

# Ode to Liberty

*IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE.* By Sinclair Lewis. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company. 1935. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ELMER DAVIS

SUPPOSE America went Fascist, what then? Mr. Lewis has supposed it, and the answer to the question makes a hair-raising story, once he gets into it. Granted that a Senator who, explicitly, is not Huey Long (still living when the book was written), with the support of a radio preacher who, explicitly, is not Father Coughlin, should win the next election on a program promising everything to everybody, except such Jews and Negroes as refused to be content with the station in life to which it has pleased God to appoint them; what would happen to the people of these states? Just about what happened in Germany, says Lewis; and (no doubt drawing a good deal of his information from his wife, Dorothy Thompson) he translates the present of America with a skill and power that will give you insomnia for a couple of nights after you finish the book.

Unfortunately it takes him a hundred and fifty pages to really get going. The story of the campaign, the election, the first acts of the new administration, is done no better than it could be done by any one of fifty newspapermen on assignment from the city editor. Lewis is writing a missionary tract and a fervent prayer, and it is worth waiting for; but the first third of his book, mixing fiction with fact and real with imaginary characters, is the same type of story as Floyd Gibbons's "The Red Napoleon," or the preparedness-invasion stories that were so numerous in 1916. "The Red Napoleon" was tripe except for the purely military chapters and most of the war-time invasion stories were tripe without that exception; Lewis is far better than that, yet when he is writing about public affairs and their impact on private characters he gets into his story none of the unbearably vivid sense of a national crisis against which individuals play out their personal crises, that Rex Stout managed to put into "The President Vanishes." And Lewis's story creaks in the transition from self-government to dictatorship; it may be doubted if any President would be able to get away, at the very beginning of his administration, with the arrest of all members of Congress who refused to vote him absolute power.

But all that had to be got out of the way before Lewis could get down to his

real business, and you are earnestly advised to push your way through it and give attention to what he has to say. Once he has all the works of German fascism going in America the story concentrates more and more on what happened in one small town in Vermont to the sort of people you know; and especially to Doremus Jessup, the easy-going, elderly liberal editor who saw his paper taken away from him, his son-in-law murdered, and his worthless and vicious hired man promoted to be fascist boss of the district. When Doremus Jessup, his daughter, his mistress, and a few of his friends become the local cell of the New Underground, the secret revolutionary organization in contact with the refugees in Canada, the story becomes a thriller of the very first quality, and a thriller with as good a sermon behind it as Lewis has ever preached.



DOROTHY THOMPSON  
"As rapidly inquiring . . .  
as a kid in class."

For essentially this is an ode to Liberty. Doremus Jessup was a liberal and he remained a liberal to the end; but a fighting liberal who found plenty of others like himself, men and women who believed that liberty not only is worth fighting for but can be fought for. Lewis writes like a man who has had to listen to communists; and the bigoted intolerance of communists who would rather continue as a persecuted sect, sustained only by the hope that some day they may do the persecuting, than admit any merit in people who fail to accept their theology, has never been more effectively blasted than by half a dozen scari-fying paragraphs in this story. He pays his respects, too, to the gentlemen who talk about liberty, meaning only liberty for big money, and think that the Constitution consists of the due-process clause plus a few meaningless phrases. It may surprise some readers to find the author of "Babbitt" and "Elmer Gantry" appearing as a devotee of America, as fervent as Whitman; but the America he loves is Whitman's America, and Lincoln's, and Jefferson's. An America not to be restored, at this late date? Perhaps;

at the end of the story a liberal rebellion has broken out in the Northwest, but there is no guarantee that it will win, no clear indication of what it would do if it did win—except that the country is no longer to be ruled in the interest of the rich, and that the freedom for which liberals are fighting is to be preserved, even if they come out on top. There are still a good many people in this country who believe that the thing could be done.

In some respects, undoubtedly, Lewis has mellowed. Communists will say that wealth has mellowed him; more probably it is time—and Vermont, for which he reveals more affection than he showed for Sauk Center. (Yet it is the Northwest, observe, which first rises against the tyrant.) Scattered through the book are a hundred aphorisms worthy of quotation, comments on American life and American history much more temperate than you might expect from Lewis. Yet he can still hate; he still does hate, all the enemies of liberty whether Right or Left.

No doubt a good many people will dismiss this as a sensational scare story; it can't happen here. Well, Lewis's account of the administrations of Presidents Windrip, Sarason, and Haik may copy Germany a little too closely—purely by the law of averages, it is unlikely that American fascism would also so strongly tend to homosexuality. But his story of the workings of fascism in Fort Beulah, Vermont, is enough to give you the shivers; for he shows you exactly the sort of people—every small town has them, and every city too—who would find in fascism the outlet they have always wanted for envy, hatred, and malice.

The material is there, kept down only by fear of the police; once the police are on their side—

And as I write this, the morning papers quote remarks of Governor Eugene Talmadge which might have been spoken, word for word, by Lewis's Senator Buzz Windrip; yesterday's papers reported speeches at a D. A. R. convention which, if Lewis had written them, would have been dismissed as burlesque too exaggerated to be effective; and the president of the American Federation of Labor

has just pledged coöperation with the American Legion "to the end that subversive elements may be well identified . . . and promptly suppressed." Brethren, it could happen here—not in 1936, perhaps; but sooner than anybody might think, if the hard times go on. Watch and pray.



SINCLAIR LEWIS  
"A country-store type." Caricatures  
by Peggy Bacon, from "Off With  
Their Heads" (McBride).

# Saint Joan as a Human Being

JOAN OF ARC. By Milton Waldman. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1935. \$3.50.

Reviewed by DAVID OWEN

JOAN OF ARC is a member of that select group of historical characters whose fascination for the biographer is wellnigh irresistible. The explanation is simple. It lies both in the obvious fact that her career was dramatic far beyond the legitimate demands of writer or reader and in the variety of appeal that she makes to sentimentalist and cynic, baptized and unbaptized. As an architect of the French nation she seems to epitomize France itself. Herr Sieburg showed a sure instinct when, in his study of the French national character ("Is God a Frenchman?"), he entitled the first chapter "Saint Joan." The chronicle of Joan's life, preserved chiefly in the records of her trial and rehabilitation, invite attempts to guess the riddle of her character. Yet she remains as mysterious as ever.

This, in a word, is the justification for another life of Joan. No two solutions can be alike, and all have value. Mr. Waldman's purpose, as announced by his publishers—to show "the Maid of Orleans not as a legend but as flesh and blood"—has an alarmingly familiar ring. It is a claim that too often has been used to cover biological details and backstairs scandal. In this instance the profession, I think, is justified. Mr. Waldman has written a book from which both sensationalism and sentimentality are happily missing. His Joan is easily distinguished from the talking abstraction of Bernard Shaw, the naïve tool of shrewder minds created by Anatole France, and the ikon-like figure of Mark Twain and Andrew Lang. She is a salty, straightforward virgin in whom the deepest piety and patriotism are joined to a dangerous commonsense that cuts through the elaborate conventions of theology and feudal warfare. The gaily ironic humor which runs through her trial should convince even her idolators that as the rather priggish heroine on a pedestal she is grossly miscast. Mr. Waldman's Joan, on the whole, is a credible person, and he has described her in a book that, save for a few minor lapses in literary taste, is satisfying and absorbing.

Modern students of Joan's life, whose motives go beyond those of hagiography, have had to contend against heavy odds. The Joan legend, which even during her lifetime nearly obliterated the human being, has hidden the kernel of fact within a hard shell of tradition. At the hands of pious chroniclers and popular belief the legend has swelled until it is now, in Mr. Waldman's words, "too old, too rugged, even too hallowed ever to be seriously modified." Another and equally serious difficulty lies simply in the inability of one age to appreciate the emotional and intel-

lectual climate of another. To accept the explanations of natural phenomena given by our sixteenth-century ancestors would condemn us to a universe in which caprice had been substituted for order.

Mr. Waldman has made a gallant attempt to surmount these obstacles. He rejects alike the objective reality of the Voices and the theory of certain moderns who would throw the Maid to the psychiatrists. There is nothing about her, he concludes, that suggests a hysterical personality, nor did she find kinship with the typical mystics of her age. In the early fifteenth century the religious sensations of European humanity were so acute as to become pathological, revealing themselves in such perverse forms as flagellants and dances macabres. At such times one can expect Voices to speak clearly and imperiously. Is it absurd to suppose then in



JOAN OF ARC

this highly charged atmosphere a peasant girl, extraordinarily sensitive, could summon angels and saints by the very force of her own will to believe?

The qualities which Joan brought to a chaotic and demoralized France were not chiefly military. This is not to follow Anatole France in belittling her talent for generalship. But it was rather the moral content which she was able to inject into the cause of the Dauphin and the confidence which she inspired in her troops that made her appearance the turning-point of the war. After the relief of Orleans, her tactical sense developed rapidly. With the moral ascendancy which she established over her soldiers she coupled an intuitive grasp of the immediate objective and the will to strike hard until it should be achieved. Her behavior at the trial was of a piece with her conduct in the field. Here she was pitting herself not against a few thousand Goddams but against the officers of the Universal

Church, backed by the University of Paris. Her tactics were so direct as to embarrass her examiners, used as they were to finely-drawn subtleties. She could make feints and sorties, sometimes with considerable damage to her opponents. But her testimony in the large is that of one who countered guile with simple honesty. Joan would not have appreciated the compliment paid her by an English nobleman present at the trial, though for him it was the ultimate tribute: "There's a fine woman; what a pity she isn't English."

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## From A to Zyrian

THE COLUMBIA ENCYCLOPEDIA. New York: Columbia University Press. 1935. \$17.50.

Reviewed by PERCY W. LONG

AMERICAN dictionaries have long encroached on the field of the encyclopedia. Here a professed one-volume encyclopedia approaches an encyclopedia dictionary. But as four-fifths of its estimated 50,000 entries are names of persons and places, it is primarily a dictionary of proper names—and one without illustrations or maps. Thereby places are very fully covered, for the United States endeavoring to include those of 1,000 inhabitants up. Names of persons rank second, but include a restricted "Who's Who." Biblical names are thoroughly covered. Characters in literature are rare.

The entries, however long, are confined to one paragraph, and thus often become (as at United States) unwieldy for quick reference. But they offer only what the editor aptly terms "first aid." The book makes no pretense to serve an expert in his field or suffice him for expert instruction in another field. It is rather an alphabetized primer. Its entries are well selected, and generally adequate in accuracy. They suffer from two defects: the selection of data offered has not the discrimination of a specialist, and the relative space for like entries lacks nice evaluation. For the former see such entries as *Hamlet*, Marx under *Communism*, *Piers Plowman*; for the latter compare Dante and Giotto, Molière and Munsey, Algernon and Sir Philip Sidney. Where several places bear the same name, as Springfield, the alphabetical order by states or countries results in obscuring important places.

This book, by profession, does not replace the dictionary or the atlas, in fact, except for brief references, it does not replace the encyclopedia. Its field of usefulness is to provide scraps of important information to satisfy a momentary interest. This service it does well enough for undiscriminating readers. It is usually up to date, and in matters of controversial nature or religious differences it shows highly praiseworthy tact. Only the doctors