

The Thick of Battle

SLANTING LINES OF STEEL. By E. Alexander Powell. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1933. \$2.50.

Reviewed by JOHN PALMER GAVITT

BYONETS, of course. And the Great War, about which Powell already had written much and brilliantly. This book covers episodes of the whole "duration," but includes the finale of his own actual war service, as no longer a newspaper and magazine correspondent but an officer in the American army. I happen to have read it side-by-side with that of Frederick Palmer, his colleague and rival in the field of war correspondence, and was tempted to put them together; but that would have been unfair to both. Palmer's is an autobiography, covering forty-odd years of adventure, including wars, and comes in a different category. Each is first-class work. Nevertheless one senses a curious, almost indescribable contrast of personalities in the two men. Each has traveled widely and observed alertly; each is a master-craftsman at this trade. Each narrates in the first person. But Palmer is somehow merged in his story; Powell never allows himself out of his own sight. I was continually reminded of the little girl who said, "I don't see why people call me conceited, just because I am always right!" But the deuce of it is that Powell—if you believe what he says, and I have no disposition otherwise—generally was right, and when he was wrong he doesn't fail to tell you about it with a grin. No man is unpardonably conceited who can enjoy laughing at himself. Moreover, his conceit is spotted with honest, spontaneous modesty and careful credit where it belongs. Indeed, he acknowledges uncommon good luck at crucial points, whereas in most of the instances it is clear that the "luck" was his own foresight and enterprise. In other words, he fully appreciates himself, with a naive self-satisfaction that is sometimes irritating; but recognizes the qualities of the other members of the cast, and is conscientious against stealing the other fellow's thunder. In the end one hardly can fail to discern an extraordinarily lovable, candid, democratic chap, enjoying his job and exceedingly competent at it.

Powell has, in contrast with Palmer, much more of the professionally military point of view; much more was he cut out to be an army officer—a regular, I mean—and of the finest type. But however much he accustomed himself to horrors he never took them lightly. And he never condoned the brutalities, the senseless cruelties, inseparable from war. On that subject he certainly told General von Boehm, under whose command and consent occurred the butcheries at Aerschot and Louvain, to his face, his real name in words of one syllable. And as for war itself: out of a heart profoundly informed by personal observation and experience and charged with sound humanity he indicts it:

... it cost the Germans upward of three hundred thousand dollars [in ammunition alone] to wound ten French soldiers. No other business could be run with such extravagance and succeed.

But war, as anyone who has seen it will admit, is the most senseless business on earth.

I have read scores of war stories, but none, including Palmer's, better than this, and at the moment I can recall none (unless perhaps Stephen Crane's "The Red Badge of Courage," which was fiction) anything like so good. The description of the bombardment of Antwerp, of the tramp-tramp of the German avalanche into Belgium, of the French artillery tornado in the Champagne, of the Italian-Austrian battle line "on the roof of Europe," where men froze on the snow-clad mountain-peaks and fried in the sun within sight of each other. . . . You will look far and fare worse in search of anything finer, if as fine. There is something French in the color of it—Dumas, Zola, Daudet, Maupassant, might have written and need not have been ashamed of some of this stuff.

When the United States entered the war Powell instantly quit his reporting and returned to offer himself in the service of his own country. The story of that service is a revelation—not new, of course—of the priceless blundering and waste of personnel and capacity with which we performed our part. None of it more characteristic or absurd than the punishment the Washington bureaucracy was able to inflict upon Powell for having, in Antwerp, run up in the face of the invading German horde, the American flag upon the American consulate whence the entire personnel, including the consul-general himself, had fled.

At the last he was put out of action by the falling of his horse upon him, and was invalided home, on the voyage hearing, two days out, the news of the Armistice. There are more than plenty of men to be army officers, but only a few Powell's equals in seeing and recounting, with consummate skill and artistry.

Our Family Album

THE AMERICAN PROCESSION. Assembled by Agnes Rogers, with Explanatory Captions by Frederick Lewis Allen. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1933. \$2.75.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

THIS is about as instructive a social history of America, and as easy of assimilation, as one could purchase for the price the publishers wish for it. The "latest" thing in books seems to be the book of pictures, the history of something conveyed through the photograph. Whether this indicates that the desire to read is decreasing in America—but usually when one conjures up some dire trend and then resorts to statistics it is found that the habits of the average person actually remain just about what they were. So despite Mr. Stallings's book of photographs of the late Great War, and now Mr. and Mrs. Allen's book of photographs of just about everything in America in the past seven decades, we need not, from a literary point of view, take fright. Indeed, when one adds up what Mr. Allen has written about the pictures in "The American Procession" we find that it runs



AT THE CHICAGO WORLD'S FAIR, 1893

to some twenty thousand words of informative and witty comment on the stream of events. His text no less than the choice of photographs creates atmosphere.

What a colossal job was here—to select from the enormous files of news photographers and collectors of all sorts the most significant and revealing panoramic presentment of our American past—and yet how well it has been done! The editors speak in their preface of the toil and the sudden unexpectedly gorgeous compensations of this work. They tell us of the remarkable results obtained in the face of enormous obstacles by those early photographers, Brady and Gardner, who photographed during the Civil War. They refer to the obstacles they themselves surmounted in identifying certain interesting pictures. And in their book they give us in proper sequence and proportion war, architecture, costume, the stock market, the "Empire Builders," the first inventions, the Indians, sport, the stage, the mansions of the rich, the hovels of the poor, the fandangoes of high society, a sequence of Presidents, the changes brought about by the industrial era, and a medley of fantastic American characters.

This book is of documentary importance and, at the same time, a whole evening's entertainment. Some of the pictures are "joys forever!" "The American Procession" will doubtless stimulate reminiscent anecdote all over the country. It should be infinitely suggestive to the writers of fiction, indicative of a wealth of native material still hardly touched. All those who read Mr. Allen's "Only Yesterday" need not be reminded of his keen intelligence and clear exposition as an historian. The compilers of this book pay a tribute, incidentally, to Mark Sullivan, whose work has been of some assistance to them in their own.

Bonfils, Tammen, and their Merry Men

(Continued from first page)

region of which Denver is the capital. The sphere of influence of the *Denver Post* extended from the western Kansas line well into Utah, north into Wyoming, and south into New Mexico, an area larger than an average European state. It is sparsely settled but rich in natural resources and rich in political power. So Bonfils and Tammen became American princes of the blood, men of power, satraps of the central Rocky Mountain region; and lived scrappily ever after, carrying to their graves the bullets of their adversaries. So much for the story.

This book by Gene Fowler who was a reporter on the *Post*, is a merry tale. Fowler is splendidly equipped to write this story. He reveals himself thus: Being sent to interview Buffalo Bill, he insulted the old plainsman by asking him what the duke really said when he caught the Colonel in the lady's bathroom. Of course Buffalo Bill resented it. When Fowler re-

turned to the *Post* to write his piece, Tammen called the young reporter into his office. Cody had just demanded that Fowler be fired.

"Were you always impudent?" asked Tammen.

"Yes," he admitted, "I always was."

Tammen put his hands on the young man's shoulder and said, "Keep it up, son, it is something you cannot buy." The gorgeous impudence of this book, its felicitous, diabolical cynicism, its authentic un-morality furnish the perfect tempo in which the story of the Bonfils and Tammen adventure should be told. The tale is a most delicious bit of Americana. Bonfils and Tammen could not have lived in any other country. Yet they might have lived in any other American state. Any newspaper which appeals directly, consciously, and intelligently to the moron mind is reasonably sure of financial success. Sometimes it acquires political power but rarely has standing in the profession. Bonfils, the editor of the *Post*, resigned from the Society of American Newspaper Editors after an inquiry into his activities in connection with the Teapot Dome exploitation. The *Post* was always held in low esteem in the higher Pecksniffian circles of the journalistic craft. Yet despite the fact that it paraded up and down the primrose path of American journalism, it was a type, exaggerated to be sure, of journalistic success in this country.

Tammen was a good showman. Bonfils kept the box office. The two made money. They made a demagogic appeal to the great plain people. The *Post* was supposed to be the big brother of the Rocky Mountain region. Its editors like to call it the paper with a heart and a soul. Its enemies added, "and a price." Yet it did dominate a region, it molded the politics and to a certain extent the external mind of that region. The *Post* was indeed an exponent of its territory. It represented the hard metal mining region. It was the errand boy of a rather crass plutocracy, perhaps not a corrupt agent but none the less the representative of great riches quickly gained, unsteadily held, and endowed with all the unconscious arrogance of conscious wealth.

Of course the story that Gene Fowler has told here lacks coherence; it wanders all over the lot, is full of extraneous stuff all interesting, all illuminating, all a part of the background out of which the story springs. And when one has read the book which is easy reading, as easy reading as the *Post* itself or any tabloid paper, one has a sense that he has been slumming in darkest democracy. He has read an ugly story, viewed ethically, but a merry one which will sadden the reader if he has any sense of what it really means. It should be published and circulated by the Society for the Suppression of American Optimism. It would be the society's perfect handbook!

William Allen White, editor of the *Emporia Gazette*, is one of the leading figures of American journalism.



STEVE BRODIE IN HIS SALOON, 1886

(Photographs on this page are from "The American Procession")

The Saturday Review of LITERATURE

HENRY SEIDEL CANBY..... Editor
NOBLE A. CATHCART..... Publisher
AMY LOVEMAN..... Associate Editor
GEORGE STEVENS... Assistant Editor
WILLIAM ROSE BENET } Contributing
CHRISTOPHER MORLEY } Editors

Published weekly by The Saturday Review Co., Inc., 25 W. 45th St., New York, N. Y.
Noble A. Cathcart, President and Treasurer;
Henry Seidel Canby, Vice-President and Chairman; Amy Loveman, Secretary.

Subscription rates per year, postpaid in the U. S. and Pan-American Postal Union, \$3.50; in Canada, \$5; in Great Britain, 18 shillings; elsewhere \$4.50. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 1, 1879. Vol. 10. No. 15.

THE SATURDAY REVIEW is indexed in the "Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature."

THE SATURDAY REVIEW cannot assume responsibility for the return of unsolicited manuscripts submitted without an addressed envelope and the necessary postage.

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Tension When Tennyson wrote "Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay" he packed a century of symbolism into the words. His conscious mind meant obviously that Europe was alive and Asia dead; the prophetic instinct of the poet, which so often sees more than it understands, forecast the growing tension of the Occident, which was to string high pressure wires throughout civilization upon which bodies and souls were to be wrecked. With China what it is today, we cannot say "Better fifty years of Cathay than a century of Europe," yet if there are still untroubled founts of culture at the back of the Yang-tse-Kiang, the sentiment will have subscribers.

The tension in literature referred to before in these columns, and so marked in the movies, in the novel, on the stage, and in poetry, is the response to, or the reflection of, that tense competition in production and sales which marked the epoch out of which we are just emerging. Its best symbol was the hysterical intensity of advertising, precisely as the blood and violence of pre-Shakespearean drama was a symbol for the violence and blood of the reigns of the first Tudors. American university life was also tense through the decades centering in 1900, tense not with intellectual striving, but with social and athletic competition. Now that tensility is relaxing, and there are widespread complaints of defeatism, disillusion, idle dissipation, and sterile criticism of stale methods of teaching in a college life that has lost its glamour but has not yet attained a different vitality. Yet it is probable that the American university is a healthier place for minds now than in the quite unintellectual feverishness of the last epoch.

The tensility which sparked from laissez-faire competition in the business world to social competition in the American universities is paralleled in Europe by the sudden leap of tensility from political discontent to education. Italy, Germany, and Russia, each in its fashion, are streaked with high-power lines leading to the schools, and tension, tension, tension is exalted beyond any other value in life. Children are led in thousands to view melodramatic monuments celebrating a consecration to war and national aggrandizement at the expense of others, and the state has been deified in order to make the purposes of a whole generation tense.

Of course it is better to wear than to rust, better to be blown up than to be

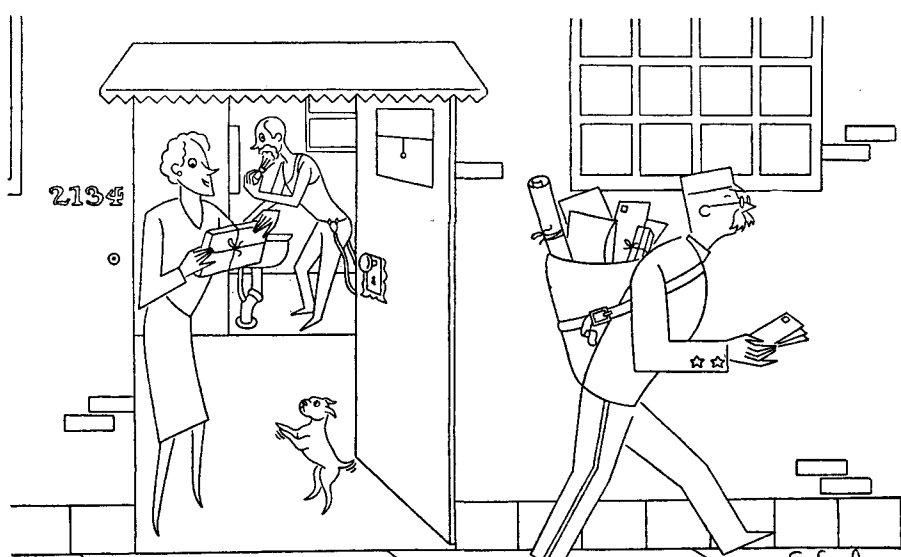
bored to death, better (some think) to be strung to a pitch of fanaticism than to be let down into idle disillusion—we know all these arguments, but they deal with blacks and whites and do not touch the central fact, that tension on the live wires of the modern world is increasing much faster than the load of electricity on our mechanical power systems, with casualties proportionately more frequent. And if the meek do not seem likely soon to inherit the earth, the future may very possibly be already ripe for the hands of those that have been fortunate enough to escape. It is possible that those who will lead us out of the pit that is being dug visibly at our feet, will not be the demagogues and dictators, whose clenched jaws and strained faces stare out of the Sunday supplements (looking as if they had fed on coiled springs and compressed air capsules), but those others who have freed themselves, or are by nature free, from tension, who have cut or dodged the high voltage wires and returned to the tempo of earth.

Nor is it the least fortunate aspect of this year in America that President Roosevelt is obviously such a man. His policy of trial and error with a goal ahead but no fixed path pre-determined, and his ability to inspire both confidence and calm, would be unworkable by a fanatic, such as Hitler, or even by a high-pressure American of the type we admired before 1929. How he escaped in this generation of over-tensility one does not know, but it is fair to assume that his struggle with physical disability has given him that equal temper which Tennyson, following the Greeks, also praised.

As for the others, and us, the much put-upon American public, roll'd to starboard, roll'd to larboard by the waves of tension, there are remedies enough where there is will to want them. In literature, Jane Austen would be our evening choice, that cool persiflage in which pretense and selfish aggrandizement become ridiculous. And philosophy, religion, and a sense of humor were created out of man's imagination for a like end.

Pamphlet Literature In these days when government announces its policy by radio, and systems that have taken generations to build change their form over night, it becomes increasingly difficult for written discussion to keep pace with action. Even the most hastily concocted book may be outdated before it is off the presses, and publishers, even though authors might, do not easily contemplate extensive corrections and revisions. As a result a whole literature in pamphlet form is already springing into being which, transitory as its life in the present may be, still should have a large importance for the future. For here, vivid with the excitement of the moment, is a record of opinions and discussion as they shift and veer within a brief compass of time, a sort of informal history of public sentiment which ought to be enormously valuable some day to the student of social psychology. Not for a long time has the pamphlet had so pertinent a usefulness for its own day. But its worth is for the future as well, for a time that may indeed have seen disappear many of the policies which called it into being.

Some lost letters of Richard Wagner have been discovered in Bayreuth. One shows how he encouraged Nietzsche to publish "The Birth of Tragedy."



"OH, JOHN, THEY MUST LIKE YOUR MANUSCRIPT—IT SAYS, 'AFTER TEN DAYS RETURN TO HENRY AND LONGWELL, PUBLISHERS.'"

To the Editor:

Spontaneous
Combustion

Mr. Nevins's Review

Sir: I protest against Allan Nevins's review of "The Brown Book of the Hitler Terror." I protest not merely in behalf of myself, but in behalf of the many readers of *The Saturday Review of Literature* who, I am certain, were distressed by his sabotage of a book that has created an international sensation, but who have not, perhaps, had the opportunities that I have had to learn the facts.

"The Brown Book of the Hitler Terror" was written some six months after the Nazis seized power. It was written in the heat of the brutal civil war that is not yet ended. The documents upon which it is based, according to Lord Marley's foreword, were placed at the disposal of the World Committee that prepared the book by doctors and lawyers now in Germany, by the tortured and martyred victims themselves, and by the reporters of the Committee. These "reporters," as everyone knows, are labor leaders and intellectuals of all camps who were and still are close to the scene, have every conceivable chance to observe what is actually going on, and are risking their lives and the lives of their relatives and friends in order to make the truth known. Lord Marley writes: "It is always difficult to secure authentic information as to what is happening under a well-organized terror." In short, it was heroism that produced this book. . . . Mr. Nevins says it is not "sober."

I should like to know what Mr. Nevins considers sober. . . . Moreover, what emotion animates a man to plead for sobriety concerning a situation that shrieks for anger and fear. Correspondents in Germany who are anything but communists have been insisting that there is sadism and murder there, and that it is literally a "hell." What justification has Mr. Nevins for damning this book because it says exactly that?

It is "loosely written," he says. Certainly. It was prepared necessarily in haste; it was not prepared as a Ph.D. thesis.

It is "significant that the actual authorship of this volume is nowhere stated," he says. It unquestionably is significant. If the names of the writers were made public they would be murdered. Merely because Professor Einstein is an honorary member of the sponsoring committee, the Nazis have put a price upon his head. Does Mr. Nevins doubt that? Has he forgotten the slaughter of Professor Lessing in Prague?

The names of the "World Committee" that sponsored the volume are not given, he remarks. As a man who is presumably in touch with current affairs he should himself be acquainted with the names. They have been published often. They are: Lord Marley (of the Labor Party), Professor Francis Jourdain, Henri Barbusse, Paul Longevin (of the French Academy), Ernst Toller, Sylvia Pankhurst, Professor H. Levy, J. B. Matthews, Egon Erwin Kisch, Willi Muenzenberg, Professor Robert Morss Lovett, Malcolm Cowley, Romain Rolland, and numerous others.

One of the most significant sections in the volume deals with the burning of the Reichstag. "The Brown Book" exonerates the communists and accuses the Nazis themselves of being the real incendiaries. The evidence put forth was just examined by a group of internationally renowned jurists and unanimously approved by

them. The current trial in Leipzig and Berlin has not yet disproved any part of this evidence. Mr. Nevins, however, is not convinced. He writes that "it does not add to our confidence in the book to find the caption 'Hitler Betrays Himself' applied to some natural words against communism which Hitler uttered immediately after the fire; nor to find a list of 'thirty-one Nazi contradictions' made merely on the basis of confused reports in Nazi organs and confused utterances by Nazi leaders." Mr. Nevins neglects to point out that Hitler's "natural words" consisted of an accusation made before he could, in the ordinary course of events, have learned that the police were charging the communists with the crime. Nor does Mr. Nevins point out that among Hitler's "natural words" were the following: "This is a God-given signal! . . . This fire is the beginning." Shortly afterwards, using the fire as a pretext, Hindenburg turned the government over to Hitler. And finally, Mr. Nevins fails to mention that the "contradictions" prove exactly one thing: that there was absolutely no ground for the arrest of Torgler, Dimitroff, Popoff, and Taneff. Of course, Mr. Nevins says nothing at all about the irrefutable and damning Oberfohren memorandum.

Mr. Nevins complains that the murders are not "adequately documented!!" It is hopeless to attempt a reply.

It all boils down to this: that he resents the radical touch in the book. But who else would have written it? Liberals like Mr. Nevins? No, they would have waited ten years for "adequate documentation." Conservatives like James W. Gerard? Let Hitler quit his Jew-baiting and they will throw themselves into his arms. Mr. Nevins concludes that if "The Brown Book" were "restrained" it would be a "powerful weapon against some of the present policies of the German rulers." Some of the policies? Ah!

BERNARD SMITH.

New York, N. Y.

Mr. Smith's Letter

Sir: Thank you for showing me Mr. Smith's letter. In reply, I don't in the least resent the radical touch in "The Brown Book of the Hitler Terror." I don't even resent some violent language in a good cause. I do resent violence to truth. "The Brown Book" does violence to truth when it speaks (p. 132) of "the sadism which in the last few months has led to thousands of murders"; when it refers (p. 133) to "the whole of Hitler's Germany" as "a brown hell"; when it not merely accuses the Nazis of being the incendiaries of the Reichstag, as Mr. Smith says, but treats this dubious case as closed and the charges as proved; when it deliberately distorts such facts of history as those of the Haymarket Riot. It was not I, but former Ambassador Gerard, who said in an entirely different review of the book that it smacked of communist propaganda. My own opinion is that in some parts it is simply hysterical and exaggerated. The World War taught us that nothing is more easily obtained, nothing needs more critical scrutiny, than atrocity stories. Professor Einstein is reported to have dissociated himself from the book; I shall believe that such men as Henri Barbusse approve talk about "thousands of murders" when they are formally quoted to that effect.

ALLAN NEVINS.

New York, N. Y.

The Saturday Review recommends

This Group of Current Books:

TIMBER LINE. By GENE FOWLER. Covici-Friede. The startling story of the Denver Post.

THE INTELLIGENT MAN'S REVIEW OF EUROPE TODAY. By G. D. H. and MARGARET COLE. Knopf. A panorama of present-day Europe.

AFTER SUCH PLEASURES. By DOROTHY PARKER. Viking. Pungent tales of contemporary life.

This Less Recent Book:

THE GREEK WAY. By EDITH HAMILTON. Norton. A study of the Greek mind and civilization.