

REVIEW AND COMMENT

Thomas Boyd, Communist

A YEAR ago a letter appeared in Percy Hammond's column in The Herald-Tribune, accusing him of having defended capitalism and war in his review of a play by George Middleton. The letter concluded:

In the next World War, for which American capitalism is busily preparing, the basic conditions will be the same as in the last. Workers will be herded in by the draft. White-collar youths, unable to find another place in a society which has no better use for them, will eagerly enlist. Bankers will pyramid their riches by huge flotations. Some millions of men will be turned into foul cadavers. . . . Others will be patched with gut and silver where bone and sinew have been shot away. And in the end the industrialists of some country—England, Japan or America—will have gained a little larger markets for the things their workers produce but are paid so little they are unable to buy. There will be immense profits for the capitalists, death and misery for the clerks and workers. All this is clear. What I want to know is, where do you come in?

Thomas Boyd, who in this letter made public for the first time his newly formulated conclusions about capitalism, had every right to speak on the subject of war. Enlisting in the Marine Corps when he was eighteen years old, he saw service at Belleau Wood, Soissons, and St. Mihiel. He emerged from the war with the Croix de Guerre and with a body racked by poison gas.

When he was only twenty-four, Boyd wrote the story of the war as he had seen it. His novel, *Through the Wheat*, is, I hold, the most convincing portrayal of the World War by an American writer and the most devastating indictment of the war machine. Even hostile critics admitted that Boyd's characters were representative American soldiers and that this depiction of trench warfare was exact and unexaggerated.

Written in the very simplest style, depending on the cumulative effect of a series of unadorned descriptions, the novel overwhelms the reader with the terrifying reality of war. This is the final passage:

On the drab earth, beaten lifeless by carnage and corruption, drab bodies lay, oozing thin streams of pink blood, which formed dark, mysterious little pools by their sides. Jaws were slack—dark, objectionable little caverns in pallid faces. Some men still moaned, or, in a tone into which discouragement had crept, called for help.

Each body was alone, drawn apart from its companions by its separate and incommunicable misery.

Hicks tramped on through the field, dimly sensing the dead, the odors, the scene. He found his rifle where he had thrown it. As he picked it up, the ridge swarmed with small gray figures, ever growing nearer. He turned and walked toward his platoon. The breath from his nostrils felt cool. He raised his chin a little. The action

seemed to draw his feet from the earth. No longer did anything matter, neither the bayonets, the bullets, the barbed wire, the dead, nor the living. The soul of Hicks was numb.

Though this ending is as coldly pessimistic as anything could well be, the reader somehow feels in the whole book a power of protest that almost succeeds in translating the defeat into victory. And it is true, of course, that Thomas Boyd had not surrendered to despair. A full decade intervened between the publication of *Through the Wheat* and his avowal of Communism. It was a decade, for Boyd, of varied activities, blind stumblings, false starts. But never at any time did he enroll in the lost generation. He refused to be lost; he would not adopt an easy, comfortable, prosperous pessimism. And never for one moment did he cease to hate war or to try to find a way to end war.

The results of that decade, so far as his writing was concerned, were not wholly satisfactory. He wrote a book of short articles, only one or two of which approximate the intensity of *Through the Wheat*. His historical novels are certainly inferior to his war novel. The three biographies he wrote are shrewd, well-informed, more than competent studies of unconventional Americans: Simon Girty, Anthony Wayne, Harry Lee.

It would be pleasant to say that Boyd was a great writer, but it would not be quite true. His work, taken as a whole, entitles him to a perfectly respectable place among American novelists and biographers of the twenties. He had, moreover, written one novel, *Through the Wheat*, that very clearly suggested latent greatness. But nothing that he did between 1923 and 1935 measured up to the standard he had set.

I knew Boyd only after he became a Communist, but it is not difficult to imagine what he was like in the ten years before. He has, as a matter of fact, given many hints in his new novel, soon to be published, *In Times of Peace*. It is the continuation of the story of William Hicks, the central character of *Through the Wheat*, and it tells of restlessness, dreams of success, and frustration in the mad bourgeois world of the Coolidge era. It ends with Hicks among the unemployed, battered down by ruthless police as he stands in line for a job. But this time the soul of Hicks is not numb: he knows now whom he is fighting and why, and he goes to take his place in the ranks of the militant working class.

More than once I have heard Boyd say, "I was a Communist all the time, but I didn't have sense enough to know it." He was always aware, and perhaps most clearly at times of personal success and financial well-

being, that contemporary society was rotten. Even if he had not been able to use his eyes, the memory of the war would have shown him the viciousness of capitalism and the instability of what is called civilization. But why society was rotten and what could be done about it, he did not know. It took the years of crisis to teach him.

When Boyd did realize that he was a Communist, he wanted to act. He was living in Woodstock, Vermont, a small country town with a few writers and artists. He talked, of course, and his talk was fruitful, but conversational Communism was not enough. He wrote for Fight, and he volunteered to do reviews for THE NEW MASSES. Then, when a unit of the Communist Party was formed in one of Vermont's few industrial cities, he joined. Last summer members of the party told him that he was the only person available as candidate for governor. Obtaining signatures and speaking throughout the state meant the postponement of work he was eager to do, but he accepted the responsibility, and thousands of Vermonters realized for the first time that Communism was a reality and Communists human beings.

When the campaign was over, he went back to writing, and finished the two books on which he had been working. They were the first books he had written since he became a Communist, and he was naturally interested in giving expression to the new attitude he had developed and to the fresh insight that he felt he had acquired. I have read the novel, *In Times of Peace*, and part of the biography of John Fitch. It would be less than honest to say that I was wholly satisfied with the novel. It was a story that Boyd had to get out of his system, and it is certainly an interesting and an illuminating book. But I think it is fairly clear that it is the work of a man in a period of transition. It does not represent the complete integration that I feel Boyd had achieved only within the last few months of his life. It is not quite the book that the author of *Through the Wheat* should, once he had become a Communist, have written. The biography, so far as I can judge from the

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fragment I read, comes closer to satisfying achievement. The treatment is Marxist throughout, and this poor, exploited inventor of the steamboat—one of the innumerable inventors who have been robbed of both profit and fame—takes on significance as a symbolic figure in the development of American capitalism.

I am afraid that so restrained an analysis of Boyd's work conceals both the admiration I felt for him and the confidence I had in his future. It would be pleasanter for me to throw critical reservations out the window and write in unbounded praise. But it is precisely the greatest tragedy of his premature death that he died without having given a clear indication of the literary achievement that, if he had lived, would have been his.

Boyd was certainly a born rebel. His contempt for bourgeois convention was deep-seated, and it found constant expression in word and action. He had been, I gather, quite capable of breaking rules for the sake of having them broken and shocking people for the sake of seeing them shocked. This rebelliousness was at first largely blind, but it was one of the qualities that impelled him toward Communism. And when he fully understood what made contemporary society so detestable and what had to be done to change it, boisterous protest gave way to serious, laborious activity in the revolutionary movement. It took 1,500 signatures to put the Communist Party on the ballot in Vermont, and Boyd secured the larger part of them himself by persistent, wearisome, house-to-house and farm-to-farm canvassing. He submitted to the

routine of committee meetings; he delivered speeches, which he very much disliked to do; he spent long hours driving over the state to take care of minor details of the campaign. And he did all this with extraordinary vigor. Even when he was most serious, his high spirits simply brushed aside any suggestion of pompous solemnity. All his energy, so long dissipated in futile revolt, poured itself into his new-found tasks.

Twice in the course of the Vermont campaign I heard him speak. He was not a good speaker, nervous and at a loss for words. And yet his speaking was always effective, for the whole force of the man drove home his stumbling but perfectly sound analysis of capitalist decay. One of the meetings at which I heard him speak was attended largely by middle-class people, and the other was attended entirely by workers. He spoke much better at the second meeting. And I understood why when I saw how completely the workers—many of them granite cutters—accepted him as one of themselves. He obviously thought and felt almost entirely from the workers' point of view, and they responded to this quality in him.

Boyd signed the call for the Writers' Congress, and I have no doubt that he would have played an important part in it. He had the qualities of which revolutionary writers are made. His books, whatever their faults, prove it. His record in Vermont proves it. In terms of achievement and even more in terms of potentialities, the loss to the revolutionary movement is beyond measurement.

GRANVILLE HICKS.

Portrait of Two Liberals

CONDORCET, AND THE RISE OF LIBERALISM IN FRANCE, by J. Salwyn Schapiro. Harcourt. 306 page. \$3.50.

COMPARATIVELY few Americans have heard of Condorcet, the French nobleman who admired American institutions, who was an advocate of radical changes in the French state, and yet found himself one of the early victims of the French Revolution. But Professor Schapiro's life is nevertheless timely for two important reasons. Those of us who are interested in our own revolutionary tradition must be curious to know what aspects of it appealed to this admirer of Franklin and Thomas Paine. And

those who attracted by Marxian theory must realize that, after the history of the Russian Revolution, the indispensable history to study is that of Condorcet's period and the century following it in France. But this particular book has another reason for its significance. Professor Schapiro avows himself a liberal. His book is intended as an illustration of the "liberal" method in writing history. More specifically, it is a liberal's comment upon the father of liberalism.

The nature of this comment may become more clear if we try to suppose for a moment how a Marxian historian might have approached the same subject. He would probably have made a division, somewhat too

sharp to satisfy conservative scholars, between what in Condorcet's thought and action was impractical and obscurantist, and what was shortly, in the flow of history, to become transformed into the philosophy of Marx. He might have criticized Condorcet's reliance upon abstract reason. But he would certainly have pointed out that Condorcet was more empirical than either Rousseau or Montesquieu. Condorcet's belief that the constitution of the state of Pennsylvania was the nearest the ideal in existence, his belief that the Quaker society of this American state in the eighteenth century was the most admirable in the world, is certainly a more accurate representation of fact than Montesquieu's interpretation of the British constitution. Not only does he criticize Montesquieu on this score, but he quite frankly and correctly predicts that the American imitation of this much admired system of checks and balances through the separation of legislative, executive, and judicial functions will lead to absence of responsibility and to corruption in politics. Our supposititious biographer would praise and accept all this, and spend his effort probably in distinguishing between Condorcet's theory of human perfectibility and Marx' law of the economic determination of history. And when it came to practice, he might very well have pointed out that Condorcet, like Jefferson, erred in his theory when he kept his state on the conservative agricultural foundation because, out of historical necessity, he could not predict the rise of industrialism. As a result of the conditioning of environment, which is neither to be praised nor blamed but rather to be thoroughly understood, every act and idea of Condorcet would be interpreted as representing the dialectic opposition between a dying nucleus of neo-classical royalist attitudes and a nucleus struggling to develop into full-blown Marxian economic theory. Such an analysis might or might not be a rich and subtle one, but it would at all events be free from ambiguity.

By contrast Professor Schapiro's book is baffling, hesitant in its direction. Indeed, to some readers who might expect a liberal to acknowledge gratefully some sort of debt to his forebears, the book will seem traitorous. It is true that on the surface it is a dispassionate and scholarly biography. The author protects himself by an extensive reliance upon authorities. He quotes discreetly from Condorcet in the succinct manner of the well qualified college lecturer. And he has read everybody who has written upon him since. He relies to a considerable extent upon the judgment of Sainte-Beuve and Brunetiere, though he tells us they were hostile in their verdicts. But, as so often happens, when the pieces are assembled, the composite picture is not so clear. In his introduction Schapiro says that the genius is too far above his age to represent its hopes. The lesser figure, like Condorcet, brings us "closer to the advanced thought of his day." What the book actually shows is that the advanced

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