



## REVIEW and COMMENT

# THE MAN WHO WAS RALPH FOX

By **SAMUEL SILLEN**

SOMETIMES it seems to have happened an age back and in another world. Sometimes it seems that only yesterday, only this morning, the cable arrived telling us that Ralph Fox was dead, killed by a fascist bullet near Lopera in Andalusia.

Fox was dead! January 3, 1937. In England and in China, in the Soviet Union and the United States, wherever men had read his books, we grieved that this brave and good fighter for freedom was dead.

He was acting as Assistant Political Commissioner with the International Brigade. The fascists advanced from Cordova. Our men—how very much ours they were!—took cover behind olive-trees. Junker planes bombed low, strafed with explosive bullets.

Ralph Fox ran across open ground to help set up machine-gun positions to cover the fascist flank. A long chance, but necessary. "It was a supremely brave thing to do," wrote Hugh Slater, describing the mission for International Press Correspondence; "the bombing and machine-gun fire were at their most intense, and it was almost certain death for anybody to leave cover. Fox knew this, but he considered it necessary to take the risk."

Later this open ground became a no-man's land, center of crossfire. At night a soldier crawled out to collect the papers from the pockets of the fallen men. He found Fox's notebook. The fighting was so fierce that the brigade had to move to another sector before the bodies could be gathered and identified.

That is how Ralph Fox died.

And that is very much the way in which his English comrades, writing men like himself, died—the young and brilliant poets, novelists, critics, the John Cornfords and the Christopher Caudwells.

"Tragic waste," some people said then, and may still say. But for Fox it was not a life wasted. Only a few weeks before his death he had written from Albacete: "Victory means the end of fascism everywhere sooner or later, and most likely sooner." How terribly

right he was, and how tragically stupid were the embargoes and nonintervention pacts that throttled victory!

We did not win, but Fox and his comrades knew that the fight against the fascists in Spain, win or lose, was only part of a struggle which would not cease until the people's triumph was beyond the range of reversal. "In any case," he wrote, "the very fact of the resistance has wakened up the democratic forces, encouraged them, and weakened the enemy to an extent we don't quite yet realize. So however hard one's work may be, and exasperating, we do feel it counts, is history, and must be effective."

It did count; it was history. Fox, like the American Dave Dorans and Joe Dalletts, lost his life in the early round of a fight that reached to Stalingrad and Bataan and will cease only when "the democratic forces" are in Berlin and Tokyo—and Madrid.

"Our little army is of every nation," Fox wrote in another letter from Albacete that last December of his life. "We have created the first International Army to fight for peace and freedom."

In that army of every nation, Fox had the job of educating political workers. Five hours sleep, and meals if and when, serving as a general nurse, mother, teacher and commander to the British boys as they came through, a life "all very topsyturvy—and looked forward to immensely."

**W**HENCE had he come? Why? To understand this is to appreciate the heroic challenge of our times and the magnificent men who have answered it with their lives.

He was born in Halifax, Yorkshire, in 1900. His family was of the middle class. He finished his education at Oxford. And then, rejecting the conventional, well-blinkered career that might have been his as a sensitive young intellectual, scorning the prevailing cynicism of the postwar writers, he decided to become a conscious part of history.

Fox joined the English Communist Party. He joined, as Harry Pollitt, Sec-

retary of that Party, tells us, "from a deep sense of intellectual conviction, and from the moment he took out his Party card, his life was dedicated to the cause of Communism." And Pollitt adds: "Whether as author, journalist, or instructor of our factory groups in various parts of London, Fox undoubtedly influenced the thought of thousands of working men and women, and also of a big section of the professional classes of this country." Ralph Fox anticipated and encouraged that alliance between the worker and the intellectual which was to become a striking feature of the fight against fascism.

**I**N 1920 Fox went to the Soviet Union, visiting the areas hardest hit by famine. And there, under the most adverse circumstances, he saw the future and he saw it work, as did Lincoln Steffens around the same time. His feeling about the Soviet Union—it was to sustain him until the day of his death in Spain—is best expressed in his biography of Lenin (1933). He noted Lenin's direct simplicity of outlook, his intense love of life.

"The world today," he wrote, "is full of dictators and would-be dictators. A moment's glance at any one of them is sufficient to convince one that Lenin was not such a 'dictator.' He was a man made in the mould of Lincoln and Cromwell, very simple, very rugged, very great, fully conscious of his own importance in the history of the world, but who never gazed at himself in the mirror of history, never in his life made a false gesture, played at heroics, or spoke hysterically.

"He had knowledge, intellectual power, vision; the power of swift decision and decisive action; courage beyond the normal; but yet the most striking thing in his whole character is that he was a man like other men. No one could have more detested the idea of a superman than did Lenin, or more heartily despised the false culture and cheap philosophy that lay behind it.

"If in the world's history there have been few men his equal, it is only be-

cause the great tragedy of that history has been that the talents of man have been wasted, mocked, suppressed, and vilely extinguished by the ferocity of human society."

It was because Lenin and the Soviet state he founded had fought the ferocity of human society that Ralph Fox became an ardent Communist. And it was because fascism sought to erect ferocity into the sole principle of human society that he gave his life in the fight against fascism.

Fox's life and mind were exceptionally rich and versatile. For he was not only the biographer of Lenin. He was a novelist as well. He was an acutely sensitive and informed literary critic. And he was a profound student and analyst of political affairs. He was, to use a favorite phrase of his, "a man alive"; he did not wall up his mind with categories.

Consider the novelist, to begin with. Even in a non-fiction work like his *Genghis Khan* (1936), we meet the master of narrative art, bringing the world to us in vivid images. He is describing the impression made on an islander of the North Sea by the steppes and plains of Central Asia, the contradictory emotions evoked by the vast distances:

"At first you feel overwhelmed by the feeling of land, that here you are in the driest, most continental and essentially land parts of the world. The sea becomes a distant dream; so many thousands of miles away in this or that direction—you are equidistant from all the great oceans, as near to the Atlantic as to the Pacific. And then, when, choked with dust and blinded by the monotonous glare of yellow earth, brilliant sky and bright sun, you have at last forgotten the very existence of sea, you are suddenly seized by the feeling that you are riding by the shores of a great ocean. That long purple-brown cliff which stretches to your left must surely have the waves beating at its foot."

This vivid, evocative quality, combined with an imaginative grasp of characters and events, gives distinction to his novel *Storming Heaven* (1926). The title is from the phrase used by Marx in describing the heroism of the fighters of the Commune who "stormed heaven." The novel deals mainly with Siberia. It opens with the evacuation of Vladivostok by the Japanese shortly before its incorporation into the USSR. It is an exciting, colorful book, even



"The Day Before Passover" (receiving free matzo's), oil by Geri Pine. From her exhibition "Out of My Daily Life," at the Bonestell Gallery through January 13.

though it does not have the technical finish of a later narrative like *Conversation with a Lama* or the superb imaginative quality of *They Hanged Frank Whittam*.

The British critic and editor John Lehmann recalls that one of the things that impressed him most in his early meetings with Ralph Fox was his intense interest in literature as literature. "This," writes Lehmann, "was a surprise to me then, chiefly I think because I was not yet free of the delusion, common among my contemporaries, that Marxists had a cut-and-dried method of dealing with literature, and were really only interested in it insofar as it proved something political." Fox corrected this delusion as he talked about the English novel from Fielding to D. H. Lawrence, discussing with zest and insight the beauties of style or the brilliance of character-creation.

BUT of course Fox was at the opposite end of the world from the art-for-art's sake obscurantists. As one who was deeply saturated with the humanist outlook of Marxism, he was concerned with literature as a reflection of men's experience and as a mold of men's minds. And in his brilliant work of criticism, *The Novel and The People*,

Ralph Fox has given us his mature reflections on the art of fiction, just as that other Communist who died in Spain, Christopher Caudwell, left us a monumental work on the art of poetry in his *Illusion and Reality*.

*The Novel and The People* (1937) deals with the crisis of ideas that threatened to destroy the once secure position of the English novel, and it investigates the changes that must take place in fiction if it is to retain its vitality. For Fox, the novel was not merely fictional prose, but "the prose of man's life, the first art to attempt to take the whole man and give him expression." And he is concerned with preserving its stature and dignity "in a time in which nothing less than the fate of humanity is being decided."

With extraordinary economy and clarity, Fox explains the basic ideas of Marxism as they apply to the novelist's search for truth and reality. Over and over again he insists that "Man and his development is the center of the Marxist philosophy. How does man change? What are his relations with the external world?" These questions, which Marx and Engels answered scientifically, are the basic questions the novelist must answer in fictional terms. And Fox, applying Marxist method to literary



12th BIG WEEK  
Artino Proudly Presents  
WANDA WASILEWSKA'S  
**"THE RAINBOW"**  
Based on the Stalin Prize Novel.  
A beautiful poem of human courage.  
A burning indictment of Nazi atrocities.

**Extra! — Exclusive!**  
**"THE RUSSIAN NATIONAL CHOIR"**  
and  
**"57,000 NAZIS IN MOSCOW"**

Cont. from 9 a.m. Late show every Sat.  
**STANLEY** 7th Ave. bet. 41-42 Sts.  
WI. 7-9686