

# BOOK REVIEWS

## A Book for the Millions

I LIKE AMERICA, by Granville Hicks. Modern Age Books. 50 cents.

SUPPOSE a miracle were to happen. Suppose that Modern Age Books, with their far-flung distribution system, and their low prices, were to decide, for once in a way, really to do the kind of job they originally intended, that is, to distribute books on a mass scale. Suppose they reexamined this book they have just published and allowed their imaginations to play with the realization of just how wide the potential market for it is. And suppose they concentrated their efforts on every means of publicity and merchandising to cover that market. Suppose, in short, that they succeeded in putting this book into the hands of the not less than ten or twelve million Americans to whom it is directly addressed, and who ought to have a chance to read it. Suppose all that. At once fascinating possibilities open up, and not only for Modern Age Books (who would, of course, be rolling in wealth) but for the country at large.

This is not a middle-class nation, as Hicks points out. But the ten or twelve million he is addressing, the professionals and small-business people, the farmers who are getting along, the literate, newspaper- and magazine-reading public, are an immensely important and, in some situations, a decisive section of the population. In his "Prologue—for a Certain Patriot," Hicks writes:

What I want to do in this book is present my case to the middle middle-class, to the group to which we both belong. As I conceive it, we are facing a jury of our peers—in the strictest sense of the word. You do not have to worry about the presentation of your case; it is stated daily in newspapers, magazines, radio speeches, sermons, and classroom lectures. It is the case for things as they are, and is dear to those who have easy access to the various means of influencing public opinion.

Mine is the case for change, and it is less often heard. It is stated by only a few newspapers and magazines, and these not widely circulated. It is given only a few minutes on the radio in contrast to the hours and hours of which your spokesmen avail themselves. It is presented by a mere handful of ministers and teachers, and these constantly suffer from the displeasure that you and your friends know how to make so effective.

That is why I find it necessary to address myself in a book to your class and mine. My thesis is not that I am as good an American as you; that is too modest a claim; I maintain that I am a better American. And I shall try to prove it to the jury of our peers.

This is a book about America. It is not a report on a special tour of investigation. It is not the outcome of scholarly researches. It is not even the impressions of an extensive traveler. It is merely a statement by a middle-class American, based on what he has seen in the course of an ordinary life and what he has read in intervals not devoted to the literary studies that are his professional concern.

To imagine this great section of the American people becoming thoroughly aware of what has been happening to their country, why it has been happening, and what can be done about it, is to imagine an enormous raising of the entire political level of the nation, an immense strengthening of the forces of progress. And *I Like America* could go a long way toward accomplishing just that clarification of the puzzled, muddled, and bedeviled minds of the "middle middle-class." Pounded on every side by propaganda for a return to Hooverism, with every major source of news and information poisoned, they grope toward a solution. They don't know all the facts, but they know something is seriously wrong, and that it is rapidly getting no nearer right. And here is a book which tells them all about it; which doesn't shriek or scold or weep; which starts out from the same class viewpoint as their own, with the same love of justice and decency in human relations, the same love of country, the same aim of widespread human happiness. When Hicks writes of his ancestry, his deep roots in this land, of the kind of America he likes, of the life he and his family lead, he achieves the persuasiveness of a personal letter to a friend. When he exhibits the misery that exists all around the 10 percent of the population he is talking to, he is demonstrating, in the same way, the needlessness of it.

Hicks starts from scratch, in his discussion of the problems facing America. His own family, their house, the scheming and planning to build the upstairs study, to get the artesian well drilled and the electric wires run in, are details which accurately evoke a thoroughly familiar picture of middle-class life. And that life is good to Hicks, in its balance of work and rest, except for the absence of security. But from the relative comforts of this life

Hicks looks abroad on the whole of depression America, where another kind of life drags on. He recounts what he has seen in a coal patch, in city slums, in factory towns, and in the back country where the stranded farmers are rotting in their misery. These are the aspects of America Hicks doesn't like and which he invites the reader to detest enough to change; the squandering of human resources, the unemployment and inadequate relief and semi-starvation; half a million children in New York City alone growing up in families on relief incomes; "scientific" budgets of \$8.05 a week for a family of five; suppression of freedom, academic and civil; Jim Crowism and blacklists, tear gas and lynchings. The indictment of the failure of capitalism to live up to its boast of plenty and freedom leads into a discussion of whether people can work together to wipe out all these evils, and here Hicks is at his most persuasive. He presents the dilemma of the middle class in its most serious aspect, as that of a vanishing class without enough security in the present or confidence in the future, to enable it to fight for its separate existence against the inexorable advance of capitalist decay. The overshadowing danger of fascism as an alternative to collective action to guarantee democracy, is ably presented, and there is a moving "Epilogue—for My Daughter." The America he likes emerges in three tenses, the America of the past, of the present, and the future, and it is on the America of the future that he banks and toward which he propels the book.

He writes at all times in the simplest language, with never a lapse into an academic lingo calculated to send the reader unschooled in radical literature to the dictionary, or to bed. This is a style of presenting an argument that the propaganda literature of the radical movement could emulate with benefit, for it recognizes that writing is a partnership in which the reader has at least an equal interest.

Just because it is so simply done, it is the more remarkable that we have had so few books of such effectiveness as *I Like America*. Hicks has his belittlers, who have been yapping at his heels for years, and it may be that we shall be told he is being altogether too elementary—naïve is the word I believe. If it were so, if the ten or twelve millions he is writing for already knew all he has to tell them, it would be very well for all of us. That they don't know all, or a hundredth part, of the material brought together in *I Like America*, is abundantly evident in the eagerness with which the reactionaries center their propaganda on just these "middle middle-classes."

In any event, what *I Like America* needs is not criticism. Nor is this review written in any spirit of unpartisan objective appraisal. We like Hicks, and more, we regard him as one of the most valuable citizens we have. In five years the only quarrel we've had with



Painting by Ida Laura Clark

Sharecroppers

him is over just this book, because NEW MASSES should have had it, to print. What *I Like America* needs is distribution. It is a book for the millions; of course we'll settle for less. But here is fair warning: Unless *I Like America* is given a circulation of at least fifty thousand within a few months, we'll publish it ourselves. And let Modern Age sue!

HERMAN MICHELSON.

## Partisanship in Literature

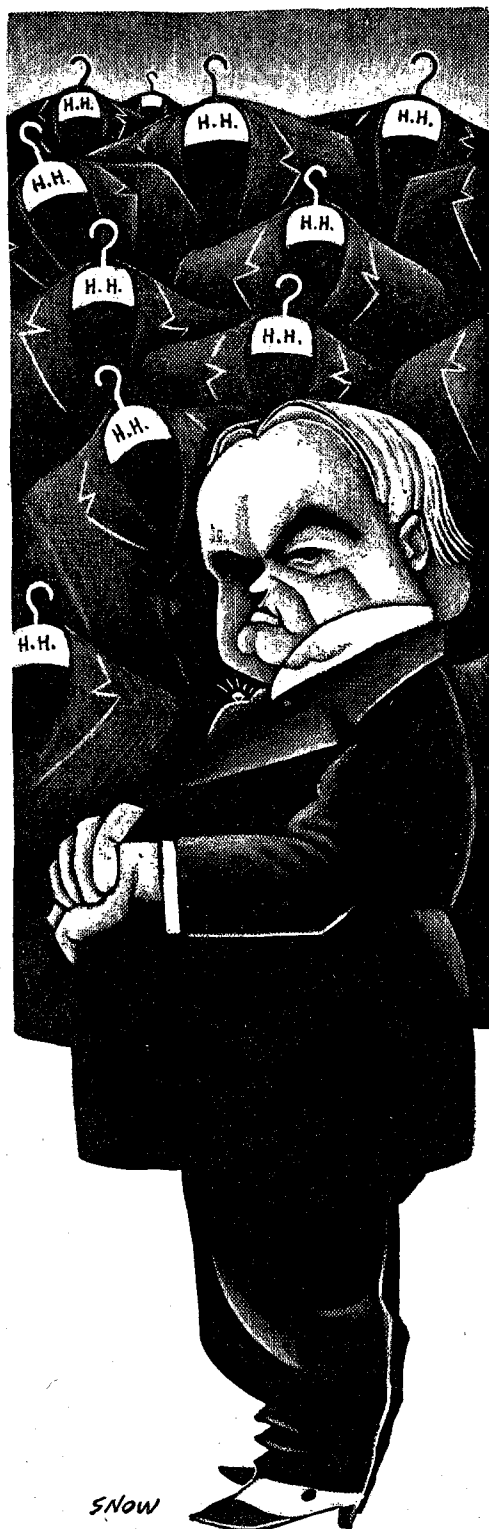
DIALECTICS No. 5. *The Critics' Group*. 10 cents.

THE latest issue of this valuable Marxian literary journal includes a full reprint of Lenin's classic article on "Party Organization and Party Literature." Originally published in 1905, this essay is extremely pertinent and instructive today in the distinctions which it draws between the bourgeois and proletarian concepts of the writer's status in society. Lenin's analysis of the relation between the revolutionary writer and the working class movement is the best single answer I know to the professional distorters of the Marxian attitude toward literature. Edmund Wilson and John Chamberlain and Bernard DeVoto might conceivably profit by studying it.

Lenin stressed the fact that "the literary aspect of the work of a proletarian party cannot be identified in a stereotyped manner with other aspects of its work. . . . There can be no doubt that literature is the last thing to lend itself to mechanical equalization, to leveling, to domination of the majority by the minority." He was convinced that in literature "it is absolutely necessary that the widest latitude be assured to personal initiative and individual inclinations, to thought and imagination, to form and content." The function of the artist is not mechanically to repeat prepared slogans. The problem of his art cannot be solved by edict.

Those who listened to Earl Browder at the last Congress of the League of American Writers will recall that he made the same emphasis. They will recall that Browder stressed another point too: that writers cannot claim exemption from those responsibilities which other men share in society. This other side of the question receives ample consideration in Lenin's article. Socialist proletarian literature, Lenin wrote, "cannot be at all an individual affair independent of the proletariat as a whole." It may strike some critics as "strange and curious," as Lenin predicted it would, but "literature must necessarily and inevitably become an inextricable part of the work of the Social-Democratic Party."

Lenin envisaged the response to his criticism of anarchic conceptions of the writer's role: "What! cries some intellectual, a passionate lover of freedom. What! You wish to collectivize a subject as delicate and individual as literary creation! You wish workers, by majority vote, to decide the problems of



*"When we raised the American standard of living to include an extra suit of clothes and a trip to the movies we introduced a most delicate adjustment."*

—HERBERT HOOVER.

science, philosophy, esthetics! You deny absolute freedom to the absolute individual creation of the mind!"

Calm yourselves, Lenin advised the gentlemen who, at the drop of a hat, cry: Artists in Uniform! In the first place, the party of the workers is a voluntary association, and freedom in such an association does not involve the right to oppose the interests of those with

whom you have agreed to work. Those one-hundred percenters so passionately devoted to "freedom of criticism," as Lenin pointed out in his exposures of Trotsky at the same period, are in reality more devoted to the dream of breaking up the workers' association. As I read this passage, I recalled that at the Writers' Congress a group of Trojan-horse Trotskyites demanded to know why such "passionate lovers of freedom" as Sidney Hook and Max Eastman had not been invited. Harry Hansen also howled from the sidelines. The answer was obvious to anybody who was not deliberately seeking to destroy the purposes of the Congress. A voluntary association which has as one of its major objectives the support of the people's front and the loyalist government was asked in the name of "freedom of criticism" to admit men whose undisguised aim is to destroy the people's front and the loyalist government. Lenin was not deceived by these critics of "bureaucratization." He had a proper scorn for their hypocrisy.

Nor was Lenin more patient with those critics, who, like Joseph Wood Krutch and Sinclair Lewis, make a great to-do about "curbs" on the freedom of proletarian writers. The real restraints are those imposed on the non-proletarian writers. "The freedom of the bourgeois writer, artist, or actress is nothing but a self-deceptive (or hypocritically deceiving) dependence upon the money bags, upon bribery, upon patronage. And we Socialists expose this hypocrisy, we tear away this false front—not in order to attain a classless art and literature (that will be possible only in a Socialist, classless society), but in order to oppose to a literature hypocritically free, and in reality allied with the bourgeoisie, a literature truly free, *openly* allied with the proletariat. This literature will be free because rather than careerism and pecuniary motives it will be the Socialist cause and sympathy with the workers that will draw ever new forces into its ranks." And, in spite of Edmund Wilson's urbane chastisements, "The organized Socialist proletariat must keep watch over all this activity, supervise it completely, breathe into it the living spirit of the living cause of the proletariat. . . ."

The two other items in this issue of *Dialectics* supply ample corroborative evidence that Soviet writers are observing these Leninist principles. Angel Flores has compiled a very useful list of Soviet creative works available in English translations. It is an impressive list, even though it represents only a fraction, of course, of the creative work which has been produced in the U.S.S.R. since the October Revolution. Certainly, such writers as Valentin Kataev, Ilya Ehrenbourg, Leonid Leonov, Lev Kassil, Benjamin Kaverin, Nikolai Ostrovski, Boris Pilnyak, Alexei Tolstoy, and Mikhail Sholokhov, and many others, have had the "widest latitude" assured to them as to "thought and imagination, to form and content." And certainly, they have reflected the truth that Socialist literature "cannot be at all an individual affair independent of the proletariat as a whole."