

## People and Scenes of Modern Asia

*THE ASIATICS.* By Frederic Prokosch.  
New York: Harper & Brothers. 1935.  
\$2.50.

Reviewed by PEARL S. BUCK

"**T**HE ASIATICS" is not a novel, if by a novel one means a narrative wherein characters are not only presented but also portrayed and developed. There is here only brilliant presentation in rapid succession of a series of disconnected although fundamentally similar persons. The slight and only unifying external thread is the "I" of the author. There is, however, a unity deeper than this; it is the unity of a continuing and exclusive point of view which sees only that which it is prepared to see, only the persons within this chosen scope of vision, and of those persons only the aspects it prefers.

This scope, this aspect, is best expressed in the author's own words:

Take away our clothes, our food, our liquor, our quaint sexual pleasures, our fatiguing little conversations, and our loathsome excitements about this and that; what's left? . . . Nothing's left, because we never really believed anything, we never rose above the world of objects, we never deep down within us were alive. It's the age of inversion, the negative age.

But within these limits—and one must accept the author's right to act upon his own point of view, and I have no quarrel with this one more than another, except that people who hold it do not seem able to get much fun out of being alive—this is an extraordinarily clever book. That is, Frederic Prokosch describes the world of objects—and in this world are to be included his people—with a physical closeness which fills our nostrils with reek and scent, which sets alive din and music in our ears, and sometimes makes the stomach sick with its reality. The section on India, particularly, portrays with terrifying accuracy a certain part of Indian human nature.

But I am interested in this book especially for what it symbolizes. It is a fine example of a type of novel now being written by certain young writers, wherein is to be found extraordinarily accurate and vivid portrayal of physical sensation without any further penetration into or understanding of life. Sense leads to nothing, means nothing, beyond itself. Characters are conceived as bodies only, moving blindly in the dark. We do not know what they think and feel. About them is always the smell of death and corruption. I am reminded of an old Chinese superstition which teaches that when death comes, the three souls leave the body first, and only gradually and reluctantly do the seven earthy spirits depart, so that there is an interval when the souls—that is, the seat of intelligence

and moral sense—are gone, and the body is given over to the earthy spirits. Then even though he were a good man in life the corpse does the most blindly evil deeds, and he must be bound with ropes lest he harm even those whom he once loved. So in a sort of phosphorescent native evil the characters of this book stir blindly upon its pages.

It is not fair, I think, to call this book "The Asiatics," not only because, physically, so little of Asia is included—Japan and China and Russia are omitted—but because the whole of the robust, active, humorous, everyday aggressive life in all Asia is omitted, and this is to omit most of Asia, after all.

But it is, of course, an author's right to omit all he likes. And within the small circle this author has chosen, it must be fully granted that he gives us a brilliant, though glancing, and glittering array of pictures. To read it is to have the experience, with the author, of moving through strange and alien crowds, to see for a moment the turn of an unknown head, the curve of foreign lips, the sound of melancholy, unfamiliar singing, the touch of a stranger's hat and too caressing hand, and then to pass on.

## Genji for New Readers

*THE TALE OF GENJI.* By Lady Murasaki. Boston: The Houghton Mifflin Co. 1935. \$5.

Reviewed by HAROLD G. HENDERSON

**M**R. ARTHUR WALEY'S translation of Lady Murasaki's famous "Tale of Genji" is now being reissued in a two-volume handy form. This is good news, for it is a curious fact that all "Genji" addicts (and this reviewer is frankly one of them) seem to have the bad habit of reading in bed. And yet, perhaps after all the fact is not so curious, for "Genji" is eminently a bed-book—at least by Mr. Bemerton's definition. It is long; it is leisurely; it has purple moun-



TWO PAINTINGS BY MAJESKA  
Pictures on this page from the frontispieces of the new edition of "Genji."



tains which lure the reader on; and it also has its level plains, unexciting but dotted with pleasant flowers.

For those, if such there be, who do not know "The Tale of Genji" it should be said that it is the outstanding novel of Japan, and has been so for over nine hundred years. It was written, probably between the years 1000 and 1015, by Murasaki Shikibu, who during most of that period was a lady-in-waiting to the Empress. Murasaki used for her background the life of the Court—and a most extraordinary court it was. At that period Japan was dominated by the ancient and noble Fujiwara family, who, however, held their position by intrigue rather than by force of arms. In consequence the real power was already beginning to slip from the Capital and to pass to the military magnates of the provinces. But as yet the courtiers could see no signs of this. To them it seemed simply that the Emperor, relieved of the cares of state by his faithful Fujiwara, had time to devote himself to stately ceremonial, to music, to art, to poetry—and to love affairs. And the courtiers naturally followed the example of their Master. The result was that there centered around the Court a very high but very narrow culture, brilliant, artificial, dream-like, in which esthetics had become almost a religion. And it is against this background that is painted the pageant of the life and loves of Prince Genji—Hikaru Genji, the Shining One.

Murasaki has made her people and her period vividly alive, and Mr. Waley's magnificent translation has kept them so. This translation was originally published in six parts between the years 1925 and 1933. For those of us who eagerly waited for each succeeding volume to appear, this first edition had, however, one great drawback. The print was large and the paper very thick, and the volumes were just a little too unwieldy to be perfect bed-books. The present edition, which has smaller print and very much thinner paper, is far more convenient.

Harold G. Henderson has recently translated a history of Japanese art from the Japanese.

# Saint Stalin

STALIN. By Henri Barbusse. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1935. \$3.

Reviewed by SIDNEY HOOK

JOSEPH VISSARIONOVITCH DJUGASHVILI, whose name, happily for English orthography, was abbreviated to Stalin, is the most powerful ruler in the world today. Natural curiosity about his personality, cultural tastes, and the internal landscape of his mind has until now been gratified only by anecdote, partisan legend, and revolutionists' gossip. When, therefore, Henri Barbusse, who some years ago published a "Life of Jesus," undertook to write a biographical portrait of Stalin, all the resources of the Russian government were put at his disposal. Special and numerous interviews with Stalin were arranged and carefully edited archive material was furnished. Great expectations flourished in all sympathetic quarters. This book is the result of Barbusse's officially encouraged, if not inspired, labors. Whoever turns to it in hopes of getting some insight into Stalin, the man and leader of men, his ideas and methods of action, will be sorely disappointed. For what we have here is neither history nor biography but liturgical rhapsody. By some fantastic transference of the Messianic nimbus from the carpenter of Galilee to the young seminarist of Georgia, Barbusse has written a work in which fact and fancy are hopelessly blurred in a hazy and shoddy religious mysticism.

More's the pity! For Stalin, think what we may of his policies, deserves better of a biographer than to be rendered ridiculous by such premature apotheosis. Were this not the work of a man who, as is well known, shut his eyes, opened his mouth, and swallowed whole the new dispensation with all its Stalinist trimmings, it would be denounced as a subtle "counter-revolutionary" attempt to undermine faith in "the leader" by painting him in the colors of saintly inanity. People might well ask what kind of a hero is this who permits such fawning and grovelling. But Stalin is not the holy fool Barbusse makes him out to be. Imagine how a hard-bitten Marxist, proud of his militant atheism, would react to such typical passages in Barbusse's books as: "... if the cobbles in the streets could talk they would say, 'Stalin'"; or this coupling of Lenin and Stalin, "he is the paternal brother who is really watching over everyone. Although you do not know him, he knows you and is thinking of you. Whoever you may be, you have need of this benefactor. Whoever you may be, the finest part of your destiny is in the hands of that other man [Stalin] who also watches over you, and who works for you." Not a critical line, note, or word mars the creamy raptures of Barbusse's devotional exercises. The

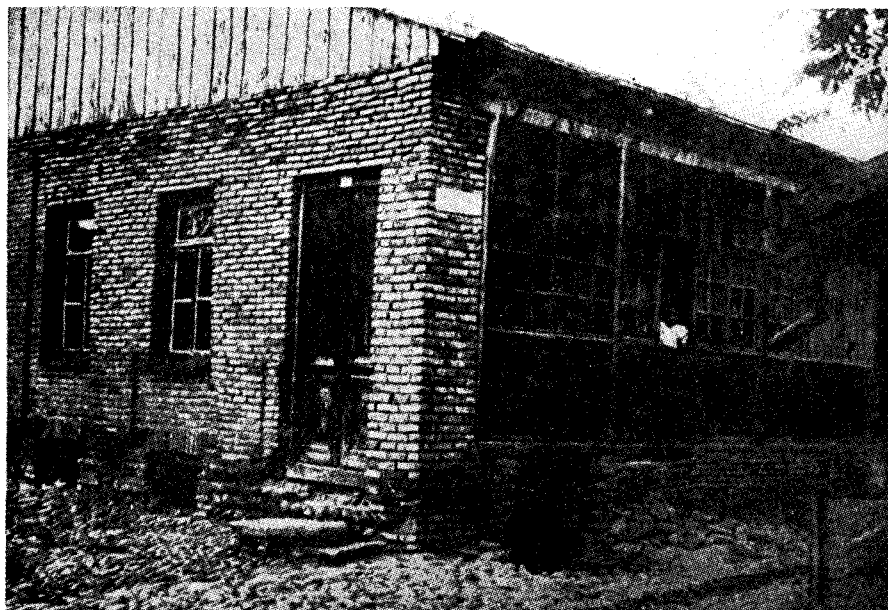
imaginative reconstruction of Stalin's past which offers great possibilities to the conscientious biographer, turns out to be nothing but a *pastiche* of remembered sayings about Stalin by his present-day subordinates who hold their positions on his sufferance.

It is not to Stalin alone that a manifest injustice has been done by the publication of this book but to the memory of the Russian Revolution. And to Barbusse himself. Had he truthfully admitted to himself that he was not writing a sober account of Stalin's career but a transfiguration in terms of sacred fable, Barbusse would have avoided doing violence to firmly established facts. But as it is he stands under the shadow of having deliberately committed more than a hundred sins (at which point I stopped counting) of omission and commission in his prolonged, Byzantine hymn. I cite an illustration. "Lenin," says Barbusse, "arrived at Petrograd April 3rd, 1917. Stalin arrived at the same time from the opposite direction." The actual facts are so well known that Barbusse could not have been ignorant that Stalin together with Kamenev and Muranov was already editing *Pravda*, the Petrograd organ of the Bolshevik Party, on March 15th. Why this deliberate perversion of the truth? The explanation is simple. In the interests of his religious myth, Barbusse must make it appear that Stalin enjoyed Lenin's confidence at all times. But as a matter of fact, upon his return to Russia, Lenin launched a vitriolic attack upon the editors of *Pravda* for their social-patriotism, for their conditional support of the Provisional government and their failure to put the question of the conquest of power on the order of the day. Since Stalin was one of the leading three responsible for

the policy of social patriotism, Barbusse must remove him from Petrograd, play ducks and drakes with calendar dates, and arrange his entry into the city to coincide with that of Lenin. Only a man in the throes of a great obsession can delude himself that the world will look away while he drags historical truth into the dust so that he can feel free to urge others to kneel before his idol.

It would be kinder to Barbusse's name to forget that he ever wrote this book. But it can and should be used as a horrible object lesson of the intellectual and spiritual fate in store for sentimentalists of every political complexion who have embraced a cause without trying to understand it, who have glorified action at the expense of truth and evidence, and, finally, have abandoned their integrity as craftsmen for the consoling myth that they are on the winning side. Perhaps the saddest thing about Barbusse's pitiful attempt to fall in line in atonement for the mildly critical indiscretions of his past, is the sentiment expressed in his unguarded statement: "If Trotsky had been right, he would have won." The material, if not the formal, implication of the remark is that "Whoever wins, is right." Yes, if Trotsky had won, Barbusse would doubtless have written of him with the same revolting fulsomeness as he now writes of Stalin. The principle behind Barbusse's practice unflinchingly leads to spiritual debauchment; its effects are observable not only in Europe but in our own country. But however it may be with the lettered mercenaries of the world, no person who desires to retain his self-respect at a time when all ideal values are threatened by party passions can believe that might makes right and that the law of the jungle is the law of mind.

Sidney Hook is on the faculty of New York University. He is the author of "Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx," and he edited a recent symposium entitled "The Meaning of Marx."



STALIN'S BIRTHPLACE AT GORI IN GEORGIA. From "Stalin."