



BOOKS

Local Author Profiles Scientific Lion In Winter

By LEWIS WHITTINGTON
FOR THE BULLETIN

Any bio of J. Robert Oppenheimer, genius creator of the A-bomb, invites challenges by the mere fact that so many conflicting facts and myths exist about him. Even though his standing as an American patriot has been completely vindicated, doubts remain — to the extent that he has even been turned into a Faustian figure in John Adams' opera, *Dr. Atomic*.

Mark Wolverton, a local science writer has written a new book focusing on Oppenheimer's life after his fall from the pinnacle of scientific and political success.

Continued On Page 13

Wolverton Discusses Oppenheimer Mystique In 'A Life In Twilight'

Continued From Page 1

Mr. Wolverton, who has two other books, started thinking about *A Life in Twilight: The final years of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (St Martin's Press, 352 pages, \$27.95) 10 years ago. The author talked about wanting to redress Oppenheimer's legacy this week by phone from his home in Bryn Mawr.

"Oppenheimer is someone I've always been interested in," Mr. Wolverton said. "None of the Oppenheimer books out there — including many notable ones like *American Prometheus*, which won the Pulitzer Prize — have looked at this part of his life."

As Mr. Wolverton deftly cites, Oppenheimer was called "...Red," a "Commie sympathizer," even a "traitor." Conversely, he could also be considered a "victim of the times," a "martyr," a champion of freedom and scientific openness." Mr. Wolverton illuminates Oppenheimer not as a ruined man in academic exile, but as an intellectual lion in winter, as polarizing as ever, reconciled to his public image and inside and outside of scientific academia.

As openly as he led his life, Oppenheimer was a Rorschach test for the public — people saw what they wanted to see in him. Some viewed him as a peerless scientific hero, others as a mad scientist. Today, Oppenheimer remains a doggedly mysterious figure, not because of his bomb baggage, but because he was sub-

jected to McCarthy-era tactics that painted him as an anti-American seditionist.

"He's defined as the guy who built the atomic bomb ... Taken down by McCarthyism," Mr. Wolverton said. "Then, he went off and retired to the Institute of Advanced study at Princeton. I was curious about what happened with a figure like Oppenheimer — second only to Einstein, as far as scientists are concerned. [He was also] someone who helped this country win the war and the No. 1 thinker on atomic energy ... And suddenly he has this amazing fall from grace — how does he deal with that? How does he go on with his life?"

Mr. Wolverton gained access to all of the Oppenheimer papers, including the 10,000-page file compiled by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. Hoover's surveillance letters to and from operatives pepper Mr. Wolverton's book. Aside from being fascinating in their own right, Mr. Wolverton uses the letters as a narrative device, making *Twilight* a bit of a political thriller.

To add to the suspense, chapters are introduced by flashbacks of Oppenheimer's interrogation by the Atomic Energy Committee (AEC), which eventually denied him security clearance to work with the U.S. government, forever compromising his scientific, academic and moral integrity.

As well as being a robust por-

trait of Oppenheimer, the book is a snapshot of America at the time. Even as Oppenheimer was *persona non grata* in many ways, he also retained vast support, especially on college campuses, where the scientist garnered rock star status.

"The thing that struck me is how persistent the anti-Oppenheimer people were," said Mr. Wolverton. "[That] he was this disloyal, untrustworthy, probably Communist guy. Those feelings about him dogged him for the rest of his life. Some people would never let that go."

Mr. Wolverton's style, though rambling, is still a fine-line drawing that penetrates Oppenheimer various persona. He describes in real time Oppenheimer's infamous interview with Edward R. Murrow on "See It Now," with large chunks of transcribed text from the broadcast.

"Men don't like to know what they are up to if they can avoid it, so it becomes secret." Oppenheimer tells Mr. Murrow off-handedly. Oppenheimer's dialogue is much more ominous on the page than on the screen.

Mr. Wolverton's intriguing treatment of this titan of American figure detangles much of the hazy afterburn his tarnished image. This is an American story of forgotten second, and in this case, third acts.

Lewis Whittington can be reached at lwhitt1284@aol.com