

that we must remember our sense of proportion in judging a contribution of this sort.

Assuredly, *Battle Hymn of China* is no definitive political guide to the maze of Chinese society. We do not pick it up for that type of guidance. We read it to become acquainted with what kind of man the Chinese soldier is as he faces the problems, both military and political—and also biological—which to most people would long since have proved insuperable. This is not to say that there isn't much of political value in what Agnes Smedley recounts. Anyone whose political thinking on China has been sharpened by reading the brilliant analyses of Mao Tse-tung and Chu Teh and their colleagues will find in Miss Smed-

ley's book much concrete documentation. Page after page contains detailed accounts of the great fissure in China of which I spoke early in this review, the split between those willing and anxious to accept all the democratic consequences of winning China's nationhood and those exploiting the war for their own private benefit and, wittingly or unwittingly, for the benefit of the Axis. The whole volume, as a matter of fact, is a series of case studies of this fissure and of the crying need for national unity. Maybe Agnes Smedley is not a political writer, but I challenge any one to show me a book containing more ammunition for political thinking.

FREDERICK V. FIELD.

The Language Men Speak

From Spain to the siege of Sevastopol. Norman Rosten's "The Fourth Decade" reviewed by Joy Davidman.

THE FOURTH DECADE, by Norman Rosten. Farrar & Rinehart. \$2.00.

THE little critics continue to moan in the little magazines. Poetry's a frail butterfly, they tell you, and its wings have got broken by the iron realities of this war. There isn't any American war poetry, there can't be any; the little critics refuse to discover it. All the *true* poets—whom you may identify by their consistent refusal to write anything comprehensible—must continue to stifle in the unventilated closets of their own souls.

And meanwhile, of course, the great poetry of this war is being written. It looks at heroes; it sings on piercing trumpets, and it does not ask the critics' permission first. Such a book as Norman Rosten's *Fourth Decade* is all the answer our defeatist critics need. Here is verse written, like the Declaration of Independence, out of "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind" rather than out of the contemplation of the poet's navel. Norman Rosten is speaking to human beings of their own struggles and achievements; he speaks in the language that men speak, and it is a language that burns and freezes with fiery beauty and with icy rage. You will not find here the self-pitying whine which neurotics from Eliot to Delmore Schwartz have attempted to establish as the sole business of verse.

But you *will* find Spain, and the volunteers coming across the Pyrenees on foot in the cold and surreptitious dawn. You will find Sevastopol, holding the Nazis back till its bricks and the bodies of its children were confounded in one red ruin.

*This was not Paris, the open city.
This was a closed city and men fought
for it.*

*They pulled the sky down over their
heads.*

Honor blazed in their eyes like suns.

For eight months the body held.

*This is the last day of the eighth
month.*

This is the day the heartbeat stopped.

When verse is as good as that it becomes an absolute, and you cannot measure it with yardstick, you can only feel it go through your heart like a knife. There is much in *The Fourth Decade* which is as good as that, particularly in the last section, "Siege," which tells the story of Sevastopol. Norman Rosten has not contented himself with the empty lip-service which declares that the Russians are so brave, the Nazis so brutal, the whole thing so terrible, yes—and goes on its way without the faintest conception of what terror and bravery really mean. Rosten brings you face to face with the individual men; with Piotr Barkanov, torn to pieces between the Nazi tanks; with Luzenko, the grower of vines, and the nameless sailor drowning at sunset in the Black Sea, and the nameless lovers in the bombed hospital; with twenty-five soldiers trapped in the cellar of the armory when the Nazis held the city over their heads. He is not afraid that horrible things will destroy his flowerlike verses, he dares to show you a schoolgirl with her hair in two long braids, tied to a bed for the pleasure of the Nazi officers. Yet, from these innumerable tragedies, a single sharp beauty is created—the beauty of the unbroken spirit of a fighting people. It is good to see poetry saying again what so much poetry has forgotten to say in the last twenty years: that there is only one final beauty, to be on your feet, and only one ultimate ugliness, to fall to your knees.

The heroic mood of "Siege" is almost

equaled by the earlier group of poems on the Spanish Republic and the International Brigades, and here Rosten has opportunities at times for another mood—that of savage irony, which he handles brilliantly. The escapists waltzing to Strauss on the ice at Radio City, the renegade liberals who "left no forwarding address"—they serve as a black background to the tragedy of Spain. And there is bigger prey:

*Generalissimo Francisco,
the man of God, the pope's choice,
voted most likely to succeed. . . .*

*Approach, friend, and be recognized!
Greetings! We rejoice with you!*

The State Department on this occasion

*of your victory takes your bloody hand
in most fraternal greetings. . . .*

*We assume the German and Italian
troops*

will leave as quietly as possible.

Let everything take place quietly.

*Let the political prisoners be shot
quietly*

*and the bleeding be as internal as
possible. . . .*

This has not lost its bitter relevance in the years since the betrayal of the Spanish Republic. Nor has the extraordinary newsreel-in-three-acts of the League of Nations, in which swift flashes of historic moments build up to Munich and the final catastrophe—"We walk to the exits, into the burning world." Wherever there is a positive emotion to be expressed, whether it be rage or love, Rosten is at his best. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the opening section of the book is its weakest; for here Rosten is merely tilting at paper windmills. Rotary clubs, literary teas, and radio soap operas—all the more commonplace sillinesses of the thirties—are obviously not quite such exciting material for poetry as the siege of Sevastopol, and Rosten's humorous attack on them has been influenced rather too much by the later trivialities of Fearing. Nevertheless there are moments which give you the authentic "cauld grue" of horror:

*Down, down the decade comes;
all the king's horses
and all the king's men
will not put it together again.*

The Fourth Decade is a delight for its own sake. And it is equally valuable as a symptom of the healthy morale of the American people that such poetry should appear just now, that Norman Rosten should be able to reach millions over the radio with the *Ballad of Bataan* while defeatist poets must live by taking in one another's washing. With the radio poetry resumes its long-lost character as one of the vocal arts; it sheds the affectations of the slim pale-mauve volumes and regains di-

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rectness and sincerity. And if *The Fourth Decade* is any indication, American poetry is even now coming back to the people for good and all.

Joy DAVIDMAN.

Brief Reviews

THE STORY OF THE AMERICAS, by *Leland Dewitt Baldwin*, Simon and Schuster. \$3.50.

THE OTHER AMERICAS, by *Edward Tomlinson*, Charles Scribner's Sons. \$3.00.

BOTH of these books have their place on the shelf of any man's Latin American library. They pose no deep problems, assay no peaks of Darien; they conquer neither new frontiers nor ancient civilizations as did Pizarre. But they round out in an interesting and stimulating way one's knowledge of our hemisphere. Baldwin's work, while re-telling the story of how the two Americas were first discovered and settled, is most interesting on the history of the early Spanish and Portuguese operations. The tale of the Conquistadores lives again with particular brilliance and brutality. What will impress the North American reader most is the fact that our Latin American friends have a much longer and more tragic history than ours; the roots go back five centuries and are gnarled in the remains of the great Indian civilizations. Baldwin tells the story directly, pausing on some of the more bizarre details.

Tomlinson's is a kind of travelogue: South America as seen in terms not so much of history and underlying economic and social reality but in every-day life, mores, foods, costume, and custom. It conveys in a very adequate fashion the physical sense of the other American peoples, the kind of land they live in, their way of thinking. Not too deep, but neither so shallow that one cannot float through it pleasantly.

THE SPANISH LABYRINTH, by *Gerald Brennan*, MacMillan. \$3.50.

NOTWITHSTANDING its considerable value as a historical survey of Spanish history since the fall of the first republic eighty years ago, this book succeeds in painting a rather poisonous picture of the unforgettable fight of the second Republic in our time. Brennan's book has scholarship, a great deal of interesting material on Spanish syndicalism, on the national issues such as those in Catalenia, and the personalities and methods of Spanish reaction. But it is painfully clear that his friendship for Luis Araquistain and the German Trotskyist, Franz Borkenau, completely warps his view of the Republic's battle. Page after page on Soviet policy toward Spain in the thirties, and the role of the Spanish Communist Party are not only erroneous, but repulsive. An ugly example of how scholarship stops where professional anti-Communism sets in.

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