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Sane Books in an Insane World

BY MARY M. COLUM

A COMMENT that Eugene Lyons makes in *The Red Decade*¹ on a remark of Ralph Bates's — "We communists understand that revolution" (i.e., the French Revolution) — throws a good deal of light on peculiar happenings in our world today. "These people," Lyons says, "had taken over not only the Russian Revolution and its terror but the French Revolution and its terror, and all revolutions since the day Cain turned on Abel. In a kind of political megalomania they had identified themselves with History." This is certainly one of the reasons why the world today is in an insane state.

Before our time a cause was just a cause — men might die for it, but they did not set it up as something the whole process of history was making towards; they did not pretend to know what the end-product of history was. But in our time the revelation has been made to every good party man in every totali-

tarian state. In one section the end-product of history is the classless state; in another it is the supremacy of the Nordic race. Knowing what the end-product is, they can justify the means of reaching it. They can identify themselves with the process and so become megalomaniacs. The end being the real thing, they can indulge in any kind of trickery, hypocrisy and crime to reach it. *The Red Decade* tells us earnestly, eloquently, and at the same time ironically and humorously, what the megalomaniacs and their dupes have been up to in America.

The author associates the epochal development of communism with the third and fourth of the five periods into which he divides the history of the Communist International. The third period began with the famous Five Year Plan, the fourth after the Comintern Congress of 1935, ending with the Stalin-Hitler pact with which the present war began.

It was in the third and fourth

¹\$3.00. Bobbs-Merrill.

periods that Stalinists made a bold envelopment of the cultural front and brought into public view the Intelligentsia, the literary and near-literary comrades, millionaire Hollywooders, actors, artists and strip-teasers. Pilgrimages to Russia became the thing. We had not only books from the semi-literate comrades, but from venerable social researchers like the Webbs. The goings-on of the cultural front in this country might make one believe that a contagious psychosis had reached epidemic proportions in the literary world. They are all discussed vigorously and penetratingly in *The Red Decade*. We are made to recall our own bewilderment as our writing friends issued manifestoes, calls, ukases, excommunications, and scattered documents through a bewildered and submissive capitalist press.

The lengthy list of names affixed to these documents generally included one or more Manns, Lewis Mumford, Matthew Josephson, Van Wyck Brooks, Granville Hicks, Vincent Sheean and Theodore Dreiser, and some few women, notably Dorothy Parker. In addition there was a long roster of names, the bulk of them non-descript. In private life, many actually were temperamental reactionaries who needed compensation

through a little social daring. After the Nazis and Russians joined hands the manifestoes became scarcer and a lot of retreats from the cultural front were reported. We think, however, that Eugene Lyons is a little too hopeful about the end of the loony period, for any day now we may see, in a picture of Mr. Churchill and Mr. Roosevelt holding prayer books on a battleship, the figure of Joseph Stalin embracing an icon. This ought to be good for a religious manifesto of some kind or even a religious congress.

Some of the more peculiar forms of the lunacy broke out during the war in Spain. Lyons shows how the Stalinists seized on and perverted the democratic cause in Spain. The chapter "Cocktails for Spanish Democracy" will shock many who remember the reception given to Dr. Juan Negrin, "openly working with the Kremlin crowd," at the international meeting of the PEN held in New York during the World's Fair. All except a few of the delegates rose to their feet to receive him and he took his place at the head table with the president, Dorothy Thompson. It was an incident that revealed the grave necessity for distinguishing between those who try to practise the art of literature and those who serve any cause or any project by

the trade of writing. For Juan Negrin, an obscure professor, contrary to all the principles of the founders, was made a member of the PEN.

But even in this extensive history, Lyons has left a few typical events unchronicled. One was Waldo Frank's Open Letter to Leon Blum in the *New Republic* asking that high-minded, inept statesman to put France into the war in Spain. Another was a manifesto issued by a number of clergymen, professors and others demanding that their Catholic fellow-citizens make a statement on their attitude towards the conflict in Spain. A similar sort of document was sent round by the League of American Writers, even to non-members of that organization, demanding a statement of their attitude. The inquisition psychology was going strong when comrades Hitler and Stalin united.

But for all the comic alliances and situations it reveals, *The Red Decade* is fundamentally a serious, a warning book. "What the current task of the communists will be," he warns, "when these pages are published cannot now be guessed at. The only certainty is that it will be a task conditioned by Russia's, and not by America's national interest." This is really the point

of the book. And in working in the Kremlin's interest, the assorted fellow-travelers and outright communists, as he undeniably shows, were also working for fascism and Nazism, for it was their avowed aim to break down the democracies. In the whole racket the really important contributions of Marxism were forgotten — that is, if many of the communists ever knew what they were. The author of *The Red Decade* is a great reporter — observant, appraising and knowledgeable; besides, he shows himself possessed of a vigor of style that recalls the great pamphleteers.

II

In *France on Berlin Time*,² Thomas Kernan exhibits some of the ravages that communism and pacifism played on the French national morale. He lived in Paris from 1937 until after the conquest, and he has got hold of many facts about France and the French that have been missed by other writers of books of the Why-France-Fell type. I take from *France on Berlin Time* the terribly significant figures of France's losses in the first World War. She lost 28 per cent of her male population between the ages of twenty and fifty; another fifth

²\$2.75. Lippincott.

was either partially or totally disabled. Then the last war was fought out on the soil of France; towns and villages were destroyed, and women, children and the aged were turned adrift from their homes. There were a million war orphans of the first World War; very many of them had no near relatives left and had to be brought up by the state. When the young men among them went into the fighting forces, they had no families to send them letters or packages from home or to look forward to their return. That was what the last war did to them.

Anyone who lived in France for some time will recall the intense fear of war that affected so many of the population. They had suffered too much and were ready enough to believe that slogan, often enough handed out, which Thomas Kernan quotes with disapproval: "One can recover from slavery, from war never." However, he ruminates as to whether some sense of self-preservation was not working powerfully but obscurely amongst the ordinary people of France, and it might have been this that prevented a last ditch fight. If the French lost as high a proportion of the population as they did in the last war, France was ended as an important nation.

The author tells us that if he were asked what group in France, aside from the political leaders, were chiefly responsible for the defeat he would say the school-teachers, who were predominantly either communist or pacifist and who furthered the cult of anti-nationalism that was becoming fashionable in every country in Europe. Fascism was a reaction against it. The teachers inculcated an anti-war, an anti-nationalist emotion in their pupils.

If, as one who lived in France for some years, I was asked the same question, I would make a different answer: I would say, with the strongest conviction, that it was the indifference and apathy of the French people about their government. The government did not represent the French people at all.

Thomas Kernan, like this reviewer, met many people who told him "France can't afford another war," and many around middle age who made no secret of their conviction that France would be defeated if she fought. Yet the government pursued policies unendorsed by the people which inevitably got them into war. The author is too innocent of French history, but he has written a sensible book that is worth thinking over.

III

It is psychologically significant to look into the way the democratic ideology manifests itself in different countries. Each country seems to attach itself especially to one, or at most, two of the three attributes of democracy — Liberty, Fraternity, Equality — but seldom to all three together. For instance, the French attachment to the idea of equality is persistent and they will do much to hold on to it, whereas the English notion of equality is rudimentary while their attachment to liberty is intense. They will do anything to hold on to liberty and to their own ideas of representative government. All this emerges strongly in all the books written about the present English government. Two of the most informing at the moment are one by the Austrian international journalist, René Kraus, *The Men Around Churchill*,³ and Patricia Strauss's *Bevin and Company*.⁴ Six of the twelve around Churchill, of whom René Kraus writes, belong to the Labor Party and of these Bevin, Morrison and Cripps are probably of most interest to Americans. The same Labor figures are in Mrs. Strauss's *Bevin and Company*, and the two books

complement each other. Mrs. Strauss knows the Labor Party thoroughly and what she brings to us is the sense that she has lived in the milieu about which she writes. But she is not so professional a writer as René Kraus and cannot marshal so well the facts she possesses.

The author of *The Men Around Churchill* is one of those newspaper correspondents who quickly get to know everybody and everything, and who have ways of getting on a footing of familiarity with the key men of governments. He does it all in a genteel manner, very different from the rugged and critical approach of the American newspaperman. For instance, though he is an exile of fairly recent crop, he refers to a former ambassador as "our own Joe Kennedy," and when he gets to England, he is an authority on the "old school tie" and its accompanying privileges and customs. The number of times he uses the word "gentleman" and comments on how a gentleman behaves and resigns from a political party gives one the illusion at times that one is reading Emily Post. And he can solemnly adjure us to "remember Milton's dictum 'When God has some difficult task on hand he sends for his Englishman'." However, in spite of a lot of nonsense and a certain amount of toadyism,

³\$3.00. Lippincott.

⁴\$2.50. Putnam.

the reader will get from René Kraus's volume an overwhelming sense of laborious and devoted men, all working together, working not so much for liberty as an ideal but because liberty is a necessity of life for them and their country. None of them, high or low, has the foggiest notion of equality, but fraternity seems to be making considerable headway since the air-raid shelters came in.

If one wants an escape from all the present terrors, one can get no better book than *The Road of a Naturalist*,⁵ by Donald Culross Peattie. He is a fine writer, indeed a little too consciously a fine writer, with eagerness, knowledge, a sense of dedication to the observation of bird and beast, flower and tree. America from the beginning has had great naturalists because she has always been the wonderland of animal and plant life, the land of redwood and great bison herds. The bison are almost gone, the passenger pigeons in their billions have gone, the sea otter of Alaska has been exterminated, the redwoods have barely been preserved. But the great bi-forked forest that extends from Alaska to the middle of the states is still there, the greatest forest on the planet. The desert, too, is wonderful for the forms of

life it fosters and Peattie can enthrall us by the way he writes of them. He makes us, indeed, believe that there is more delight and excitement for the naturalist than for any other of the *genus homo*.

The book is strung along as an autobiography into which is inserted accounts of those men who were at once contemplatives and men of action — the great naturalists. To read these admirable dramatizations of the lives of birds, beasts, reptiles, flowers, trees and grasses is to get a release from the tensions that are all around us.



FICTION

THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM, by A. J. Cronin. \$2.50. *Little, Brown*. This is a highly absorbing novel by a genuine storyteller who has a talent for making everything that happens to his characters seem what should have happened to them. A dash of the melodramatic helps along this story of a priest who went from his native Scotland to China as a missionary and remained there for a quarter of a century. It has all the combinations of a high class best-seller — action, an interesting sex episode, a very humane way of looking on the world which rouses admiration for goodness and selflessness, and also that motif which is now coming into novels in English, an inside account of the discipline of a Catholic religious.

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⁵\$3.00. *Houghton Mifflin*.