

Canal Days

ROME HAUL. By WALTER D. EDMONDS. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1929. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ALLAN NEVINS

THIS book is the work of a son of the Mohawk Valley, who has steeped himself in the oral traditions, the old newspaper files and directories, and the physical atmosphere of the Erie Canal. The Canal—the “big ditch”—was a world in itself in the heyday of its usefulness and renown, between 1826 and 1850. It had a population, an economic life, a lingo, and a set of customs as distinctive as those of the Mississippi in the ante-bellum years so richly described by Mark Twain. Some of the elements which made up the scene were akin to those of the Mississippi; all waterside life is likely to be rough, boisterous, reckless, happy-go-lucky, and, by the standards of solid dry land, immoral. The Erie in 1850 was all this. Its flavor of the adventurous and lawless was accentuated by the contrast with the placid, stable, rather Puritan farming regions through which it ran. Along the canal one met foreign immigrants, runaway farm boys, sharpers, and seekers for excitement; it was a hiding-place for criminals; its women were a loose lot, handed about from hand to hand; it bred its bullies and champions, spoiling for a fight, and it had its own balladry and folklore.

Mr. Edmonds has dealt with this material in a fashion which shows more obvious debts to Dickens and Smollett than to Mark Twain. He has produced a loosely episodic, carefree, almost picaresque narrative. The characters fit their names—Fortune Friendly, Solomon Tinkle, William Wampy, Lucy Gurgel. The humors of every eddy and bywater of life along the canal are explored. The reader is taken into the “bereavement parlor” of the Rome undertaker. He views such curiosities as the “rhumatism amputator” which Solomon Gurgel buys at the Syracuse horse-fair.—“It burns the rhumatiz right out. See them little teeth on the inside? Well, you soak them in sour cider and that generates the beneficent electrical that balances the blood by getting it to a proper temperature.” We fall in with the canal-town mob chasing an itinerant preacher because he has given only five sermons after being paid eighteen dollars for six, and we stand with them when he turns on his pursuers and furnishes his money’s worth by preaching damnation in a final redhot discourse. We watch the life of the canal shudder as cholera threatens to sweep along it. We see the hue and cry after the runaway Western desperado. Cobbler Lerba explains that his shoes, five dollars the pair, squeak only because “the leather is so lively getting acquainted.” Now and then bits of local history are woven in, as when John Durble relates how he saw the canal opened up in October of ’25:

It was a masterful event. . . . They had put cannon, you know how, all along the canal and down the Hudson. There was an old ten-pounder mounted on my rise of ground, its snout pointing west, and there was one of McDonough’s sailors—an old horny man snoring upstairs in the best room—to touch it off. The neighbors came next morning early. Ellen and the woman had gotten up a big feast, and a lot of the Irishers had come in from Lockport. . . . About nine o’clock Benjy cut him a hard plug with his sailor knife. He had a tail of hair on his neck, and he’d oiled it that night, staining the pillar till my wife could have cried. He wore a red-and-white striped shirt and had pressed his pants himself. They was wide pants. Now he petted the butt of the cannon and he says, “Lilah, when it comes your turn to talk, you talk out loud.” He lighted his match and we stood waiting. Then a cannon sounded down by Buffalo. . . . And Benjy touched the match to the fuse and in a minute the old gun bucked and roared, and a glass broke in the window of the parlor. The Irishers jumped up cheering and the little girls commenced to cry.

As a chronicle of life on the old Erie the book is a richly colored addition to the panorama of American fiction; as a story of Dan Harrow, the hero, and Molly, the heroine, it is of inferior merit. The narrative lacks organic structure. There is no plot beyond the simple tale of Dan’s adventures and misadventures in boating along the canal, and Dan is an unsatisfactory observer and protagonist. He is a clod, who never quite comes alive himself, and whose eyes are not a quick or sensitive medium. A farm lad who takes to the canal for its ready money, he falls heir to a boat when the proprietor for whom he is working dies. It is the *Sarsey Sal*, a slow and clumsy but indomitable craft. “I’ll bet she keeps on moving,” her first proprietor remarks, “as long as there’s water to rub her belly on.” Dan, busy carrying Boonville potatoes to Rome and Geneseo

wheat to Albany, acquires from the bully of the canal, the muscular Jotham Klore, his “cook,” Molly. A cook is a temporary wife, housekeeper, and slave. Jotham nurses his anger till the two meet again, and at the Lansing Kill there is one of the terrific fights in which men then indulged, an almost epic encounter, which goes through round after round, hour after hour, in the good Heenan-Morrissey fashion. It is one of the few points in the book where the suspense is marked, and the story of how Dan wins it and yet loses Molly is one of the best chapters. But we part from Dan with less regret than from some of the minor personages, for example, Lucy Cashdollar, who keeps the “Cooks Agency for Bachelor Boaters” and is a minor Dame Quickly.

But despite an occasional stagnancy of narrative, a faltering of interest, the novel places us in Mr. Edmonds’s debt. The warm sympathy and the conscientiousness which he has expended in recreating the “big ditch” have brought their reward. He has restored the canal—“the bowels of the nation; the whole shebang of life!” John Durble calls it—to our knowledge. Heretofore we have seen it through the eyes of transients who, like Herbert Quick’s Vandemark, passed along it. But its real romance was in the life of the “canawlers” themselves. They were a loose, shuffling, semi-vagabondish, but lovable set. The waterway was a sort of elongated Alsatia ribboned across New York. There was no marriage or giving in marriage, little law or obedience to law, among the professional workers on the canal. Their hard self-reliance frequently touched the brutal, as when Dan sold the corpse of his former employer for a few dollars. But they had canons of their own, they were generally good-hearted, they had a pawky Yankee humor, and they found genuine flavor in living. This is what “Rome Haul,” rich in idiomatic speech, in lore of the boat and the soil, in the free and expansive spirit of 1850, has above everything else—flavor.

A Counterblast to Defeatism

ACTION, and Other Stories. By C. E. MONTAGUE. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company. 1929. \$2.50

Reviewed by ELMER DAVIS

SUCH inveterate Anglophobes as Senator Jim Reed and the Honorable William Hale Thompson must be glad that C. E. Montague is dead. He was perhaps the most distinguished protagonist in contemporary English literature of a quality that the enemies, or even the rivals, of England must have viewed with considerable misgiving. “Guts” is not an adequate term for what Montague had; that quality was present in Kipling, but in the days when Kipling was still writing a defiant Toryism could put a good face on matters that, since the war, cannot be so plausibly explained away. Montague saw and accepted about everything that was wrong, with England and with human nature, but he did not see that that was any reason for throwing up the sponge; he was a survival of the type of Englishman who does not know when he is beaten. Now he is gone; and there remains, most vocally, the type of Englishman represented by the characters of Mr. Aldous Huxley, who knows he is beaten even before the battle is begun.

Of the thirteen stories in this last volume, two may be taken, by persons who have lately read “Point Counterpoint,” as doctrinal sermons against the Englishman of the Huxley type—or, if you prefer, against the sort of Englishman that Huxley knows. The rest are a miscellaneous assortment, some good and some only so-so, which deserve notice mainly on account of the uproarious humor of such pieces as “A Pretty Little Property” and “The Great Sculling Race.” But the title story, and “The Wisdom of Mrs. Trevanna,” are explicit counter-propaganda against the conviction now prevalent in England (if prominent men of letters may be believed) that “what we have to do now is to achieve the right temper in the presence of the accomplished fact of defeat.” The quotation, as it happens, is from a letter addressed by an English publicist to a member of the Fifth Army in April, 1918, just after the disastrous retreat from St. Quentin, and only six months before the victorious conclusion of the war. Mr. Montague does not point the analogy; it points itself.

“One can’t always bother,” says one of the characters in “Action,” “about the convention that talk always has to be pessimist piffle.” But it is apparently

only elderly gentlemen who can achieve this non-chalance; younger people (which seems to include everybody under forty) not only can but must be convinced that March 21st is final, that it can never be followed by an August 8th. To them, Mr. Montague replies somewhat brutally in “The Wisdom of Mrs. Trevanna,” the history of the wife of an Oxford don who yes-yessed the Browningsque optimism of late-Victorian youth, and yes-yessed as placidly the determined pessimism of our contemporaries. “We follow a fashion,” she says. Optimism or pessimism, “it’s good for them, just making the noises; the way crying, in reason, is good for a baby.”

As to which of these positions is nearer the truth, if any, judgment must depend on one’s personal preferences. A fiction writer can stack the deck and prove anything. In the title story of “Action” an elderly Manchester gentleman, observing the symptoms of approaching dissolution, decides to go out like a gentleman climbing an ice slide on an Alp—climbing as high as he can on an impossible slope, and crashing only when he can honestly climb no higher. Just as he is about to drop he discovers another couple marooned on the cliff above him, and by superhuman efforts manages to rescue them, at the cost of condemning himself to going on until Nature gathers him in.

The scorn with which Mr. Huxley would treat such a theme need not be imagined. It is quite true that elderly gentlemen who make superhuman efforts to save others do not always succeed; they may crash in disaster. But it is equally true that well intentioned and mismatched couples do not always lose their only child in the agonies of cerebrospinal meningitis. Huxley stacks the deck as much as Montague; either can prove whatever he wants to prove. One must go behind the returns to find a criterion; and here, it may be suspected, the evidence is in favor of Montague. The evidence, quite simply, is the human race, which stands on its hind legs, however unstably. It would still be hanging by its tail from a tree, if it were composed entirely of the sort of people Huxley knows.

To be sure, Huxley sells; and Montague’s best sale was achieved by his most Huxleyesque book, which represented Truth as quite literally on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne. But there was a good deal in “Right Off the Map” besides mere defeatism; and as to the sale of “Point Counterpoint” one may suspect that it was not so much Mr. Huxley’s reflections on the intellectual necessity of defeatism that sold it as his skill in salacity. Fornication is no novelty, in either literature or history; it seems to make for literary popularity, but it has apparently no relation to the health or the decadence of a society, moralists and defeatists both to the contrary notwithstanding. Julius Caesar and Genghis Khan were not notable for continence, but they both got away with a good deal.

These caveats are not to be taken as an assertion that Huxley is wrong; a mere reviewer has no right to offer such a suggestion. They are offered only as a matter of purely nationalistic self-defense. For comparing the Englishmen one reads about in Mr. Huxley’s novels, and in novels of an entire school of which he is the most brilliant exemplar, with the Englishmen one reads about in the daily papers, one observes a considerable difference. So the suspicion arises that perhaps defeatist English novels are only part of an extremely subtle propaganda, designed to mislead the citizens of England’s chief rival in international affairs into the notion that England is through. Reading “Point Counterpoint,” we feel that these people need no longer be taken seriously; and for that misconception we may presently pay in debates over naval parity and the readjustment of war debts. The eccentric type of Englishman served his country well during the nineteenth century; he befogged popular opinion on the Continent, and thus made the way easier for perhaps the most astute and *Zielbewusst* foreign policy of modern times. The defeatist type of Englishman may serve an equally useful purpose in twentieth-century America.

With the Montague type of Englishman the ingenious American at least knows where he stands. They have their wounds on the front, and so have their enemies. The injunction to beware of the Greeks bearing gifts, it may be remembered, was first applied to Greeks who offered tokens of surrender.

For the first time a complete and up-to-date dictionary of the Turkish language is being prepared by a special commission.

Diplomatic Europe

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Triple Alliance of 1882 on the one hand, the Franco-Russian Alliance of 1894 and its extension, the Triple Entente of 1904-1907, on the other, were both defensive in purpose. But as the years went on, "both systems of alliance tended to be deformed from their originally defensive character, they tended to become widened in scope to cover policies involving offensive military action." With great skill, Professor Fay shows how this change was brought about by the progressive decay of the Ottoman Empire, which stimulated the latent ambitions of Austria and Russia in the Balkans and inspired Russian, German, and British designs in Anatolia and Mesopotamia; by the German policy in Morocco, which caused French nationalist sentiment to revive and permitted M. Poincaré to tighten the alliance with Russia; by the German naval policy which led England to make commitments to France that were technically not binding but proved effective in the hours of stress; and by the conduct of Italy, who played fast and loose with both sides.

Professor Fay passes no moral judgment on any of these policies or ambitions. He is concerned to show that in 1914 the rival groups stood face to face in an equilibrium so unstable that only through the action of the Concert of Europe could the delicate structure be maintained. The policy of the Concert was most sincerely supported by Sir Edward Grey, in varying degree by German, French, and Russian statesmen, and by "Count Berchtold least of all." Professor Fay thinks that the Triple Entente was the stronger and more closely knit combination, for Italy was a dead weight in the Triple Alliance; and the events of July 1914 proved that this was the case. But he very curiously fails to mention, although he considers at some length the military and naval arrangements of the Triple Entente, the naval convention drawn up by the Triple Alliance in 1913 and the German-Italian military convention of March 1914, which led the chief of the German general staff to believe that the loyalty of Italy was not open to doubt, and made even his skeptical opposite number in Vienna hopeful. Apart from this lapse, the first volume is a fine piece of historical writing, full of balance and caution. On the one hand Mr. Fay discards the wartime assumption that Germany had plotted and deliberately precipitated the catastrophe, but he repeatedly points out how her diplomatic methods created the impression that she did desire war. On the other hand, while showing that the ultimate aim of Russian policy was to secure possession of the Straits at Constantinople, and that military preparations were being made to seize them in the event of European complications, he rejects the contention of certain post-war writers that a plot was afoot to create the complications.

The second volume opens with a valuable essay on the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, whose murder furnished the occasion for the war. Two weeks before the murder the Archduke had been visited at Konopischt by the German Emperor, and there is a circumstantial story to the effect that the two men laid plans for an attack on Serbia which should be the prelude to a general reorganization of the map of Europe. Professor Fay, relying on the "full account" of their conversation sent to the German foreign office, concludes that "there is not a shred of evidence that the Archduke was plotting at Konopischt," and that the conversation was concerned principally with Rumania's relation to the Triple Alliance. Certainly there is no evidence of plotting; but the account of the German diplomat is not a "full" one, for it does not mention, probably because he was not informed of it, that the Archduke raised the question whether in the event of war Austria-Hungary could count on the unconditional support of Germany—such at any rate is the statement of Conrad von Hötzendorf, the chief of the Austrian general staff, on the testimony of two independent witnesses. The voluminous, confused, and often contradictory evidence relating to the murder of the Archduke, much of it mere hearsay gossip, is fully and acutely dissected, and Professor Fay's opinion that the Serbian Government "had a guilty knowledge of a murder plot, but concealed it" must be received with great respect. He exculpates the Austro-Hungarian authorities from any responsibility for what happened at Sarajevo. It is apparently unknown to Professor Fay that the former

chief of police in Zagreb has stated that a month before the murder he received information about the plot, including mention of the assassin Princip, but was instructed to pay no attention to it. Also, a certain Dushan Tovdoreka has recently revived an old theory, discredited by Professor Fay, but for which Tovdoreka adduces a certain amount of circumstantial evidence, that Chabrinovitch, the second conspirator, who threw the bomb at Francis Ferdinand, was an *agent provocateur* of the Austrian military espionage and was only won over to the real plot at the last minute. Naturally such statements are not conclusive and must be treated with reserve, but they do suggest that the full story of Sarajevo, as of Konopischt, is not yet revealed.

The account of the July crisis is less satisfactory than the analysis of the preceding years. By treating the various aspects of the crisis topically instead of adhering fairly closely to the chronological order of events, Professor Fay has not only made it difficult to follow the development of the situation day by day and in each capital, but, as it seems to the reviewer, he has missed sometimes the concatenation of events, notably in Berlin on July 27 and July 29. Another weakness is that, although he describes fully the activity of the military officials, he does not sufficiently explain, in the case of the Central Powers, how their demands were dictated by strategic considerations; thus Conrad's pressure on Moltke for a statement about German mobilization was necessitated by the fact that he had to know before the end of the fifth day of mobilization against Serbia whether he must convert this partial mobilization into a general mobilization against Russia, and Moltke's anxiety was probably due not so much to the reports of Russian mobilization as to the news that the Belgians were putting Liège into a state of defence, for his whole plan of campaign depended on being able to seize that fortress by a *coup de main*. Professor Fay regards the Russian mobilization as the decisive event which ushered in the European war, and for that reason, perhaps also from considerations of space, he has quite logically reduced his narrative of the last days of the crisis to a mere summary; still, his opinions on many controversial points, such as Sazonov's telegram of July 31 stating that he understood Austria to be at last ready to negotiate, or the "misunderstanding" of August 1 between Sir Edward Grey and Prince Lichnowsky, would have been most welcome. It is also to be regretted that, while he frequently and very properly calls attention to the omissions, distortions, and falsifications of the Russian, French, and British diplomatic papers published in 1914, he does not note that in the German "White Book" the dates of telegrams exchanged between the Kaiser and the Czar were in several cases so juggled as to give an entirely erroneous idea of what had happened.

Certain particular points also call for comment: (1) Mr. Henry Morgenthau's famous story of the "Potsdam Conference" of July 5, which is supposed to have decided on a European war, is ruthlessly examined and shown to be almost devoid of any foundation of fact. Professor Fay evidently does not believe Mr. Morgenthau's assertion that he was told the story by the German ambassador in Constantinople; but it seems to have escaped him that the German ambassador at any rate told much the same story to his Italian colleague, according to documents published by Signor Salandra, the former Italian premier.

(2) But while the Morgenthau-Wangenheim version is demonstrably absurd, the conferences at Potsdam on July 5 between the German Emperor and various officials were scarcely so innocent as Professor Fay seems to think. The German admiralty at once took what steps it could, within the limits of the peace budget, to make the navy ready for war; the minister of war, if he had had his way, would have ordered similar measures for the army (so his biographer states); and the minister of the interior wished, a few days later, to make preparations for the purchase of food. Why? Because when they learned that the Emperor and the Chancellor had sanctioned an Austrian attack on Serbia, they concluded that a European war might result. Professor Fay doubts whether Bethmann-Hollweg sanctioned such an attack, but to the reviewer the evidence—too long and complicated to be even summarized here—is conclusive that he did approve of military action, and did not merely leave it to Austria to decide what she would do.

(3) The criticism of Count Berchtold for his precipitate declaration of war on Serbia and his subse-

quent refusal to heed German advice in the interest of peace overlooks one important fact not mentioned by Professor Fay. Berchtold's original intention was to postpone the declaration of war until the completion of mobilization, but he received two hints from Berlin and one from the German ambassador in Vienna not to delay either this step or military operations and he acted accordingly. But the day after he had yielded to this pressure, he found himself being asked by the German Government to stop his military operations after occupying Belgrade and be content with a diplomatic solution! Having taken good care to explain his intentions to Germany and secure the promise of military support to cover a war with Serbia, he was justly indignant at the German change of front and from his point of view entirely justified in refusing all concessions.

(4) On the question of Germany's "belated peace efforts," Professor Fay has failed to notice three points. (a) At the conference on the afternoon of July 27, after the Kaiser's return from Norway, it was decided, so Falkenhayn's biographer states, "to fight the business through, cost what it might." (b) When Sazonov's request for "direct conversations" was transmitted to Vienna by the German Government, there was omitted from the telegram Sazonov's promise to advise Serbia to accept the results of the conversations—which was the essential feature of the Russian proposal. (c) Bethmann's telegram of July 28 transmitting the Kaiser's so-called "pledge plan" (the Austrians to stop when they had occupied Belgrade) was, says Professor Fay, "not sufficiently vigorous to compel immediate assent from Berchtold. Nor did it correspond precisely with the Kaiser's decisive instructions that Vienna was to be told that 'no more cause for war exists.'" This is true enough; but Professor Fay does not make clear that whereas the Kaiser desired negotiations on the basis of the Serbian reply, Bethmann's proposal aimed to secure for Austria "a complete fulfilment of the demands" embodied in the ultimatum. In other words, Austria was not asked to concede any of the points which had aroused the opposition of Russia, and it is difficult to see how, as Professor Fay remarks, "this telegram of Bethmann's was a step in the right direction."

These criticisms of his narrative are not intended to convey the impression that Bethmann-Hollweg did not, on July 27 and July 28, advise Berchtold to yield a little; what they show, it is submitted, is that the German Chancellor had committed himself to the Austrian programme more completely than Professor Fay appears to realize, and that therefore he could not and did not exert the pressure necessary to make Berchtold enter into negotiations with Russia on the Serbian question. The opinion may also be ventured that Professor Fay is unduly severe on Moltke for urging mobilization and for telegraphing directly to Conrad behind the back of the Chancellor; at least it should be said that the situation had been created by Bethmann (even if he was trying to retrieve it), not by Moltke, and that the latter was only urging what he, with the consent of the German Government, had promised Conrad in writing (though not in formal "military convention") as far back as 1909, namely, that if Austria attacked Serbia, she could count on a threat of German mobilization as a means of bluffing Russia to keep quiet or on German support if Russia made war.

For all these reasons the reviewer considers Germany's share of the responsibility for the outbreak of war a larger one than Professor Fay seems disposed to ascribe to her; but he agrees that it is futile to try "to fix in some precise mathematical fashion the exact responsibility," for the question "is after all more a matter of delicate shading than of definite black and white." His final verdict is that "none of the Powers wanted a European War," but "because in each country political and military leaders did certain things which led to mobilizations and declarations of war, or failed to do certain things which might have prevented them, all the European countries in a greater or less degree, were responsible." Repudiating the dictum of the Treaty of Versailles which laid the sole responsibility for the war on the Central Powers as "historically unsound," he rejects with equal firmness the thesis which would relieve those Powers of any and all responsibility. Professor Fay is to be congratulated on writing a book which, though not exempt from criticism, is instinct with the historical spirit and is immune to the infection of propaganda.