tenderfoot Wilkins joined the expedition clad in striped trousers, spats and a topper. But he quickly earned their respect and proved a responsible, adaptable traveler and leader. He became a disciple of Stefansson's living-off-the-country technique of Arctic travel and learned Eskimo ways of dressing and living that provided mobility and comfort in a difficult environment. While talking with Stefansson as they sledged over the moving ice pack of the Polar Sea, he developed his own and adapted his leader's philosophy of exploration into a pattern that influenced both men and produced a friendship which ended only with death.

Wilkins left the Canadian expedition to join his fellow Australians in World War I and was many times wounded and decorated for bravery under fire. After the war he made the first plane landings on the drifting Arctic Sea ice. The techniques he learned from Stefansson enabled him to walk back from a forced landing far to the north of northernmost Alaska and to save his companion, Ben Eielson, with whom he made many famous flights. In 1931 with a surplus U. S. Navy submarine which he purchased for one dollar (and spent hundreds of thousands refitting), he made the first bold attempt to explore the Polar Sea from a submarine, going beneath the polar ice for the first time. The drama and beauty of that act is one of the most thrilling in polar annals and its description in this book is equally so.

Wilkins continued exploring and accumulating firsts. He made the first inland flights in the Antarctic, discovering new lands. He achieved this dream of going south with Shackleton, but the expedition was cut short by the sudden death of its leader. Wilkins was knighted, not alone for his famous 1928 trans-Arctic flight, as some believed, but for all his polar achievements to that date. He was first to make extensive flights by moonlight over the Arctic Sea while searching for the lost Soviet flyer, Sigismund Levanevsky, in 1937. When he died in 1958 he was still working as adviser to the Research and Development Section of our Quartermaster Corps.

Sir Hubert's friend of more than thirty years, Lowell Thomas, is an ideal biographer. Lady Wilkins has not only generously given him access to papers but she also contributes a final chapter of her own. Here is a portrait of a genuinely modest hero. Wilkins was a great man, his life was a great life.

Mrs. Stefansson, wife of the explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson, is a Lecturer in the Polar Studies Program at Dartmouth.