

BOOK REVIEWS

Elmer Rice's Debut As a Novelist

IMPERIAL CITY, by Elmer Rice, Coward-McCann, Inc. \$3.

IN his valorous attempt to portray the life of as complicated a city as New York, Mr. Rice has manipulated the tricks of a skillful playwright with an old-fashioned Dreiserian hand. The result, for myself, is an interesting self-portrait of the author, but there will be many who will enjoy the melodrama of this novel for its own sake.

As Mr. Rice has undoubtedly discovered, since his declaration a few years ago that he would never again write a play, a novel discloses more of the personality of its creator than does any other literary form. A novel of the magnitude of *Imperial City* is an arena in which the author, at the end, can stand quite naked. When a piece of work doesn't quite come off, the infirmities of the poor human being out of whom it came are pitilessly exposed to view. It is the fear of such exposure, of course, which deters so many from ever setting pen and brush to paper and canvas, and paralyzes many painters and writers in the midst of their careers and in the very midst of a piece of work. Mr. Rice has *not* been deterred, and his attempted portrayal of his native city is far from inconsiderable.

The primary structure of this novel is the one employed most successfully in our own day by Dos Passos, *i.e.*, the selection of types from different strata in the population, and hence from different geographical areas of the city. After depicting each person on his native heath, engaged in a pursuit characteristic of his social position and his psyche, these people are mingled together in accordance with the complications of a plot which bears more or less similitude to life. This structure imposes one inescapable burden upon the reader. He must start the novel a half dozen or more times, familiarizing himself with new people in new situations, unrelated to the people of the preceding chapter. It is not until the reader is well along that the characters begin to meet and their lives to merge.

The way in which Mr. Rice has selected his types of different strata of population is interesting. He has selected them from the newspapers, very often the tabloids. They are all melodramatic people. It can be argued that they *ipso facto* fail to typify; but this need not necessarily be so. The range of his selection is definitely representative—Wall Street, Park and Fifth Avenues, the upper East Side, Greenwich Village, Times Square, Central Park West, Morningside Heights, Harlem, the Bronx, the lower East Side, Brooklyn, Queens, and Coney Island.

It is inevitable that Mr. Rice would be more

at home in some quarters than in others and that certain characters would suffer. For me the central characters suffer—the Coleman family, through which Mr. Rice portrays the plutocracy that exerts the dominant power in the imperialist city of New York. I found them given names they would not have in life; speaking as Dreiser might have them speak, and as they most certainly do not speak today; and with the tags of their prototypes plainly in view. They are presented to the reader with delicacy and envy, and it is as though Mr. Rice had never met them except in the tabloids and the society columns.

The love affair of Gaillard Coleman is one of the dreariest examples of unintended anemia in current fiction. Mr. Rice is never very happy in his depiction of the tender passion. It is noteworthy that almost all of the coition in this novel—and there is a good deal of it—is achieved through supplication by the male. This feminine quality may account for the over-idealization of Gaillard Coleman. His prototype in real life is incomparably a finer, stronger, and better person.

And it is this Gaillard Coleman whom Mr. Rice prefers. His intrusion of his preference is artistically wrong and intellectually telltale, and the utilization of such a two-legged, pre-war futility for the keystone of his novel is an irreparable structural flaw. With such a keystone the edifice is artistically unsound, for no such childish building blocks are at the core of the ruthless and dynamic city of New York.

How and why did Mr. Rice perpetrate this fatal mistake? By accepting and nurturing such intellectual naïveté as the following: "There's nothing like a social point of view for taking the joy out of life"; the troubles of mankind "can be traced to biological and psychological causes—and just to the plain inexplicable"; "not one in a thousand takes an abstract interest in good government or is animated by a definite social philosophy"; "returning travelers tell me that every year thousands of pilgrims visit the shrine in Red Square where the body of St. Ilyich lies miraculously preserved." The last phrase is uttered by "a noble old man"—the father, incidentally, of the girl Gaillard Coleman is woo-woo-wooing. Some of these phrases are author interpolations, and there is interior evidence that all of them meet with Mr. Rice's approval.



Woodcut by H. A. Blumenstiel

Were Mr. Rice free of his predisposition toward half-truths, which seems to have persisted from his pre-war adolescence, he might have treated the Coleman family with a strength that is frequently visible in other parts of the novel. The satire he achieved in dissecting a play imported from England, for example, is strong and effective. So are his characterizations of those people to whom he feels superior. He is capable of great skill, as in the first indication of the homosexuality of Christopher's mistress; and capable of some god-awful plopping clichés, as in the rape of Miriam, and in the ham melodrama of Christopher Coleman, Fanny Coleman, and Ruby the tramp. It is curious how little universal sympathy for the human being there is in this book.

The manipulation of a hundred different characters in order to produce overlapping of lives, so that the same people stand in different relationships to as many of the other characters as possible, has entailed considerable agility and some drawing of the long bow of coincidence. For the most part, Mr. Rice has managed this contriving well. Some of the tricks, through repetition, become quite mechanical, such as ending chapters with a blackout just before the couple gets into bed. The dishonesty of the trick with which Mr. Rice ends the book (borrowed from Frank Stockton) can only be considered a residue from his years in the theater. It is a piece of press agency of which Mr. Rice should be ashamed.

This novel is about contemporary New York. Yet a large slice of the plot is the Harry Thaw case; the politics are those of a Clarence Darrow liberal; the writing is like Dreiser. All that is closest to the person of the author seems to belong to the immediate past. He has done his best, and he has neither altogether succeeded nor altogether failed. It was a major effort, and he may want to try again, reinvigorated, perhaps, with a knowledge that, for the artist, faith and participation in the struggle of humanity must never cease.

HENRY HART.

Scientific Socialism: A Source Document

ENGELS ON CAPITAL, translated and edited by Leonard E. Mins. International Publishers. \$1.25.

THE most authoritative introduction to Marx's *Capital* can now be obtained in a book just published under the title *Engels on Capital*. Leonard Mins is to be congratulated for his translation and editing, and International Publishers for issuing this unique collection of papers by Marx's closest friend and life-long collaborator; it makes available to the public explanations of Marx's ideas



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one who participated in their elaboration as the co-founder of scientific socialism.

This book contains Engels's synopsis of the first volume of *Capital* and his supplement to the third volume, giving further details on the development of surplus value. It further contains letters, articles, and reviews of *Capital* written by Engels at various times. One of these he wrote in English for the *Fortnightly Review*, then edited by John Morley. To facilitate its acceptance, he had one of his English friends sign it, but Morley turned it down anyway and it has never been printed until now. What the famous liberal editor rejected was a lucid exposition of ideas that were to revolutionize the world.

One of the simplest expositions which Engels did was the one which appeared in Wilhelm Liebknecht's Leipzig paper and which opens the Mins collection. Written for workers, it outlines with brief and beautiful clarity the theory of surplus value. When this is grasped, it becomes easier to understand the central conflict of capitalist society.

The surplus labor of the worker, over and above the time necessary to replace his wages, is the source of surplus value, of profit, of the continually growing accumulation of labor [Engels explains. Therefore] it is to the capitalist's interest to make the working day as long as possible. The longer it is, the more surplus value he obtains. The worker correctly feels that every hour of labor which he performs over and above the replacement of the wage is unjustly extorted from him; he experiences in his own person what it means to work excessive hours. The capitalist fights for his profit, the worker for his health, for a few hours of daily rest, to be able to occupy himself as a human being as well, in other ways besides working, sleeping, and eating.

The strike is thus an inevitable product of capitalist society, and not, as Westbrook Pegler seems to think, a villainous conspiracy of the C.I.O.

Two ideas of *Capital* which Engels emphasized in his review for the Leipzig workers are worth noting here. One dealt with the possibilities of improving the conditions of labor under capitalism. The struggle for fixing the working day, he pointed out, has lasted from the first historic appearance of free workers to the present day. But only where the law fixed the working day and supervised its observance could one really say that there existed a normal working day. So far this was the case almost solely in England. There the ten-hour law had been won by the workers "through years of endurance, through the most persistent, stubborn struggle with the factory owners, through freedom of the press, the right of association and assembly, as well as through adroit utilization of the divisions within the ruling class itself."

Marx's *Capital* contains the most exhaustive material on the history of this struggle; it tells how the English workers obtained legislative regulation of the working day in their favor. The forthcoming North German Reichstag was going to discuss the regulation of factory labor, and the workers had an opportunity to elect deputies to that Reichstag. Engels urged such deputies to study Marx's

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