

# Books

## The State of Britain

*GENERAL BUNTOP'S MIRACLE, and OTHER STORIES*, by Martin Armstrong. Harcourt, Brace & Co. \$2.

*THE WOMAN WHO HAD IMAGINATION*, by H. E. Bates. The Macmillan Co. \$2.

*DEFY THE FOUL FIEND*, by John Collier. Alfred A. Knopf. \$2.50.

*FULL FLAVOUR*, by Doris Leslie. The Macmillan Co. \$2.50.

*SPINNER OF THE YEARS*, by Phyllis Bentley. The Macmillan Co. \$2.50.

*LOVE ON THE DOLE*, by Walter Greenwood. Doubleday, Doran & Co. \$2.50.

MR. ARMSTRONG'S stories are all neatly constructed, and some of them—Mrs. Vaudrey's Journey, for example—are adroit enough to be pleasant reading. They are of all kinds, from the crisp brutality of Saki to the whimsicality of Milne. When one tries to discover where Mr. Armstrong is in the variety of mood and method he displays, one suddenly realizes that he isn't there at all. He is on the outside, carefully manipulating his effects. This is art for entertainment's sake, pleasant to the taste and bad for the digestion.

The stories of H. E. Bates, on the other hand, run to the slice-of-life type, and they are both sensitive and honest. There are some fine, vigorous portraits of old men, and there are excellent descriptions. The title story, *The Woman Who Had Imagination*, is delicate and perceptive. But Mr. Bates cuts his slices of life rather thin. He deliberately isolates his little scenes so that he can dwell on them. Herman Melville said that you need a great theme to write a great book. I am afraid that Mr. Bates, for all his talent, would not know a great theme if he saw one.

Great themes are not necessarily rare, but in the bourgeois world today they are seldom utilized. Pseudo-great themes, however, are since the success of *Anthony Adverse*, the order of the day, and it appears, with the arrival of Collier's Willoughby Corbo to join Linklater's Magnus Merriman, that England is to have her share of boisterous heroes. The hero of *Defy the Foul Fiend* is, one is pleased to note, a little more human than Anthony or Magnus, but he goes through a series of amorous adventures, described in what Mr. Collier probably hopes is a Rabelaisian manner. Like Anthony and Magnus, Willoughby is a sound conservative at heart, and in the end he settles down as a good imitation of a landed gentleman. This seems to be a reliable formula for pleasing the solid bourgeois: give him plenty of vicarious adventure, and then assure him that he, in his cautious quest for security, was right all the time.

Doris Leslie has chosen for *Full Flavour* a

theme that usage, especially British usage, has consecrated as great, the story of a family. The central character is Catherine Ducrox, who inherits and runs and makes a success of a London cigar store, disastrously marries an artist and successfully marries a tobacco magnate, loses her daughter in a tragic marriage, and sees her grandson fall in love with her old rival's granddaughter. In the background of all these domestic mishaps is the account of the tobacco business, told with some tenderness for the small shopkeeper who is conquered by the monopolies. Miss Leslie writes vigorously, makes skillful use of minor historical details, and keeps her characters alive. She seems, however, to have nothing important to say.

*Full Flavour* naturally reminds us of Phyllis Bentley's handling of a British family in *Inheritance*. Miss Bentley's family had more than a sentimental interest because it was directly involved in one of the great historic movements of the nineteenth century, the rise and fall of the textile industry, and the attendant struggles between capital and labor; and even Miss Bentley's incurable liberalism could not prevent her from grasping some of the implications of her material. *Spinner of the Years* is a much earlier novel, and it is obviously a piece of apprentice work. It is a study, careful to the point of tediousness, of the influences that shape the character of Imogen Armitage. The scene is the textile district, but textiles play no part in the story.

Walter Greenwood has looked for his theme in the very center of the life of his times, and *Love on the Dole*, published more than a year ago in England, is, despite many an amateurish touch, a strong and moving novel. It seems to me, indeed, the finest novel of the depression I have read, quite as tender and human as *Little Man, What Now?* but free from mawkish sentimentality and weak evasiveness. It is a story of people who, in the very best of times, live in rotten poverty, always in fear of unemployment, always in debt to the pawnshop, always in need of decent food and decent shelter. For such people the depression means bare survival on the dole, and the Means Test is a death sentence.

The novel tells of Harry Hardcastle, eagerly leaving school to serve his apprenticeship in a machine shop, and turned out in the end to make room for another generation of schoolboys on apprentices' wages. For him love means fugitive meetings to avoid the bestialities of his girl's parents; it means bitter quarrels while the futile search for a job goes on; it means forced marriage and survival in rat-ridden rooms on his wife's wages. His sister Sally is in love with Larry Meath, a worker for the Labor Party who is killed in a demonstration against the Means Test. Sally, becoming the mistress of a successful bookie,

brings a measure of prosperity to her family and Harry's, but they know, and the author knows, how uncertain, as well as how exceptional, their good fortune is.

"The time is ripe, and rotten ripe for change; then let it come," the author quotes from Lowell, and from Rosa Luxemburg: "What we are witnessing . . . is a whole world sinking." *Love on the Dole* successfully shows a world in decay. But Greenwood's awareness of the need for change far outruns his perception of the forces that make change possible and inevitable. Larry Meath, the only conscious rebel in the book, is a more or less typical educated British workman, bitterly dissatisfied with his lot, eager for a socialist state, but limited to a futile faith in education and reform. Greenwood himself, as his portrayal of the demonstration shows, scarcely goes farther than Larry. In itself, therefore, the book is pessimistic, for the only forces of revolt it describes are obviously inadequate to combat the enormous evil it portrays. But we must remember that such a book is not read in a vacuum. Taken alone, it is incomplete, but the reader may supply for himself what the book lacks. Disgust with the existing order is never enough, but it may be the beginning of wisdom, both for the author and for his readers.

GRANVILLE HICKS.

## Bloody Thursday

*VETERANS ON THE MARCH*, by Jack Douglas. Workers' Library Publishers. \$1.25.

Here is an excellent book on a subject that badly needed detailed treatment. Jack Douglas' *Veterans on the March* makes it obvious that not only the general public, but also the more interested people who read most of the available reports know very little of what took place when the ex-soldiers, the "Bonus Marchers," massed at Washington in the summer of 1932.

It is common knowledge that the veterans set out to gain a more favorable adjustment of their "Adjusted Service Certificates." They, their wives and dependents wanted to be paid, not in 1945, but before they starved. They had had thirty months of the crisis, and for the bulk of them the only hope of keeping their families together lay in cash payment of certificates. It is also well known that they were finally driven out of Washington after two of their number had been murdered by the police and their camp had been attacked by soldiers with cavalry, bayonets, tear-gas, and the torch. But the moves that took place between the time the veterans shouldered their way into Washington and the time when they grimly straggled out are a revelation.

From here on I'd like to quote the entire book. As the veterans began to arrive some of the Federal powers "wanted to squelch the entire movement by physical blows," but that would be "fairly certain to send sparks into the equally discontented non-veteran populace. At least another ten million, besides the veterans, were unemployed, and already there was

talk among them of joining the march of the vets. No, the thousands of ex-soldiers marching to Washington could not be squelched with force. The authorities knew this. Most of the veterans did not. Here was the keynote of the authorities' handling of the entire situation. Without the veterans themselves realizing it, they, who felt they were coming to Washington as petitioning citizens, as they had been taught they had a right to do, became, for the authorities, only a big police problem."

The effort to solve this problem made Pelham D. Glassford, retired army officer and Chief of the Washington Police, one of the busiest hypocrites at the National Capital. First, he did everything he could to keep the veterans from coming; once they had arrived, he tried all of his tricks to separate them, in both instances pretending to be their friend. "Fellow veterans and comrades—I shall be glad to do everything I can for you," he addressed the first meeting at which, with stool-pigeon aid, he had just been elected "Secretary-Treasurer." And while the veterans, confused and irreparably weakened by warnings not to associate with the Reds, grateful to Glassford because it was he who seemed to be getting food for them and their families, were waiting to demonstrate before Congress, Glassford moved closer to other self-appointed leaders of the Bonus Marchers. There was Waters from Oregon, itching to whet himself into a fine, sharp Fascist tool which the Capitalists would pay to use; there was one Doak Carter, Waters' "chief of staff." And behind these fakers were waiting the "Key Men of America," demagogues like Smedley Butler and Mayor McCloskey, who pretended to be the veterans' friends while they prepared clubs to crack their skulls.

It was men like these and tactics like these that broke the back of the Bonus March. "Don't join the Reds or out you go," they threatened the ex-doughboys; and, as always, a Red was anyone who saw through and fought the vicious hypocrisy of the self-appointed leaders. But such tactics succeed only temporarily. As Douglas makes clear, the gloved hand and the lying mouth are necessarily followed by savage brutality. And Glassford's rule was to thin the ranks and drive the resolute to "Bloody Thursday." But even before this, hundreds of ex-soldiers were driven over to a militant program put forward by the Workers Ex-Servicemen's League, a rank-and-file organization to the core. And while the WESL has grown, the ex-soldiers' company unions such as the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars have continued to decline. "Just as the inauguration of the strike-breaking N.R.A. was followed by the greatest wave of strikes in the history of the United States," Douglas concludes his valuable book, "so these attempts to regiment the masses into fascism are only further solidifying their ranks and clarifying to them their class position. The veterans—together with the other sections of the toiling population—are on the march." THOMAS BOYD.

### "Gesture Without Motion"

*THE ROCK, Book of Words, by T. S. Eliot, Harcourt, Brace and Company. \$1.*

In his last prose volume *After Strange Gods*, T. S. Eliot spoke with considerable conviction on questions of literature and belief, society and sensibility, and the necessary disparity—since he had been brought up in the midst of heresy and the worship of Progress—between his own poetry and his ideas. Now in *The Rock*, published with elaborate disclaimers, he has temporarily, at least, closed that interior breach by contributing choruses and dialogue for a religious pageant to raise cash for building more churches. At the same time he has cast a very deep shadow indeed over the private profundities of *After Strange Gods* by confronting them with this banal and arid successor. It is not hard to see, however, why he made the attempt. Eliot's recent criticism has been strongly affected by his respectful fear of Marxian philosophy. The pageant of *The Rock* gave him opportunity for an imitative counter-attack on the revolutionary literature with which he has been increasingly preoccupied.

The hero of *The Rock* is a worker, a rather vaudeville Cockney named Ethelbert, engaged with some comrades in building a church. The site is a poor one, and the funds, we learn, are limited. But Ethelbert spurs on his lagging companions by showing that churches do no exploiting, make no profits, and grow from the pennies of the poor. His zeal is rewarded by a series of visions: Saxons are converted, ghostly monks come to help, Israelites build Jerusalem, and so on. The resurrected declaim a good deal in the set speeches of a thousand such pageants; the acknowledgements Eliot makes to a number of clerics in his prefatory note are obviously well merited.

One scene, however, is less usual, the scene, one may suppose, for which Eliot takes sole responsibility in his note. Here Ethelbert is beset by an Agitator who tries to make him class-conscious. When Bert indignantly confronts him with the Douglas Plan and the threat of his fists, the fellow slinks off like a movie-villain Communist. A Chorus remembers the words of Nehemiah, "The trowel in hand, and the gun rather loose in the holster," and "But we are encompassed with snakes and dogs: therefore some must labour, and others must hold spears." The Agitator appears again speaking to a mob, citing Russia and attacking religion. "We'll all be free and we'll all think alike, as a free people does; and them that don't won't be allowed to think different." He urges them to break the windows of the churches, tear down the walls. This attribution of violence is emphasized by an attack on nuns by invading Danes, in dumb-show. Red Shirts and Black Shirts march on singing their songs. Both groups are easily deceived by the hypocritical speeches of the Plutocrat, and run grovelling after him when he displays the Golden Calf, Power. The Chorus points out the inefficacy of all parties,

and suggests getting alone with God.

Eliot said of the hell of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* that it was a hell without dignity. *The Rock* is set in the midst of a contemporary hell, the choruses imply it at every appearance; given a few honest phrases from even the crudest of true proletarian literature, the hell would break in upon us with the unbearable intensity of the present situation. But with romantic rejection and in the name of eternal damnation, Eliot bars it out for a much more traditional and much less distressing set of values, and produces as a result this unhappy farce of tepid conservatism. He knows that these nerveless scenes have nothing to do with Lancelot Andrewes or Jeremy Taylor, that his remote martyrdoms are of very different character from those his English bricklayers may well suffer fighting Fascism, but he can permit himself only anguish based on attractive hypotheses: "And if the blood of Martyrs is to flow on the steps, We must first build the steps." Actually Ethelbert leaves us singing a popular song, and *The Rock* ends with a perfervid conversation between the Major, Mrs. Poultridge and Millicent, on church decoration.

The dramatic defects of this play, the readiness of conversation, the characterless expository speeches, the simplification will be, I suppose, cited to show that all propaganda literature, Right or Left, is bad. That is not important. Insofar as Eliot, in his talk of eternal Good and Evil, means the abiding complexity and difficulty of human character, we can agree that the more a literature comprehends this complexity, the more intense it is likely to be. But it is interesting to compare bourgeois propaganda literature like *The Rock* and Paul Engle's *American Song*, with proletarian work on the same technical level, because in such samples the emotional fundamentals and strength of both cultures are so plainly exposed. In both, the symbols of evil, spiritual or physical, are much the same and easily indicated: triviality, dirt, hunger, idleness, oppression, torture. In *The Rock*, indeed, the only affecting choruses are those which give the sense of idleness and industrial decay. We compare the two literatures, then, not so much for their indictments, as for their assertions. And we find bourgeois propaganda factitious in its solutions, positive only in nostalgia, incompatible with existing reality, and, as literature, betrayed by an inability even to find adequate symbols for what it seeks. Eliot refers uncertainly to the eternal dilemma of Good and Evil, to individuality in God, to some new Crusade. To say that proletarian literature always rises above bourgeois literature by the power of its solution, is not, I think, to set merely an extra-literary criterion. The bourgeois writer dares not find in the materials of suffering and actuality from which he draws his strength, the implications which would point his conclusions, but he must, as in this play of Eliot's, cover those implications with substanceless phrases of personal desire. The proletarian writer, on the other hand, sees in that material the struggle