

Literary Carpetbagging

SOUTH. By Frederick Wight. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1935. \$3.

Reviewed by JONATHAN DANIELS

WHEN Frederick Wight wrote the one word "South" over his novel, he meant it. If he has left anything out of this southern novel, surely it must have been by oversight, for from near-incest to near-lynching, from decadent aristocrat to undernourished lint-dodger, from native Negro to rich wintering Yankee, from strike to flood, he shows the clearest intention of putting into his book every lurid aspect of life below the Potomac. As sometimes happens, however, the sum does not add up to the whole. No sound picture of the South emerges but only the attenuated story of young and beautiful Katherine Winslow, who came with her painter husband into the South, where she swiftly slept with one handsome but worthless Southern aristocrat and hungrily contemplated sleeping with another before she and her husband left to ride again back into the comparative safety of the land that lies at the north end of the road.

"South" is a novel written in invasion. Its story is that of movement into new, strange land and of escape from it. And perhaps, as is often the case with invaders, the destructive processes at work in the alien country penetrate more quickly to the invading mind than understanding. There is not the least reason why a northern writer should not make a sound novel about the South, even one who comes to it from New York via Cape Cod as Mr. Wight does. Furthermore Mr. Wight had the opportunity of knowing at least the upper South around Charlottesville as student at the University of Virginia. And certainly he does not disqualify himself by choosing the sensational aspects of the Southern legend. Caldwell and Faulkner, to name but two, have not hesitated to look behind the jessamine bushes. But Mr. Wight's invading couple, and particularly his lady whom he romanticizes with all an author's adoration, comes South

with a too quick readiness to be soiled by the South. It may well be that when they escaped they also left escape behind for the southern world, which like all other worlds is diverse and complex and not to be drawn in understanding in the same terms in which the front page of a tabloid pictures the world.

Mr. Wight has attempted too much or too little. Everything he pictures has happened in the South. There are such Southerners and rich mock-Southerners as every one he presents at Lady Holden's dinner party, in Mrs. Larch's mill village house, in Dr. Quain's hot and hard-benched tabernacle of salvation, and on Vance Carlton's drinking parties. But to make the one town of Millington the stage upon which every aspect of southern life and every diversity of southern character appear is to put a severe test upon the

credulity of any reader who knows the human geography of the South.

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that "South" wholly lacks merit. Mr. Wight, as a painter (much like his own portrait painting hero) turned novelist, has decorated his book with five paintings in color of southern types and in his text there are some excellent portraits of typical southern characters. His characterization of old Mrs. Tainey, who could always wheedle fifty cents out of her writer or painter visitors, is accomplished with a ve-

racity, a humor, and an understanding which is unexcelled in the growing American literature of the poor white. Some of his other minor characters are also deftly and accurately drawn. If Mr. Wight had succeeded half so well in the broad aspects of his story and in the characters of importance in his book as he has with his supernumeraries and his visual details of description, he would have written an excellent book. His trouble seems to be that, painter turned novelist, he remains only a painter with a splendid seeing eye for surfaces. Here the strength of the painter is the weakness of the novelist, for Mr. Wight is so preoccupied with a dramatic succession of scenes and surfaces that he fails to find the essence of truth which might be found in any of them but which does not emerge from them all.



One of Frederick Wight's paintings, from "South."

Sailors Under the Czar

ROMANOFF. By Leonid Soboleff. New York: Longmans, Green & Co. 1935. \$2.50.

Reviewed by NICHOLAS WREDE

AMONG the numerous books which have come out of wartime and revolutionary Russia few have attempted to give to the outside world a glimpse of the life in the Russian navy. The field offers interesting possibilities for various reasons: no branch of the Russian service made greater strides forward after the sad lessons of the Russo-Japanese War, no department proved more efficient during the World War, and, finally, nowhere were the revolutionary convulsions more destructive or more terrifying than among the navy crews.

Mr. Soboleff attempts to interpret the entire course of events by placing the action within several weeks immediately preceding the outbreak of the World War. The story is divided into three episodes which are in no way related to one another. The central figure in the first two is Georgi Levitin, a midshipman in the Naval Academy, who goes to visit his brother serving on a battleship, and who returns to Petersburg in time to witness the arrival of Poincaré on his historical visit to Russia. In the third episode the author describes the feverish activity on board the ships of the navy on the very eve of the war, Georgi Levitin is completely forgotten in the excitement, and the action centers around the older brother, Lieutenant Nikolai Levitin.

The book is a peculiar hodge-podge. On one hand it abounds in excellently executed vignettes of navy life. The pages devoted to the ship's routine are drawn with masterful simplicity which will make a navy man of any nationality feel perfectly at home in them. This illusion of reality is further strengthened by Mr. Soboleff's adroit use of specific facts: he mentions the customs and the traditions of the Russian navy, he describes the ships in minute details, on occasion he even uses names of real men. No one reading these passages can fail to realize that the author has done them with feeling and with understanding.

On the other hand, whenever Mr. Soboleff attempts to connect these splendid navy sketches with a thread of thought he is entirely out of his depth. The philosophical interludes in which he indulges, and the moral and political dissertations which he squeezes out of his characters, are actually embarrassing.

Nor is there anywhere any evidence of a plot, though occasionally the narrative lapses into melodrama. For instance, there is the episode in which the representative of the privileged classes in the person of a midshipman attempts to seduce a deadly earnest servant girl, and is repulsed in the best prescribed virtue-versus-villain manner. Somewhat more original is the

case of the naive sailor who in the midst of the preparations for war absentmindedly writes an obscenity across the double-headed eagle which decorates the stern of the ship, and who boils over with moral indignation when the officers fail to take a playful view of his prank.

Perhaps time will show whether Mr. Soboleff is a person totally devoid of humor and of a sense of proportion, or whether he simply has not found himself in his first attempt. But whatever the future has in store for the author, certainly his present effort cannot be considered seriously as literature or history.

Nicholas Wreden entered the Naval Academy at St. Petersburg at the outbreak of the war. His experiences in the war and the revolution are told in his forthcoming autobiography, "The Unmaking of a Russian." Mr. Wreden is now the assistant manager of the Doubleday, Doran Bookshop in St. Louis.

Settlers in the Territory

BROTHERS THREE. By John M. Oskison. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1935. \$2.50.

Reviewed by STANLEY VESTAL

HERE is a noteworthy novel of the old Indian Territory (now the eastern half of the State of Oklahoma) by an author whose roots are in that soil, an author who knows his ground and the people of whom he writes. John Oskison was born near Tahlequah, the beautiful old capital city of the Cherokee Nation. His heritage was cultivated by years at Stanford and Harvard, and in New York City, where he began his literary labors. Since those days, now a decade past, he has given himself to the writing of novels. This is one of his best.

It was written in the old Indian Territory country, near Vinita, Oklahoma, a region so unusual and dramatic that few can rival it. The realm of the Five Civilized Tribes in Oklahoma has seldom been made the scene of literary effort, though the materials offer many strange contrasts. It is refreshing to meet with an author who knows and can handle the curious and interesting life there.

The real hero of the story is the Under-Ridge Farm, a farm created by the first settler, Francis Odell, and kept clean, vital, and fresh for the coming generations. His sons are the Three Brothers of the story. One—Roger—is a cattleman born. Another—Tim, is a merchant with no love of the land. The third—Henry—goes to college, writes, and becomes a journalist in New York. Only Tim's wife carries on the passion of her father-in-law for the land, for order and permanence. We have here a novel of the soil, covering the period from 1873 to our own time.

Quite apart from the book's undoubted literary quality, it offers an amusing series of incidents. This is one novel of the soil that really gives the rich, earthy humor of it.

It Seems to Broun

IT SEEMS TO ME. By Heywood Broun. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company. 1935. \$2.50.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

THERE are few people for whom I have a more genuine admiration than, as Ruth Hale used to call him simply, "Broun." I know no man more honest according to his lights. No daily journalist is more courageous. Of course there have been all sorts of jests about Broun's physical timidity—on the theory that if an elephant is scared of a mouse it is very funny. But in Broun's case a person might find himself in error if he counted upon it.

I know Broun is not nearly as afraid of the police as I am. They terrify me. He makes friends with them. He makes friends with most people. He is, apparently, a convinced socialist; which, it seems to me, is an excellent thing to be. But that isn't being a radical. To be the McCoy as a radical, it's communism or nothing. Otherwise you just don't move in our set. (I don't mean my set. Climb as I may, I can't qualify!)

I could pick—and will—one essay from the very middle of this extremely readable, entertaining, and invigorating book, to give you an example of Heywood Broun's virtues and defects. I pick it because it is about three famous poems (apparently), and my vocation is verse. Heywood starts out by saying that the late Joyce Kilmer's "Trees" is to him a most annoying poem. He says when Joyce wrote "Poems are made by fools like me," he didn't believe it for an instant. That's true. I've long thought that, in his perfectly sincere piety (which led him into the Catholic fold) Joyce got thinking quite insincerely at that juncture. He created a sort of pathetic fallacy about trees that the dear public just ate up with a spoon. When the poem first appeared it had some fresh and striking lines, and one didn't examine it too closely—but I have heard it maltreated by many warbling voices of late years, until I would just as lief hear that atrocity, "I know a place where the sun is like gold—" which is all about four-leafed clovers, if I remember correctly. It's very coy, anyway.

So far Broun is sound and good; but then he goes on to remark that he thought Gene Tunney phony when he said, after he had won the heavyweight championship, that the more he saw of people the better he liked trees. I don't see that at all! Presumably Tunney meant it. And by

what authority must we have gregariousness thrust upon us? There are times when I feel gregarious and times when I can barely stand the sight of my own face, let alone anybody's else. Heywood gets too sentimental about how fine it must be to be a public hero; how nice it is to be recognized by taxi-cab drivers. There is something rosy-cheeked and ingenuously appealing about this, but it's rather buncombe.

He goes too far, also. What he says about bum sunsets is true enough, and he allows everyone his pet tree, "but a passion for an entire forest seems to me excessive." He misses the whole point about forests. Sometimes one wants just to get lost. Try getting lost around one tree! A drunk managed it with the palings of a park, but, as Kipling says, that's another story. Forests are grand things. I'm scared

of them, but I recognize how grand they are. I'm going to force upon Heywood either a stand of pine or a cup of hemlock! He calls an ailanthus a tree! I just jeer. Just because a redwood is one of a gang he becomes a sap about a sapling! Get thou to the Bohemian Grove, for instance, in California, Heywood! If you don't care for the wooded hillside background to their out-of-door theatre

there, I can't sell you anything!

But there is a worse fault to this essay. It is titled "Trees," "If," and "Invictus,"—but about the latter two poems the author merely says that he considers them the other most annoying pieces of verse in the world. As if that were all he need say.

I object. "If" has some darned good advice in it, even if we can't take it. Its pomposity is what has made it *anathema maranatha*; and it is pompous, but in the phrases about loving friends doing one damage, and the true things you've said being twisted into traps for fools, there is real sapience. Heywood never really read the poem, I'll bet. He just heard it parodied, and the parody got a big laugh.

And despite the rhodomontade of "Invictus" it has lyrical splendor. Sometimes you like to hear a big brag, if you admire the man who makes it, however mistakenly. And Henley was both lovable and admirable—that struggling and tortured spirit!

Well, there you have the soundness and the unsoundness of one essay of Heywood's. There are a lot that are far sounder, and that say things straight from the shoulder that need badly to be said. This man is a good fighter, a great fellow, and well worth reading.



HEYWOOD BROUN
Caricature by Peggy Bacon,
from "Off With Their Heads."