

The Record of the Writers' Congress

THE WRITER IN A CHANGING WORLD. Edited by Henry Hart, with an introduction by Joseph Freeman. New York: Equinox Cooperative Press. 1937. \$2.

Reviewed by JAMES T. FARRELL

HERE is a record of the second American Writers' Congress. It contains an introduction by Joseph Freeman, the scheduled speeches which were delivered at all of the sessions, and a narrative account of the discussions and proceedings. The final section is inadequate.

The ostensibly important purposes of the congress were two: to organize writers for the defense of democracy and culture against war and fascism; to discuss the technical problems of writers and to outline measures that would implement the spread of culture. However, the congress was essentially political in nature, and dominated by the influence of the Communist Party. It was organized and sponsored by the League of American Writers. The manifesto calling the congress expressed the prevailing party line. The only leader or important functionary of a political party who addressed it was Earl Browder. No important intellectual or writer of liberal or radical persuasion who disagrees with the official left cultural movement or the Party on important political, intellectual, or literary questions was invited to address the congress. Thus, we can see the reasons for the essentially monolithic character of the congress, for the absence of stimulating and fertile ideas in the speeches and discussions, and for the lack of any all-sided examination of issues and problems that are today crucial.

Three of the important subjects discussed at the congress were war, fascism, and democracy. Dealing with the manner in which the congress treated the war question, John Chamberlain contributed an article—*WAS It a Writers' Congress?*—to the August issue of *Common Sense*. He pointed out that there was a flavor of 1917 to the congress. I refer my readers to his article. Although speech after speech referred to democracy and fascism, no incisive analysis of either system was presented.

Two of the most pretentious speeches were delivered by Kenneth Burke and B. A. Botkin. Speaking on *The Relation between Literature and Science*, Burke was characteristically obscurantist; one of his conclusions advanced, as compatible with "Marxist philosophy," a Freudianized concept of a "patriot-father" image. Mr. Botkin even managed retroactively to admit the deceased Mary Austin into the progressive front. Newton Arvin urged progressives to study the democratic heritage of New England so that reactionaries could not appropriate it for fascist ends. Albert Rhys Williams spoke of billions of books published in the Soviet Union, but he did not mention the jailing of writers and the suppression of free speech in that land. Frances Winwar delivered an informative talk on literature under Mussolini. Archibald Mac-

Leish spoke on Spain and American writers.

Joseph Freeman delivered an extemporaneous speech defending the present Communist line. "The applause was overwhelming." In the 1935 congress, he also received applause after delivering an extemporaneous speech in which he attacked all the fundamental conceptions which he defended in 1937. In 1935, he said: "Consider carefully the demagoguery of the fascist government of Mexico. When I was in Mexico, I found state governors—one of whom became president of the republic—who used to hand out Lenin's portrait to peasant delegations." In 1937, he said: "Certainly Cardenas is a bourgeois president, but he is progressive in his setting . . . the Cardenas regime puts through progressive measures beneficial to the people." (Italics mine.)

Donald Ogden Stewart began his speech thus: "I am inclined to believe that my function at a congress of writers is that of the Horrible Example." He testified "to show you the awful thing a writer can become after ten years of successful commercial writing, so that when you go shuddering to bed tonight you can get down on your knees and pray, 'Dear God, please don't let me become like Donald Ogden Stewart.'" He concluded: "Let all writers, 'step out of the museum and take a breath of fresh air and in doing so help to open the doors for others.'" The "Horrible Example" was unanimously elected head of the organization of writers formed out of the congress.

Among those who did not attend the congress were John Dewey, Edmund Wilson, John Chamberlain, Sidney Hook, Louis Hacker, and John Dos Passos.

American Music

FROM JEHOVAH TO JAZZ. Music in America From Psalmody to the Present Day. By Helen L. Kaufmann. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 1937. \$3.

THIS rapid-fire, wise-cracky history of American music was evidently written for those who run to read. Why those who run should wish to read on certain subjects is another matter, but if they must read, they could probably do worse than to grab this volume and look at it with one eye while the other follows the hands around the clock. The main facts are here, if somewhat scrambled; the right names appear, even if the text seems to be in much the same hurry that the running reader reveals in his dash for culture. As might have been guessed from the title, there is far more of jazz than of Jehovah, even in those few pages at the beginning wherein Jehovah, so to speak, gets His innings. It is possible to overdo the bright-and-breezy technique in the handling of historical material. The determination to be fast and funny at any price becomes to some readers more than a trifle wearisome. It is not objectionable, for example, when dealing with Tin Pan Alley, to orchestrate one's prose with the instruments dear to the Alley; to write of this industry too soberly would be to miss the point. On the other hand, to write of all American music as if it were a theme for a journalist's holiday, is to get off key too often.

Mencken the First

THE CHARLATANRY OF THE LEARNED. By Johann Burkhard Mencken. Translated from the German by Francis E. Litz, with Notes and Introduction by H. L. Mencken. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1937. \$2.50.

Reviewed by LEONARD BACON

FOR Mr. Mencken's discovery of his remote eighteenth century relative we have some reason to be grateful. The two little tracts on intellectual quackery are amusing and full of good sense. They deserved reprinting. And they will be read with interest and pleasure. One can sympathize with Mr. Mencken's delight when he discovered in the writings of his forerunner views not altogether dissimilar to his own.

Johann Burkhard Mencken, sometime vice-chancellor of the University of Leipzig and author of "The Charlatanry of the Learned" was evidently a man of parts. He was born the year that Milton died and he died the year George Washington was born. In the fifty-eight years between he made himself quite a fellow, master of many languages, familiar with the sciences, and independent in thought. An early eighteenth century German who could speak and write good English must be called a rare bird. A university dignitary who went out of his way at academic festivals to attack academic hokum must have been a black swan. There is something fine and fresh-minded about the quaint old gentleman.

One reflects with some bitterness, as one lays down the amusing if long-winded little volume, that it could not be printed in Germany today. And there is another sad thought. It is a pity that Mr. H. L. Mencken should have undertaken the role of the scholar. His introduction is agreeable and suggestive, but angels and ministers of grace defend us from his ill-written and frequently inaccurate notes. Perhaps of all our better known men of letters Mr. Mencken is the least well equipped to monkey with the ironies and subtleties of eighteenth century letters.

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SIXTH NOVEL COMPETITION
Atlantic Monthly Press
8 Arlington Street Boston, Mass.

Roads to Neutrality

THE FINAL CHOICE. By Stephen and Joan Raushenbush. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock. 1937. \$2.50.

Reviewed by DAVID H. POPPER

THE "choice" presented in this book looks uncomfortably like an insoluble dilemma. Two moving spirits behind the senatorial front of the Munitions Committee investigation might have been expected to produce a simple panegyric in favor of legislation for "neutrality," the elimination of war profits, government manufacture of munitions, and the spate of related measures owing their origin to that magnificent probe into the causes of war. Such, however, is not the case. To be sure, the authors easily demolish the insubstantial edifice of their principal opponents—those who would have us crusade again to rescue democracy and, incidentally, assorted national imperialist interests. Democracy, the Raushenbushes convincingly demonstrate, cannot be imposed by war; it can be secured only by peace and prosperity. General war means concentration of control and eventual dictatorship, both at home and abroad.

But the outlook for the alternative, an isolationist policy, is not much more cheerful. Realistically examined, the struggle to devise laws insulating the United States against contact with foreign conflicts can do no more than delay American participation. Attempts to prevent the economic machinery of our nation from meshing into a rich war trade are "probably hopeless." All that remains is to pray that we may have an able and peace-loving executive in office when the storm breaks, and that our flimsy controls against involvement do not break down until the tempest has passed away.

So runs this grim but undeniably accurate portrayal of the position of the United States in world affairs. Yet world war is not flatly termed inevitable. A ray of hope is seen in the vague possibility that this troubled world may be reformed both politically and economically: politically by entrusting its destinies to a superstate armed with international military contingents; economically through a mass conversion to liberal international economic policies under superstate control. It is obviously a strain on one's credulity to imagine that, the League of Nations having been battered into innocuous pulp, a stronger institution of the same sort might be created from the same elements. Indeed, the authors' discussion of their own peace plan is shot through

with the recognition that it can hardly be brought to fruition without supernatural intercession. The villain of the piece, they imply, is the capitalist system itself. But would not a congeries of socialist nations be subject to national passions like our own, and tempted to indulge in similar conflicts for the right to exploit colonial areas? Capitalism may, as the Marxists declare, lead unswervingly to war, but it does not follow that a largely political malady can be cured by a mere change in economic organization. A number of unexplained assumptions of this type and an occasional lapse in style mar what is generally a worth-while presentation.

David H. Popper is a member of the staff of the Foreign Policy Association.

Choice of Religions

BEYOND TRAGEDY: Essays On The Christian Interpretation of History. By Reinhold Niebuhr. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1937. \$2.

Reviewed by ALBERT CLARKE WYCKOFF

WHEN this book is lifted up out of the obscuring mists of its shadowy title, it is easily recognized as one of Reinhold Niebuhr's most daring and brilliant attempts to present what he believes to be the vast superiority of the profound psychological and social values in Biblical religion, over the values to be found in social and cultural religions. This is the central theme around which the material and convictions of each chapter are organized. But it is a twentieth century interpretation of the Bible in which he finds these profound values resident; and he has no lack of knowledge, or appreciation, of the modern social and cultural values. For, as most of his readers already know, he is one of the most widely read and informed writers in the field of religion, and outstanding in his popularity as a college and university preacher. His regular audience is the cultured group, and the fifteen chapters contained in this book are addresses originally given in the college and university chapels of this country. And yet, when all of this has been stated, the fact remains, as the reader will see, that he makes a much more free and determined use of the Scriptures than the average modern university preacher. He believes with a depth of conviction that marshals all the resources of his gifted personality into service, that the Scriptures, through history, myth, symbol, have plumbed the nature of religious experience to a far greater depth than have social and cultural religions. "The modern age substituted the God of reason and nature for the God of revealed religion," he writes, and by so doing, he endeavors to show, it opened the floodgates of tragedy that have swept down upon the world from every side.

This whole field is so controversial, and readers are so sensitive about belief, words, and ideas, that any attempt to acquaint others with the fascinating way in which the author does his work is sure to arouse prejudices that may lose him readers who, if they had not been turned away, might have been grateful to him.

Near Eastern Affairs

THE MEMOIRS OF SIR RONALD STORRS. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 1937. \$5.

Reviewed by CHARLES DAVID ABBOTT

THIS richly freighted volume of reminiscences will attract three kinds of readers: those who desire unbiased, skillfully presented information about the background of affairs in the Near East, especially about the increasingly momentous conflict between Jews and Arabs in Palestine; those who relish anecdotes of the great and the nearly great, and who want their insight into contemporary history sharpened by a knowledge of the personalities, public and private, of the chief figures; and those who have discovered in autobiography one of the important arts, who enjoy and find instructive the often complicated self-analysis and self-illumination of a cultivated man.

Before and during the war Sir Ronald Storrs was Oriental Secretary to the British Agency in Egypt, where he gained experience under Cromer, Gorst, and Kitchener. After Allenby's capture of Jerusalem, he was appointed Civil Governor of that city, a post which he relinquished in 1926 to become Governor of Cyprus, where he remained until 1932. Few men have been in a position to know so much about the racial, religious, and social tangles of Asia Minor; few men have played a more vital part in the effort to bring order to a region where order was not natural; no man succeeded in the task so brilliantly, albeit for so brief a period. The reflective survey of nearly thirty years of Near-Eastern politics, diplomacy, warfare, and social conditions which he provides is penetrating, judicious, and frank—the product of a wisdom born not only of experience but also of acute and well-wishing interest. It is the necessary guide, not to be found elsewhere, to an understanding of the problems which exist today particularly in Palestine and, less insistently, in all the Levantine countries.

The bold narrative of events is pleasantly interrupted time and again to include many diversions—witty thumb-nail sketches of notabilities in unguarded moments; admirably dry and sparkling stories, the by-products of official life, told with the packed economy of the instinctive aphorist; aptly pointed *obiter dicta* on music, art, and literature, to which Sir Ronald has paid the homage of the advanced connoisseur. And then there is Sir Ronald himself, by no means the least exciting of the characters who come to life in his pages. In a very real sense it is his book; less as author than as subject he dominates without obtrusive egoism every chapter. The best type of British official, energetic, sincerely altruistic, disarmingly modest, the self-knowledge to which he has risen informs every sentence of his autobiography, making it a remarkable and rewarding psychological document presented with impressive but not always orthodox literary skill. It is not for nothing that Henry James has been one of his prime passions.

Charles David Abbott is librarian of the University of Buffalo.

SOLUTION OF LAST WEEK'S DOUBLE-CROSTIC (No. 195)

NICHOLAS BRETON—
"FANTASTICS."

It is now December . . .
Strange stuffs will be sold
Strange tales well told
And what else as falls out.

I hold it the costly purveyor of
excess and the after-breeder of
necessity, the practice of folly and
the purgatory of reason.