The Sage of the Skyline

LEWIS MUMFORD
A Life.
By Donald L. Miller.
Illustrated. 628 pp. New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson. $24.95.

By Ada Louise Huxtable

LEWIS MUMFORD stands high in the company of this century's sages. A scholar of cosmic cultural reach and conspicuous public conscience, a distinguished critic of life, arts and letters, an unequaled observer of cities and civilizations, his place is secure in the modern pantheon of great men. He is also an enigma and an anachronism. A legend of epic proportions in intellectual and academic circles, he is surprisingly little known to the public. This could be the result of generational amnesia, which sets in quite early these days, or part of shifting intellectual fashions, or just a matter of yesterday's radicalism becoming today's received wisdom, in a vastly changed world.

But if Mr. Mumford hoped to change the world in his own way — an ambition of somewhat less than innocent arrogance which he shared with other thinkers and reformers earlier in the century — he did succeed in totally reshaping the way we see it. With a broad brush and an intensely personal brand of erudition, he defined the built world and brought it brilliantly to life as a historical, esthetic, urban, environmental and societal whole, as no one had done before.

Author of more than 30 books and over a thousand essays and reviews, he spanned the Victorian age and modern times, surely one of the most traumatic leaps in history. With a gift for creative synthesis, he has made past and present a seamless whole. Through all of this ambitious agenda, the man and the message seemed one. Like other mortals who lead faulty or troubled existences, he carried his share of insecurity, anguish and guilt, but his impressive public persona eclipsed his far from flawless private life. He has kept an Olympian aura.

The anachronism is that the values Mr. Mumford espoused, the foundation of his reputation as one of the most original minds and influential writers of our time, simply no longer exist. He believed not only in the perfectability of man and his environment; he was also convinced that it was the moral obligation of the artist and intellectual to take on the job. The elite leadership of men of ideas would show the politicians the way to a better world.

But if he shared the Utopian outlook of the 1920's and 30's, he was no party-liner. He warned against the dangers of mechanization while others were extolling the promise of the machine. Later, the warnings became jeremiads against the folly of overemphasis on science and technology at the expense of man's subjective and emotional life. No mainstream thinker ever, he took pride in being part of the avant-garde and it may be the ultimate anachronism that his heresies have become the truisms of our age.

A library conversion, as a student, to the pioneering work of Patrick Geddes, the Scottish biologist and town planner who was proposing sunlit garden communities to replace the 19th century's grim and sooty industrial cities, set Mr. Mumford's course as an urban activist. So great was his admiration for the older man that he later named his son Geddes, although the lifelong relationship of the two reformers was one of painful ambivalence, with Mr. Mumford swinging between loyalty and rejection.

He was a thoughtful and practiced observer of cities long before he embraced the influential ideas of Geddes and those other champions of early 20th-century English town planning, Ebenezer Howard and Raymond Unwin. He had used the streets of his native New York (he was born here in 1895 and formally educated at the City University of New York) as his "university," and his intimate knowledge of detail and context was largely responsible for his singularly penetrating and unconventional style of urban analysis. But he left the city in 1936 for a small upstate town, Leedsville, near Amenia, in Dutchess County, where he has lived a structured, hermetic, rural existence for most of his mature working years, increasingly out of touch with the urban condition and the forces of American creativity that he has understood and written about so well.

For many, Mr. Mumford's work in architecture and urbanism is his major achievement, although he preferred to think of himself as a literary man. By the age of 30, he was convinced that he was destined to carry out no less a task than to write the books that would "tie up the loose ends of Western civilization."

FROM "LEWIS MUMFORD"

Lewis and Sophia Mumford in 1957.

(Today's hubris has a more pragmatic tone.) He had married Sophia Wittenberg, an editor of The Dial, and they were closely involved in the art and literary Greenwich Village life of the 20's. Certain that he was destined for fame, they lived an ascetic life on the meager earnings of his early writings.

Like so many people in the period following World War I, Mr. Mumford was a radical idealist; he had a very real impact on urban planning through the new housing and greenbelt towns sponsored and constructed in the 20's and 30's by the Regional Planning Association of America, of which he was a principal theorist and proselytizer. In 1925, he and Sophia and their young son moved to model housing in Sunnyside, Queens, that had been built by the R.P.A.A., in the company of a small group of across-the-bridge intellectual expatriates and some working folk. They spent the next decade as part of that exemplary and surprisingly pleasant social experiment (Sunnyside still pleases today), until a second child and the need for more space led them to embrace country life.

Because Mr. Mumford's vision has become so much a part of our culture, and because so many of the ideas and ideals that inspired it are so out of sync with our times, it is not easy to assess his reputation or contributions. "Lewis Mumford: A Life," the first full-length biography, by Donald L. Miller, a professor of history at Lafayette College and editor of "The Lewis Mumford Reader," is problematic. Serious and substantial, it comes at a time when signals are mixed. Mr. Mumford is now 94, incapacitated by old age, his life's work done. He is the kind of hero who falls precipitously out of favor, or becomes increasingly distant to subsequent generations that have rejected his Utopian moralism and lack a sympathetic or appropriate yardstick for measuring his worth or judging him in context. Yet even his most severe critics are indelibly imbued with his readings of history and reality.

Mr. Mumford's values, and those of his peers, have been devalued enough so that the meaning of the life, in terms of the work, has a hard time coming through. He was obsessive to the point of being messianic — the medium was indeed the message. The ego that fueled the relentless ambition seems outrageous to those who find the message flawed. In this schizophrenic moment between the smashing of idols and the rehabilitation of victims, Mr. Mumford is in a vulnerable ideological limbo. At best, a study about someone so possessed by his own genius is a daunting undertaking.

The value of this biography is its painstaking and competent assemblage of sources that explain Mr. Mumford's character and development. Although Mr. Miller tells us this is not an authorized biography, he had Mr. Mumford's cooperation, and access to restricted documents. Since Mr. Mumford clearly believed that nothing had ever happened until he wrote it down, and since he kept a running personal commentary that included the most intimate details and the most anguished and unceasing self-analysis, as well as passionate love letters and lofty professional correspondence, an awesome amount of material was at hand.

However, Mr. Mumford does not yield easily, or even very interestingly, to psychobiography; he was so totally self-engrossed and such an unrelenting prig engaged in such studious self-analysis that he becomes a bit of a bore. His evaluation of his own abilities and destiny has a naïve, off-putting narcissism. His struggles to break out of his repressive Victorian morality are monumental, if not exactly riveting. His extramarital affairs were repeatedly rationalized in terms of the need for the full release of the inner passion that would free his creativity, or justified by the permissive sexuality (what else is new?) of those heady, free-thinking early years of the artistic and literary ascendancy after World War I. Part of the credo of open marriage was honesty, or telling his wife about the new partners, which was guaranteed to maximize the confusion and suffering and pass along a fair load of the guilt.

In what must be one of the most systematic classifications of infidelity on record, he described himself at one point as being "romantically in love" with one woman, "intellectually in love" with another, and "domestically in love" with his wife. The other women, in turn, considered Sophia Mumford "a fine sport" about it, and she confided to her diary that he had picked worthy rivals, not "lightweights." The affairs and near-affairs seem endless, and since Mr. Miller only hints at the passionate pedantry with which Mr. Mumford noted anatomical and other amorous details, and *liaisons* were less *dangereuses* than subsumed in petty bourgeois arrangements, it all becomes more tiresome than titillating. The affairs invariably ended for the most timeless of reasons — the other woman left him because he wouldn't leave his wife. It would not seem that she had much time for dalliance on her own, with the endless chores of housekeeping, child raising, making ends meet and seeing that nothing disturbed Mr. Mumford's creative concentration.

This totally chauvinist domestic routine of support and sacrifice has to be understood as not out of line among even liberated intellectuals at the time, although in this case it does seem to have been carried to

Continued on page 24

Ada Louise Huxtable is a former architecture critic and member of the editorial board of The New York Times.