

Soviet Summary

THE SOVIETS. By Albert Rhys Williams.
New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1937.
\$3.

Reviewed by SAMUEL H. CROSS

LITERATURE on the Soviets, both controversial and descriptive, continues to grow by leaps and bounds, to the despair of the specialist and, I suspect, to the exasperation of the reading public. Mr. Williams's latest effort is considerably more ambitious than anything off the presses since the Webbs' imposing opus, and is a serious work of importance in the field. The author has set out to compose something in the nature of a reference encyclopedia divided under headings phrased as questions which the curious are likely to ask about the Soviet Union. Frequently seasoned with anecdotes drawn from Mr. Williams's own lengthy experience in Russia, the book has a breeziness which disguises the solid substructure of factual material. The basic information may be rapidly scanned in large print, but the curious will find additional detail in the sections of smaller type which supplement each major division of the text.

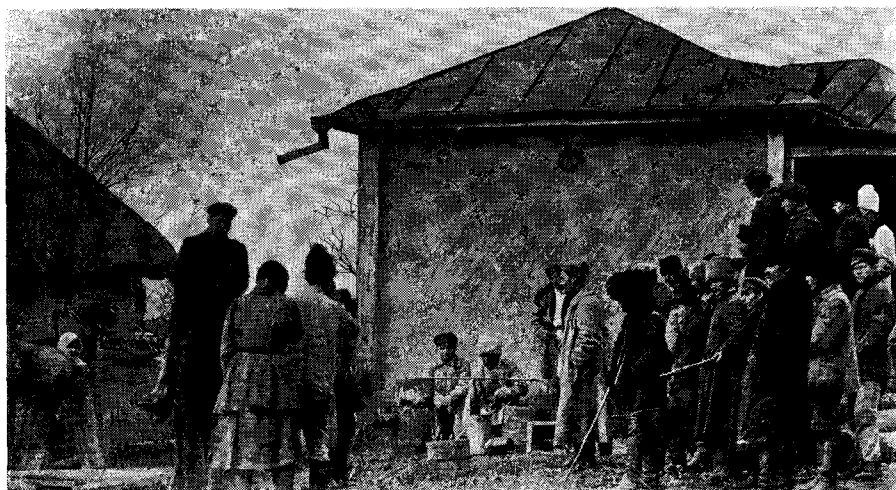
Mr. Williams gathers his data under the four chief headings of state administration, economic life, social life, and foreign affairs. His treatment of the complex ethnic situation in Soviet territory and of Soviet policy toward the non-Slavic minorities is a praiseworthy exposition both of an essential Russian problem and of the ingenious methods adopted for its solution. The carrying of culture to racial and linguistic groups which before the revolution were absolutely cut off from modern civilization is, in fact, a missionary experiment of intense social interest and a Soviet achievement which merits the widest recognition. Mr. Williams explains clearly and accurately the function of the Communist International in relation to the Soviet State, and his discussions both of the role and significance of Lenin and of the position of Joseph Stalin as mouth-

piece and leader are judicious and informing. Though he embodies the provisions of the Constitution of 1936 in his description of the Soviet administrative machinery, I have a notion that his readers would have been better served by a more detailed analysis of this instrument as compared with the essence of our own fundamental law.

While giving the Soviets every break, Mr. Williams makes no attempt to conceal the negative aspects of government, transportation, and farm and factory management. Endemic bureaucracy receives its usual panning, but to blame it, as Mr. Williams does, mainly on functionaires inherited from the old régime and on sabotage simply disguises the real causes: the buck-passing inherent in any large organization where the penalties for even innocent minor mistakes are severe and an almost superstitious reverence for non-essential paper-work. Mr. Williams is also inclined to underestimate the reconstruction problems of Soviet railroading. On the other hand, his chapters on the relations of the sexes and cultural life do the subjects ample justice.

The least satisfactory portion of this compendium is the section on Soviet foreign relations, which suffers from excessive simplification and occasional false emphasis. No competent observer questions the motives behind the Russian will for peace, and Mr. Williams's statement of the defensive and educative function of the Red Army is meaty and suggestive. At the same time, his analysis of the factors making for a Soviet victory in the next war adroitly combines facts and divination. In dealing with Soviet-American relations, he makes no more than cursory reference to the debt problem or to the connection of Article 2 of the Rapallo treaty with its adjustment. In his treatment of international affairs, Mr. Williams assumes the arts of the pamphleteer to the detriment of an otherwise valuable summary of the ideals, operation, and attainments of the Soviet Union.

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A MOONSHINE STILL RAIDED BY THE SOVIET MILITIA

World of Certainties

THE WIND FROM THE MOUNTAINS.
By Trygve Gulbrandsen. New York:
G. P. Putnam's Sons. 1937. \$2.50.

Reviewed by PHILLIPS D. CARLETON

MR. GULBRANSSEN's new novel, though complete in itself, is a sequel to "Beyond Sing the Woods" and carries to old age the characters there introduced to the reader. It is not so successful a book. "Beyond Sing the Woods" was a romantic tale with all the simple stern opposites, the shadows and white light, and the rising action that any good narrative demands. The old legends of the countryside, the wicked heiress of the baronial estate, the proud and ruined Major, the struggle in the heart of the hero between the savage doctrines of pagan revenge and Christian forgiveness, all lent a glamour and a surge to the earlier story that this new novel does not possess. Here the years are long; the problems more complicated; and the manner of telling much more episodic. Yet this novel is laid in a world of the past where there were definite certainties of conduct and ethics, and the reader will find in these certainties much of the same charm that the earlier book held for him.

Adelaide, daughter of the retired and poverty-stricken Major, marries the son of a great estate owner in the deep wooded country and begins a strange new life in a household ruled by tradition and the Elder Dag, her father-in-law. The Elder Dag came of a fierce old stock that long ago had settled in this valley and made its people their tributaries. The earlier book told of his struggles to maintain himself against the baronial family south of him, his struggle to deal justly with his people and yet be merciful with his great power to support or destroy. Now he is an old man gentled by the years, a kind of *deus ex machina* watching over the happiness of his son and daughter-in-law. The story tells of the strife of the younger pair toward happiness and understanding. It is a strife not sharply plotted to a definite conclusion, but uncertain and fluid. The figures approach and part and gain painfully in understanding, watched over by the Elder Dag who offers now and again a solution or a sign of confidence and trust. The story is told in a series of short pictures that sketch out the years but that interlock none too well.

This novel carries a nostalgia for the past where the conduct of life had at least hard, firm ideals for its guide. It is philosophical by implication, ethical in its intent, and the ethics are those of Christianity. The author has suspended his book somewhere between the world of legend and the hard world of fact; he has ruled out the irritants of daily living, cast his characters in a heroic mould, and boldly decided for the mild virtues of Christianity.

Life in the Dustbowl

THE TREE FALLS SOUTH. By Wellington Roe. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 1937. \$2.

Reviewed by HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

MORE pertinent as a document than as fiction, Mr. Roe's book belongs to that school of hopelessness which leads many to be hopeful of the future of American letters. It is a study of the dustbowl area during the depression. As such it depicts with literalness the effect of the continued drought on the nerves of the farmers, from which point it continues by showing how the political and financial corruption of a small Kansas town, linked as that corruption is with the state machine, lead to an agrarian riot which Mr. Roe really gets up for the purpose of suppressing it through the American Legion. While Adam Potter is down at Topeka fruitlessly trying to see the governor, his wife is gored by a bull which his small son has thoughtlessly released from its pen. Returned from Topeka, Adam is shot in the riot. The children are turned over to the state orphan asylum. At the end of the tale the rain falls, but not before Mr. Roe has revealed at long length the futility of human action.

Undoubtedly all these events happened to somebody at some time or another. The language of the characters is a veracious transcript of actual speech. I have no doubt that the author can cite chapter and verse for every episode, every cuss-word in the tale. But Charles Reade, whose novels have not survived, could also cite chapter and verse for every episode in his fiction, and met all adverse criticism by an appeal to his enormous file of newspaper clippings. Like Charles Reade, Mr. Roe fails to observe the ancient Aristotelian axiom that what is possible is not necessarily probable.

Mr. Roe's difficulty is that of a good many contemporary novelists. Equipped with a fine reportorial faculty, he does not know what to do with it. He is so



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determined to arouse sympathy for the hard lot of the Kansas farmer that he continually underlines all he writes and fails to create that mysterious translation of life into fiction which makes the life of literature in place of the life of sociology. He hunts his characters down. The injury of Mrs. Potter is a purely gratuitous piece of misfortune. The governor is permitted to remain in ignorance of the farmers' visit because Mr. Roe can thus add another count to the indictment. Adam Potter is shot, not by the sheriff, but by the author.

The dustjacket observes that "when you have closed the book, finished reading, you will not have left its characters. The impact of the climax will send them with you for days as you go about your daily tasks." Even allowing for the passionate lyric cry which is permitted to dustjackets, the difficulty is that this is precisely what does not happen. What remains is an apprehension of the sociological truth that the lot of farmers in western Kansas is a hard one. What does not remain is any feeling that Adam Potter, his family, the sheriff, the banker (our old friend who forecloses the mortgage on the farm), and the rest are anything more than representative sociological types of what might conceivably be true if you piled all rural misery into one book. But rural miseries do not make fiction, they make only a case study, and a case study the volume obstinately remains.

Balaclava Twice a Day

CONTACT. By Charles Codman. Boston: Little, Brown & Company. 1937. \$2.

Reviewed by KENNETH P. LITTAUER

THESE are the best and the worst of the war memories of Charles Codman, once a pilot with the 96th Aero Squadron, U. S. A.

To be a survivor of the 96th is necessarily ample matter for a book. This is because the 96th was something altogether exceptional in the way of American flying units. It was the first of our day bombardment units, the pioneer, the spearhead, and the number-one martyr of a new offensive technique. Not merely once in its history, but twice a day, weather permitting, it performed exploits roughly comparable to the charge of the Light Brigade. Any part of its story is the stuff of legend, and deserves an audience. Codman was one of the first muster of thirty-six fliers, pilots, and observers, who went to the front, east of Verdun, with the 96th, early in the summer of 1918. The first combat flight took off from Amanty on June 12th. Within six weeks from that first sortie, half the original complement of fliers was either dead, wounded, or captured. Codman explains how it all happened with illustrative vignettes of disaster.

September 16th. Codman and two com-



CHARLES CODMAN

panions are talking at noon mess. A pilot named Anderson speaks: "Do you remember flying up from Clermont? Besides Evans, we are the only ones left. It won't be long now."

Just four remaining, out of the original thirty-six. "Not, not the Six Hundred!"

Before dinner that evening Anderson died the characteristic death of the Christian martyrs and the fliers of the 96th. His observer burned with him, of course. And two other pilots, and two other observers. It was Codman's last flight too. But he came through it alive, and spent the rest of the war in German prisons.

The days of his captivity follow, beginning with the crash of a ravaged Breguet bomber in a field near Conflans, and ending with the end of the war and repatriation. This is not the least exciting half of the book. For, though the imminence of death is left behind, there are other vehicles of suspense—hunger, cold, intimidation, uncertainty, the indignity of filth, the torment of hostile inquisition, the stifling misery of claustrophobia.

In the antique Castle of Landshut the captive's wanderings ended. At Landshut he encountered James Norman Hall, the perfect companion for desert isle or donjon keep. Codman fell at once under the strong fascination of Hall's extraordinary serenity; and his prison restlessness appears henceforth to have been appeased.

Books of war memories are always in peril of seeming vainglorious. This one avoids the danger by disregarding it. Though the author never asserts his merit, neither does he emphasize it by furtive disclaimers. The book is throughout the uncompromising expression of a man of decent pride, but of modest address. Its manifest purpose is to preserve and make available the record of those things that Codman saw, during certain high moments of his life, which still seem to him, after twenty years, dramatically memorable and socially significant. He thrusts no comments upon the reader but sticks to the job of writing a record. So much restraint is a mark of singularity and a recommendation.