

A Clear, Fair Picture of a Revolutionist

DANTON, DICTATOR OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION. By Herman Wendel. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1935. \$3.75.

Reviewed by WILBUR CORTEZ ABBOTT

AMONG its many contributions to knowledge and literature for which the Yale University Press deserves the gratitude of the public, is this translation of Wendel's "Danton." That such a book, originally written in German, should have been translated into French, Italian, Dutch, and Portuguese, seems to indicate that it was high time it should appear in English dress. It is, indeed, interesting. Wendel has imagination; he has knowledge; above all, perhaps, he can write. Best of all he knows what he is writing about. Unlike so many writers of the "new biography," he has a bibliography; and, still more unlike them, that bibliography contains not merely printed works but unprinted "sources." Such lists are, indeed, no guarantee that the author has read the books he lists; but no one can read far into this *Life* without perceiving that Danton's biographer has somehow "got into his period" and that he has found himself at home in it. He knows its characters. He does not merely list their names, he can tell you something about them—and to know the men of a period is the first step toward wisdom in history, however little it is heeded by many writers in that field.

His estimates of them, however subject to criticism, are among the most entertaining passages in his book. Camille Desmoulins, that "mixture of genius and gamin"; Mirabeau, who "towered among his companions like an oak among the undergrowth," though "the core of the tree was dying"; Danton himself, with his "spells of grandiose indolence," Marat, whose "subterranean life among cellar rats had given him scab and shingles," an "overheated fanatic" with an "oily voice"—whatever one may think of what Wendel

thinks of them, one must admit that he knows them, and that he has a gift of phrase.

This is not a history of the French Revolution; yet one arrives at the middle of page 259 before he reaches the middle of 1793. It is a life of Danton—and why he should be called the "Dictator" of the Revolution lies between the author and his publishers. To leave Danton out would, of course, be to have no revolution; but he was not the whole of it, nor even, save for a brief period, even the greatest part. What, then, is the conception here set forth of the great revolutionary leader? Was Danton honest? Yes, relatively, even at times absolutely; and as he points out, "the material damaging to Danton has decreased rather than increased," owing to the discovery that some of the original sources were tampered with to Danton's discredit. Was he responsible for the massacres of September? No, says Wendel; that was primarily Marat—who is reported to have said that he would let his right hand wither rather than carry out the decrees he urged others to execute! Danton would have stopped the massacres but he had not the power. Was Danton, as they say, "sincere"? Robespierre was "sincere"—cynics will retort that all fanatics are always "sincere." But Danton was not only a revolutionary leader; was he a statesman? To all these questions Herr Wendel provides an answer; to the greatest problem of all, the great problem of Danton himself, he has given an entertaining reply, couched in terms which if they lack something of what used to be called the "dignity of history," will, unquestionably, appeal to a far wider circle of readers nowadays than statelier periods. That it will have that circle, it is not possible to doubt; that it will add to their knowledge as well as to their entertainment there is equally no doubt; nor that, on the whole, it will provide them with a clear, fair picture of a great revolutionary leader, who for a moment rode the fierce tide of that revolution and, like his fellows, was overwhelmed by it.

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In the American Idiom

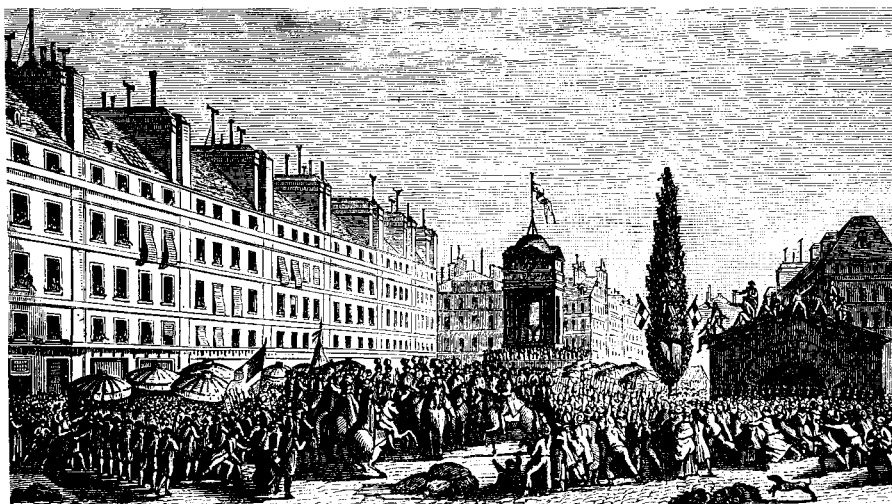
THE GREEN CORN REBELLION. By William Cunningham. New York: The Vanguard Press. 1935. \$2.

Reviewed by ALVAH C. BESSIE

IT is no compliment to Mr. Cunningham's first novel to compare it, as his publisher does, with "the early work of Erskine Caldwell." Where the conversation of Caldwell's two-dimensional characters is almost interchangeable, Mr. Cunningham's figures achieve an individual life; where the "picturesque" language of the Southern writer's people becomes almost invariably a stylized caricature, Mr. Cunningham has captured the authentic American idiom in several of its multifarious manifestations; where Caldwell manipulates his characters in accordance with a preconceived plan, the people who motivate "The Green Corn Rebellion" demonstrate the features of living people, not marionettes. So the resemblance, which is occasionally unmistakable, owes its origins to a comparable locale and probably identical influence: Sherwood Anderson.

The rebellion itself took place in Oklahoma on the occasion of America's entrance into the World War. Oppressed for years by the banks, unable to find a decent market for their crops, consigned to daily drudgery as year followed unproductive year, many farmers were distinctly socialistic in complexion, and it needed only their own awareness of the financo-capitalistic background of the war to force them to resist our entry and, more especially, the selective draft. Possibly a thousand in all took up arms "against the government." They burned bridges, cut fences and telephone poles, destroyed cattle and crops. They took to the open country, intending to march on Washington and enforce their demands, but the attempt proved abortive, many were arrested, and more felt the violence of the town-folks' one hundred percent American gangsterism.

Woven into this narrative are the several stories of individual farmers and their families—revealing their heritage of unmitigated toil, exploitation, and race prejudice. There was Jim Tetley, whose wife Jeannie had fallen a victim to the philosophy of hard work, had driven him and herself, until with considerable remorse he saw her destroy the girl he had loved, and found himself more and more attached to her younger sister Happy. There was Birdie Wellhoff, who died because she could not get the proper food to carry her through her latest pregnancy; there was Bill Johnson, Negro Spanish War veteran who, pressed by privation, accepted his sadistic boss's invitation to eat a dead mouse, on the promise of a full load of grain all for himself. These and many other farmers took to the fields when the call came for action, only to find their leadership fail them, to lose their



PROCLAMATION OF THE CONSTITUTION, 1791.

farms, their liberty, and the respect of their more "patriotic" neighbors.

Mr. Cunningham has the material and the talent to write sound fiction; he can command the robust, somewhat bawdy humor that is so typical of American agrarian life, and he can handle pathos. When he has worked his way free of the influences that cause his work to resemble the paradoxically acclaimed fiction of his more limited mentor, he will write it.

Indians to the Life

FIG TREE JOHN. By Edwin Corle. New York: Liveright Publishing Company. 1935. \$2.

Reviewed by OLIVER LA FARGE

IN recent years a number of writers, recognizing that Indians as a whole are interesting and complex human beings rather than lay figures in a fictitious history, have produced some little intelligent work about them. Most successful, perhaps, have been the novels written around Apaches—notably Will Levington Comfort's "Apache," which is without exception the most extraordinary and complete projection of the mind into a person of an alien race that any white man has achieved. There is a good reason for the interest of this Apache writing, for those people, notorious in our self-laudatory histories, infamous in our folk-lore, are primarily notable for their intellects, and the keen mind, the philosopher's mind, functioning in warlike savagery offers a fascinating study.

Writing effectively about Apaches calls for a writer with imagination, sensitiveness, and guts. It calls for a real writer. Most of us who tackle Indians can, in the long run and with all our efforts, never do more than circumscribe them. To do that well is hard enough, perhaps impossible. Our Indians come out in the end, as products of the white man's mind, more or less approximating the men whom only the Indians themselves will ever know.

In this latter group, "Fig Tree John" stands high. I think the two Apaches, father and son, in their amazing situation, are sometimes marked with the author's fingerprints. At other times, within the limitations of my perception, they are real Indians made clear. Mr. Corle has taken two of the great possible themes—the functioning of the intellect in savagery, and the adjustment or maladjustment of the Indian to a white world, salted them with action, spiced them with a sound love element, set them against a peculiar and most original background which throws them into sharp relief, and made from the whole a sensitive and delightful story.

His writing is simple, unaffected, and strong. The story has been cleverly ordered; one likes his craft. One does not need to be interested in Indians to like the book.

Oliver La Farge is the author of "Laughing Boy."

Rockwell Kent in Greenland

SALAMINA. By Rockwell Kent. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1935. \$3.75.

Reviewed by MARIE AHNIGHTO PEARY

A NEW book by Rockwell Kent is always an event to his large circle of admirers. When the book is about Greenland, this circle is enlarged by the steadily increasing number of people who are interested in the Arctic and its native life. "Salamina" is written in a chatty and familiar style which has the advantage of presenting places and people in an unforgettably vivid manner. It is more than a travel book but makes no pretense of being either scientific or instructive. The author is an artist, not an ethnologist, therefore the story is more concerned with a white man's life among the Eskimos than with an account of the Eskimos themselves.

In this connection it is well to remember that one can no more say "The Eskimos do this and the Eskimos do that" than one can make the same statement about the white man. The Eskimos are scattered over Greenland, Labrador, northern Canada, Alaska, and Siberia, and their habits, customs, and personal characteristics vary with each small tribe. The language itself, while fundamentally the same, changes so radically in different tribes as to be almost unintelligible even to such an expert as the late Knud Rasmussen. Therefore, what is true of the Eskimos of the Upernivik region of west Greenland is not necessarily true of the people of east Greenland, or even those of the region north of Upernivik, the true Arctic Highlanders, cut off from all but the slightest contact with the "civilization" of the south, by dreaded Melville Bay, grimly known as "The Graveyard of Ships."

Perhaps it is because of my early familiarity with these, the most northerly inhabitants of the globe, that I do not entirely recognize the characteristics of the Eskimos described by Mr. Kent. Here again, however, it must be realized that "Salamina" is written from the viewpoint of one man. This is important, for it is

fairly certain that other men, living among these people just as Kent did, would each have received his own and probably entirely different impressions.

When it comes to descriptions of the country, however, there can be no argument, no differences of opinion. Here Rockwell Kent is at his best, both in his word pictures and in the exquisite wood cuts which head each chapter. In this respect, if in no other, the book will be a revelation to all those who think of Greenland as a desolate, unimpressive island, peopled with uncouth savages. The beauty, the majesty, and the grandeur have always been there, but it has taken

Rockwell Kent to recognize and appreciate them, and, what is even better, to capture and bring them home for other less adventurous spirits to see and to enjoy.

Coming to Greenland early one summer, "Kinte," as the Eskimos called him, set to work at once, building his house and preparing for a year's stay. In every possible way he identified himself with the life of the community, setting nets for whales, learning to drive a dog team, attending "kaffemiks" and giving others in return, even quarreling with

the local trader. In the spring, the first ship from Denmark brought Mrs. Kent to join her husband, and together they made a round of the various neighboring settlements.

The entire book is full of life, of color, of descriptions of ways and customs that are startlingly out of the ordinary. To some, it will bring the urge to try such an adventure for themselves, but even to those who have no desire to leave their warm fireside and emulate Mr. Kent, there is enough of interest and amusement to make the reading of "Salamina" well worth their while.

Marie Ahnighito Peary, daughter of the discoverer of the North Pole, was born in Greenland, and made her most recent trip to her native land about a year ago when she unveiled a monument in honor of her father. She is the author of several books for children and is widely known as a lecturer.



A ROCKWELL KENT DRAWING
FROM "SALAMINA"

Mr. Kent's caption: "This is Beate—whose love I once declined. How she could dance!"