

# THE BOOK FORUM

Conducted by M. M. C.

**Moscow Skies** — Maurice Hindus (Random House, \$2.75).

**Seven Red Sundays** — Ramon J. Sender (Liveright, \$2.00).

**The Mountain and the Plain** — Herbert Gorman (Farrar & Rinehart, \$2.50).

**Drums Along the Mohawk** — Walter D. Edmonds (Little, Brown, \$2.50).

**Jefferson in Power** — Claude G. Bowers (Houghton Mifflin, \$3.75).

**Victoria of England** — Edith Sitwell (Houghton Mifflin, \$3.50).

**That Was Balzac** — George Middleton (Random House, \$2.00).

**Rich Land, Poor Land** — Stuart Chase (Whittlesey, \$2.50).

**Unconventional Ethics** — Osias L. Schwartz (Perennial Publications, \$3.50).

**The Story of Prophecy** — Henry James Forman (Farrar & Rinehart, \$3.00).

**A Dictionary of American English**, Part I (University of Chicago Press, \$4.00).

WE have always thought that the modern abolition of hell and the devil was a very great error. But these rationalists never show a sense of human psychology. Hatreds and fears are part of human nature; as long as the devil was there for people to hate and hell was there for people to fear, they didn't have to turn so much fear and hatred on their neighbors. The hatred and fear that are in so many of the books published are simply fantastic. Look at this interesting novel, *Moscow Skies*, by Maurice Hindus. People can turn away in strange hatred and fear from a neighbor because he once made profits out of the labor of a few workpeople and shudder before the word *bourgeois*, while at the same time they can calmly accept decrees which mean ruin and death for whole populations. The bourgeoisie takes the place of the devil; decrees of dictators take the place of the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount — *plus ça change, plus c'est la même*.

Maurice Hindus' central character is a young man of Russian parentage, a sympathizer with the Revolution, who goes to Moscow from America, immerses himself in the life of that new world. *Moscow Skies* has not the intensity of the great Russian novels, but it is in their tradition, and we get exactly the same impression about the Russians that we did from the old bourgeois or aristocratic novelists; in short, under the dialectic of materialism, as under czars and icons, the Russians are

still sorrowful, frustrated, and full of messianic hope.

So much for a novel of eastern Europe. Now for western Europe. More revolution. *Seven Red Sundays*, by Ramon J. Sender, is about Spain. Here the people also are revolting as hard as they can; in this book, as in *Hindus*, there is hatred and fear of the "bourgeois," there is the same talk of "ideology," but there is a difference in the skies and a difference in the past. Instead of the oriental fatalism of the Russians, there is a gaiety and a capacity for happiness in the Spaniards. In the fury against what is heretical, we get a waft of air from the Inquisition. The Revolutionaries are proletarians, all right, and out to liquidate the bourgeoisie and all that bourgeois sentiment that permitted colonels' daughters to be ignorant of the facts of life and wander in gardens and wear pretty frocks. But they don't seem to be communists in the Russian sense at all; they are anarchists or even something with a longer name — anarcho-syndicalists (oh, this craze of mankind for branding itself and its ideas with terrific-sounding nomenclature!). However, the author of *Seven Red Sundays* is a first-rate storyteller, and one sincerely hopes that he will come safely through the Spanish revolution and the subsequent liquidation of anarchists by the syndicalists and the syndicalist by the communists and what's left of all of them by the fascists. There is a wit and fantasy in *Seven Red Sundays* that is badly needed in revolutionary writings.

It is in the nature of all of us to think that present revolutions are bad but that past ones were always good. So we think the American Revolution was noble and the French Revolution grand. The French Revolution had a terror, of course, and a number of harmless people were liquidated. But they did things on rather a small scale in those days, and the days of terror were not so many, and the number of liquidatees would hardly fill a good week's work in Russia or in present-day Spain. Herbert Gorman in *The Mountain and the Plain* has written an interesting novel of revolutionary France around the story of a young American hero and the lovely daughter of a French noble. It is rather pleasant after the Russian and Spanish stories, and the customary sort of plot pleases one. The plottings and escapes, the captures and tumults are exciting and vivid. Herbert Gorman has a power of visualizing scenes and people,

and he has a convinced notion that there are people who like to read a book for entertainment as well as people who want to learn how far down the road to destruction the world has got now.

**Drums along the Mohawk**, by Walter D. Edmonds, has its scene laid in northern New York State in 1782. This is revolution again or, rather, the little war after the American Revolution, when the farmers of the Mohawk Valley, cut off from the Continental forces, are attacked by the British and their Indian allies. Whereas in the Spanish and the Russian books ideas or the names of ideas seem to be more important than the men and woman, in *Drums along the Mohawk* the men and women dominate the revolutionary ideas. This novel makes the reader realize vividly the circumstances of the birth of this nation. The fights, though they give drama to the lives of the people, are only part of their daily lives, and they do not dwarf the humanity engaging in them. There is love-making and the birth of children and the clash of personalities. This is a very American book, and, if it had been published before the world was deluged with print, *Drums along the Mohawk* might have had its chance of being an American classic.

**Jefferson in Power**, by Claude G. Bowers, is the history of the two terms of office of the man who wrote the Declaration of Independence, that masterpiece of American literature. He deserved to have an exciting time as president of the States he helped bring into being and he had it. Everything happened then: the conspiracy of Aaron Burr, the Louisiana purchase, the killing of Hamilton, seditions, treasons, attempted secessions. Likewise the Supreme Court emerged as a sort of supergovernment. In the midst of it all, Claude Bowers situates Jefferson as the champion of democracy. As well as deserving exciting terms of office, Jefferson deserved a fervid book colored with his own beloved rhetoric, and here he gets it. Claude Bowers is heartily on the side of his hero, and he makes all Jefferson's opponents, except Hamilton, small, yellow-livered, and foxy men. And who, ladies and gentlemen, appears as the foxiest of them all? John Marshall, who invented the Supreme Court! We never knew, before, that Marshall and his Supreme Court were the forms that objections to democracy took in Jeffersonian days. It is a relief to find that this is no debunking biography.

## The Book Forum

**EDITH SITWELL** in her biography, *Victoria of England*, is no debunker, either, but a wholehearted heroine worshiper. Here we see plainly the Edith Sitwell whom we always saw behind the poems, the pleasant lady-in-waiting to a sovereign, who could have helped in writing court masques, charades, and such diverting pieces for the entertainment of royalty. It is a well-written book about a remarkable woman, whose mind represented the top notch of the highly intelligent commonplace. The Queen seems to have been bourgeois through and through, bourgeois mentally, socially, politically, artistically, and in every other way. A very great contrast to the great Elizabeth. Edith Sitwell tries to make herself up-to-date by putting in a bit about Marx and Engels. But I cannot find a single reference to Darwin in the pages.

**I**n the period covered by Victoria's reign there were great initiators, great characters in England and great characters all over Europe. One of the greatest of them is the hero of George Middleton's *That Was Balzac*. It is a play in eight episodes and a prologue. How can one strike into the life of the creator of the Human Comedy? Where begin? George Middleton begins ingeniously and dramatically in the studio of Rodin the sculptor, as his great statue of Balzac is about to be unveiled—that was Balzac! And then comes a chronicle play of Balzac's life: his youthful days in Paris; his love affairs, both romantic and sordid; and his death before he was fifty—a crowded and tempestuous life, the life a man has to live if he wants to write a Human Comedy.

**A**ND now we pass from books about people and ideas to one about the dumb earth, the land. The hero of Stuart Chase's *Rich Land, Poor Land* is the territory of the United States. Its beauty and opulence are celebrated, but its injuries—its crying injuries—are also made evident. When we consider the qualities of this book and remember there are actually book reviewers who think that only works of fiction show passion and imagination, we realize what plain ignoramuses write about books. Compared with the passion and imagination in a book like this, the passion and imagination in the average work of fiction are hardly sufficient for the peregrination of a fly up a windowpane.

Stuart Chase rouses us most tremendously over the awful treatment this land has received in the course of a century. Its forests have been destroyed, its rivers unbanked and polluted, its wild life massacred, its soil unloosed. The very soil, indeed, in *Rich Land, Poor Land* is given a personality, so that when it is plowed up and unloosed by unthinking men it gets into a sort of rage and storms its

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