

scenery for his drama of unhappy people. Sometimes indeed his politicians seem less people than props. He seems instead to have written out of some inner weariness and not out of the politics of Ohio a tale in which the young are callow and impulsive and the older, impulsive still, find in life some excitement, much desire, but little, if any, abiding satisfaction.

Perhaps, however, it is futile to seek meaning and purpose where the play's the thing. Whether Mr. Burnett finds the secret heart of the politician or not, whether he discloses the ultimate unhappy seizure of the second best, or less than that, by all men as they grow older, he unquestionably can write fast-paced, reader-holding fiction. Some of his characters are less fresh than familiar. Some of his situations are sharply strained. A good deal of his writing is as vivid and as superficial as lacquer. But the book moves. There is no doubt about that. Crowded with interlocking stories, it advances in complex melodrama to the popular unraveled ending. Only our simple fathers demanded virtue triumphant. We have grown too wise to be so easily pleased. A good melodramatist in these times is not concerned with saving the old homestead; he ends with the house burning to the joint consternation of the mortgagor and the mortgagee. Pyrrhus made the pattern, as Mr. Burnett concedes, but Pyrrhus, as Mr. Burnett demonstrates, was not the only man who could neatly execute the design.

Jonathan Daniels is editor of the Raleigh News and Observer.

Blurb of the Week:

"This intriguing story begins with a really delicious death-bed scene" . . . From the jacket of "Hell's Bells" by Marmaduke Dixey.

Without Benefit of Supervisors

FOR THE SAKE OF SHADOWS. By Max Miller. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1936. \$2.50.

Reviewed by STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

MAX MILLER'S roof needed creosoting and his auto needed a new top. So he found himself, like other writers before him, sitting in a Hollywood studio with five new pencils, three different-colored stacks of paper, and a well-oiled typewriter, wondering what to do about a girl and a boy in the U. S. Coast Guard. They came to nothing in the end—he couldn't make them sufficiently colossal. But, if anybody wants to know what the new inmate of room 19 on the lower floor thinks about, the first week or so while the size of the check still seems incredible, here it is. Mr. Miller, it appears, got out, after that. Fortunately, perhaps, for the reflexes become numbed very quickly, after the first half-dozen conferences.

A sensitive and intelligent reporter, Mr. Miller sets down what he saw and heard, from the screen-writer saying, "But I tell you he had to have the horse die at the end of the race. If he hadn't've had the horse die what would he have had die? He had to have something die," to the producer, remarking magnoliously, "There is nothing great about these. Nothing great whatsoever. It starts out too slight. My God, who ever heard of a great picture starting out as slight as this. It ought to start out with a scene of big confusion. There should be ships and S.O.S-s. It should all be confusion." There is the visitor who said "Ain't it disillusionin'?" and the pleasant, experienced woman from upstairs who told him, "We have all agreed that we should have a motto framed on our walls reading:

AFTER ALL, IT'S ONLY ANOTHER PICTURE." And then, there was the shoe-shine man on the Lot. On the whole, he seemed to be the happiest—at least he was the one that Mr. Miller envied. He was shining real shoes with real polish—and when they were shined, they were shined.

Of course Mr. Miller can be dismissed by Hollywood—if Hollywood reads this book—as "one of those highbrow writers who couldn't make good in pictures." But that would be a trifle inaccurate. Mr. Miller was an excellent and experienced reporter before he became a writer of books—and he is an excellent reporter still. And what he gets to a T, besides a great deal of amusing and limpidly bitter satire, is the puzzled wrath and impotence of the writer who wants to do work, after all, no matter how much he is paid, and can't find how it is to be done. For he has come to a land where a story isn't a story but a conference, and little pigs fly around roasted crying "Come eat me!" Only they aren't real little pigs—they turn into something else on the stroke of midnight—and another matchless super-epic opens, in forty-two key-cities with appropriate pomp.

What Mr. Miller has left out of his book is the fact that good pictures are made, from Mickey Mouse to "The Informer." But what he has put in ought to explain to a good many people, from the writer's angle, the curious, pretentious sterility of much of the Hollywood product—and why you will see a picture with screen-credit given to A the famous novelist and B the celebrated playwright and then wonder what has happened to their minds. For an individual writer is, let us say, an ear of corn—and you are not going to turn an ear of corn into an apple, even by paying it a great deal of money. Especially when you're not quite sure what sort of apple you want. And it doesn't really better a dish to put seventeen different cooks on it. It's more apt to turn out hash.

Meanwhile, writers will continue to go to Hollywood for the money, and Hollywood will continue to feel vaguely cheated when the new expensive import doesn't produce a box-office wow in his supervised room 19. "We did everything for that fellow—we gave him a private water-cooler and put his name on the door." Perhaps that wasn't enough. Mr. Miller wasn't quite able to work the wreck of the *Morro Castle* into his Coast Guard story, though he tried. At the end of eight days, he only had a few notes and it wasn't a great picture. But he has been able to make an entire and amusing book of his fantastic experiences in the sleek, artificial sunlight. Only he was writing that himself, without benefit of supervisors. Worm bites bird.

Stephen Vincent Benét can speak with authority of the sensations of an author in Hollywood, having spent considerable time there himself a few years ago.



MAX MILLER AND CLAUDETTE COLBERT

Civilization in the U. S. A.

MAINLAND. By Gilbert Seldes. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1936. \$3.

Reviewed by BERNARD DeVOTO

"I HAVE devoted a large section of this book," Mr. Seldes says, "to refuting the general theory that the American system of life has resulted in nothing but tawdriness, childishness, and a dry and withered soul." Advice to opponents: don't try to argue with that section of "Mainland." It is a chapter and verse documentation of the thesis maintained here last week, that during the last quarter-century a majority, the most fluent and publicized majority, of American intellectuals have been wrong in their representations and interpretations of American history, American institutions and traditions, and American life. Not wrong in part, in occasional detail, in an assertion here or a syllogism there or a minor argument somewhere else, but always wrong about everything. Stated thus bluntly it may, to a virginal mind, seem blatantly overstated, but it is literal truth and the specimens which Mr. Seldes examines may be supplemented with ten thousand others. Hundreds of books may be earmarked as evidence, whole files of magazines, an enormous mass of organized and integrated nonsense which got itself accepted by the guild as realistic description and which, unfortunately for those who would rebut Mr. Seldes, remains in the records. He comes into action against it on page one, firing at every port, and his broadsides make highly exhilarating reading. Already several supporters of the dying cause have complained that parts of Mr. Seldes's gunfire are unsportsmanlike, that some of his targets are too easy, that he pots some of them sitting down. Maybe; but what are they doing in the line of fire? Analyzing America in time of crisis is serious business. If an ideologue insists on discussing important matters without first acquainting himself with them, he must expect to be winged by a man who knows what he is talking about. The former managing editor of the *Dial* knows his ideologues, and the author of "The Stammering Century" and "The Years of the Locust" knows his history.

When Mr. Seldes goes on to the all-important part of his book, his own analysis of the American past, he bases it on the findings of history and the sociological, as distinguished from the economic, principles of Marx. He accepts Marx's axiom (it is also Pareto's, though in one of the few misconceptions in his book Mr. Seldes seems to think otherwise) that "the mode of production of material life determines the social, political, and intellectual process of life in general." He joins to this principle the fundamental,

unanswerable, and usually disregarded truism that the mode of production of material life in the United States has been so different from what it has been anywhere else that the social and political life here is conditioned in a unique, characteristic form and function. This will not, of course, be news to students of history. The absolute, determining importance to American institutions of the cheap land which made widely dispersed property the basis of freedom, established democracy as our political mechanism, provided a constantly rising standard of living, and created both the democratic



GILBERT SELDES

materialism and the democratic faith in progress—the absolute importance of cheap land in establishing uniquely American ways of life has been the insistence of historical research ever since Turner's classic statement of it in 1893. Following Turner and his school, following Charles Beard and his school, following the recent and highly important work of Walter Webb, Mr. Seldes goes on to interpret the national past as the conflict of two generalized, inclusive complexes of forces. A trans-Alleghany proliferation of a native society in conformity with the unique conditions of this continent has been opposed by, but to a certain extent victorious over, an Atlantic seaboard with roots in the European interests, moved in part by the same forces, and tending always to be shaped by them.

I do not think that Mr. Seldes's analysis can be overthrown, or that any important dissent from his third section, an expo-

sition of characteristic American intellectual processes and achievements, can be sustained. The most vigorous forces in American life are the ones that have been resolved from the forces he examines. They are materialistic, not idealistic; pluralistic, not monistic; dynamic, not static. They correspond to the dominant importance of the middle class, whose most characteristic organization of society is to be found in the Middle West—which has come to be what we effectively mean by democracy. It is an organization which established the widespread diffusion of property as the bulwark of freedom, which has struggled to reestablish it against the concentrations of property that menace freedom, which has always opposed internationalism whether of finance or of political theory, and which in summoning the government to implement and defend it has moved slowly but discernibly toward democratic collectivism.

In his concluding section, Mr. Seldes examines the present crisis and some of the proposed solutions to it, including the forced and false simplification which holds that the United States must choose either the fascist or the communist form of the servile state. Holding that different forces operating on different material produce different results and that a pluralistic culture whose core is change cannot be forced into a static and monistic form, he declares that the asserted alternative is untrue to logic, to history, and to fact. The issue already joined is rather between a technology which must control industry on behalf of an expanding economy of plenty, and a financial system geared to economic scarcity and in deadly danger of freezing so. Mr. Seldes's vote, and his faith, is with the complex of forces which has opposed such a financial system since before the United States was born. Vote and faith put him on the side of a good many Americans who are poison to the ideologues—but so much the better omen. Other and more inspiring omens go with him—of history, and of the middle class, the too nearly voiceless people who in the end have determined every event in our past. And who have always determined it in their own terms, giving native shape to native life.

"Mainland" is brilliant in its analyses, its characterizations, and its illumination of the present by means of history, but if it were merely a brilliant book there would be no point in treating it at this length. It is courageous and exhilarating, it is hard and firm, it is in great part unassailable. It speaks clearly and, if a lifetime of working in the materials with which it deals entitles me to judge, what it says is true. More than all this, it is a sign of the times. Only a few more books like it would be necessary to show that the American middle class, the seldom considered but preëminent fact about American life, now knows that it need not go voiceless and is beginning to find its voice.