

do?"). They might have done an interesting piece of research in tracing the versions of the popular labor song, "Hold the Fort," from the time when the K. of L. sang "Storm the fort, ye Knights of Labor," to the present day.

But class-visioned Messrs. Lomax have become organically incapable of "seeing" such material. Just as the real struggles of the American workers and farmers have never been uncovered by orthodox American histo-

rians, so the task of digging up our revolutionary folk-ballads remains a job that has scarcely been started. Nevertheless, this work is of importance not only in the field of folk-literature, but as first-hand evidence in revealing the revolutionary tradition of the American proletariat. For folk-literature, much more directly than belles-lettres, reflects the society in which it is created and the beliefs of the class by whom it is composed.

ALAN CALMER.

A Few Jokes for Babbitt

WASN'T THE DEPRESSION TERRIBLE? by Otto Soglow and David G. Plotkin. 110 Illustrations. Covici-Friede. \$2.

AS the title indicates, the book of cartoons deals with an immediate social-economic situation. Whether it is humor or not, and consequently whether it is an artistic work or not, depends entirely on the class point of view. There is no such thing as humor in general; humor is for one class or for another. The question is whether this book is satire for the working-class or superficial cartoons to amuse the well to do.

The answer is unequivocal. The book is a typical product of a petit bourgeois artist. Its object is to tickle a haggard but counter-revolutionary middle-class. The title says that the depression is a thing of the past. According to Soglow and Plotkin it was rather bad for the rich. Their heart-rending plight is the subject matter of 95 percent of the cartoons. When workers appear they are ragged members of the lumpen proletariat, panhandling or waiting for soup. In one drawing an unemployed refuses to accept spinach at a relief station; in another the wife of an unemployed worker complains that her husband who had been in the habit of beating her on paydays was now paying her no attention; in a third an unemployed refuses to take on a job because it would spoil his record; and in a fourth, a citizen of a Hooverville cheers at the sight of a burglar there because he takes it as a sign of returning prosperity. So much for the economic plight of the working-class in the depression.

When the authors satirize the rich their intent is to tickle Babbitt but not to annoy him. The satire is never sharp, surprising, sweeping or fundamental. It is in line with the policy of the New Yorker literary caterers to the smart set. The jokes should be risqué within "reasonable" limits, a bit "advanced," teasing the more apparent snobberies but leaving basic social relationships untouched.

But Soglow and Plotkin are aware that the depression intensifies struggles and that the working-class learns in the process certain political lessons. There are three cartoons featuring "radicals" in the form of the traditional caricatures of Communists appearing in the yellow press or of the Nazi standard representations of a wild Jew-Marxist-Bolshevik in-

dividual—floppy hat, curly hair, spectacles, long nose, lunatic expression and all. By that the reader can understand the "definite class angle slant at this slightly cock-eyed universe" that the authors refer to in the smart introduction. This is further carried on by a cartoon, worthy of the editorial page of the gutter press, representing an angelic cop on horseback surrounded by a group of distraught and decrepit individuals carrying a banner "Hunger Marchers Fight the Cossack Police."

Works that presume to be a part of culture must represent the ideas and interests of the individuals creating them just as they mirror what we call broadly the times. It is precisely for this reason that the notions of a pure art or a pure humor or a pure ethics are ridiculous. The satire of a Hitler or Goering cannot have anything in common with the satire of Vol-

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taire, Swift, Daumier, Hasek (author of *The Good Soldier Schweik*), Ilf and Petrov, etc. As they think so they laugh.

It is clear that as the lives and struggles of workers are unknown to Soglow and Plotkin, so the native insight, wit, irony and of the exploited, particularly abundant in this period of disillusion and struggle are equally unknown to them. The humor of Soglow and Plotkin not only lacks sympathy for the working-class but is in fact antagonistic and vicious. In a similar way, for example, Hollywood, abysmally ignorant of the powerful wit and bitter satire developed by the Negro people, uses the Negro only for slap-stick comedy. In fact, ridicule of the Negro is the only thing missing in this book to complete the anthology of what Babbitt laughs at.

The crisis has produced unexpected changes in various strata of the population, a situation readily amenable to humor. It has produced

new struggles, new alignments. In times such as these it is well known that, because of the keener general interest in politics and economic events, folk wit grows and the humor and satire of the masses ripen. Witness the body of sharp wit dealing with the Five Year Plan circulating in the Soviet Union and outside of it, the jokes on Hitler, Dollfuss, Mussolini, etc., etc.

Whenever the people, particularly the workers, come in contact with events that affect them deeply they respond with a rich humor which is fertile soil for the cartoonist. Soglow and Plotkin chose the penthouse parlor instead. Their work shows its comfort, but also its emptiness. Had they been of the workers, had they been familiar with working class life, struggles and laughter, their skill would assume meaning in the more vital exercise of its functions. In this book they are drowned in a sea of banality. MARK LAND.

Up and Down the Furrow

Man with a Bull-Tongue Plough, by Jesse Stuart. Dutton.

THE American white farm has been poor in cultural production of any kind, but especially in indigenous poetry. It is pretty well established that the best folk songs of such regions as the Kentucky and Ozark mountains are older than the settlements themselves and are of British origin. Native work has seldom been of a higher order than doggerel, in spite of the fact that in the colloquial speech of many localities there is rich beauty and startling idiom. For this reason, the book under review is important. Here is a conscious effort to produce an epic of the hill peasantry, the dirt-farmer, share-cropper and other folk of backward rural America.

The result is authentically a proletarian epic, though not a class conscious one. It heaps up and piles on and pours detail after detail of that toiling life in the hot sun, until you smell the turned earth, hear the old men and women speak, feel the burning heat. Up and down the furrow you walk with this poet, seeing the whole scene, in infinite added minutiae. To him the whole of life is that the earth wears out strong men and tears the youth and dreams from children and sucks the marrow of gaunt brown women. He never escapes from the tyrannical, grasping soil, the life-eater, regarded with fear, love and hatred, but never with indifference. He pursues this theme of the earth swallowing generations of men, even to the graveyard.

The very monotony of land is the monotony from which his rhythm suffers. He brags, shouts, talks to himself, repeats too much, and grows too gloomy about death; but these are the ways a man acquires toward horses, oxen, miles, and "hot burley loam." The faults of this poet are the characteristics of his people. He has their kind of sophistication, which is that of knowing at first hand every human vice and aberration, of knowing

the neighbor and fellow worker more thoroughly than urban or middle class people ever know each other. He also romanticizes the natives and tries to throw a glamor over his own life that it does not possess in fact. What are these people like? There is a leaky house, a grizzled pa, an angular mother, a number of daughters, fewer sons. Beyond this

house, and its twenty acres, or beyond the creek there is somebody else's land. The boys and girls range out in all directions, climb the hills, catch snakes, trap birds, shoot, fish. For long hours they sit under the sycamores or scrub-oaks bandying fantastic and superstitious information. They fear nothing natural, they handle living, squirming things all their lives. Their thoughts are not always natural, but often mean, ingenious, nasty.

They have a fine heart-to-heart friendliness that yields only after a delicate and easily wounded pride has been set at rest. They are not always good physical specimens, and wear out young. Their vague dreams are peculiarly tragic because they see no outlet to the attainment of them. But since the auto has taken the cities to them, the girls look gaudy and out-of-place in print cotton and lipstick. They are dull, these toilers, to themselves. They know a lot of things not out of books, but they cannot express their knowledge and it seems to them too stupid to be spoken of. They have queer fathers, eccentric daughters, violent brothers. Incestuous relationships are common. They always feel the hand of the big owner, beating them down, raping their few hopes, and with his swank ways, coming into their country, taking the profit out of their soil, their coal, their iron, their blood, and making them seem silly—shooting them if they revolt. Jesse Stuart is not unaware of this harsh class war, he

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