

A Dream in Collapse

RUSSIA TWENTY YEARS AFTER. By Victor Serge. Translated from the French by Max Shachtman. New York: Hillman-Curl, Inc. 1937. \$2.50.

Reviewed by EUGENE LYONS

IN the summer of 1936, in an obscure American monthly called *The International Review*, I ran across an "Open Letter to André Gide," signed by Victor Serge. It was one of the most moving documents I had ever encountered. Its writer, I learned, had just been released from Russia by a long and loud campaign for his freedom conducted by leading French and Belgian intellectuals, to whom he was known not only as a revolutionist but as a fine novelist.

For seventeen years, since 1919, Victor Serge had been in Russia: first as one of the leaders of the Communist International and, for years, the editor of its official organ, and later, when Stalin came to power, as one of the badgered oppositionist communists shunted from prison to prison and exile to exile. He had thus experienced the Russian revolution in his own mind and flesh both in its glory and in its decadence. Now, on his way back to the West, he was writing this letter to Gide—and through Gide to the intellectuals of the world.

Subsequently, when André Gide returned from a Russian tour to indict the oppression of the human spirit that he sensed there, I wondered how much the Victor Serge letter had done to open Gide's mind about the Stalinesque ballyhoo. Certain it is that the book Serge has now written, "Russia Twenty Years After," will open the minds of thousands of other well-meaning intellectuals mesmerized by their own ardent hopes.

And it will lacerate their hearts, because it is a tender and terrifying book. Its meticulous account of the Soviet realities—the wretchedness of the masses, the depredations of the terror, the crushing of thought, the outlawing of revolutionary dreams—is suffused with the author's sufferings. Nowhere does he complain against his own long-drawn ordeal at the hands of Stalin's police. But Serge feels and writes deeply, so that what is intended as a restrained political and sociological volume emerges as a species of epic tragedy.

The book begins with a section on "The Condition of Man and Mind" that strips layer after layer of propagandist veneer to reveal the poverty and despair of the Soviet masses. It is in the second part of the volume, describing "The System," that we are confronted with the most grueling sights. The large-scale persecutions which the outside world knows by hearsay, and through the occasional shock of a mass execution or

fantastic show trial, Serge details from first-hand knowledge. The pages teem with names of great fighters for a better world, socialists, communists, anarchists, young people who somehow had been touched by the spirit of the revolution even under the present police regime—people whom Serge met in this concentration camp or that "isolator" or some remote place of exile. We become familiar with the technique of confessions and the inexorable demoralization of strong men and women under the G.P.U. inquisition, until the recent "mysterious" trials no longer seem mysterious.

Finally the book traces "The Political Evolution," from 1917 to date. We see a racketeering bureaucracy tighten its grip on the Russian land. The "socialism" that emerges is an obscene parody, and even

more obscene is the joy with which deluded outsiders, who remained indifferent or hostile to the Russian effort in its early years, now rally to gloat and to worship.

No review can do justice to this book. It is living history, a startling picture of a dream in collapse. No communist or near-communist who knows the meaning of intellectual integrity will be able to ignore it. The twittering innocents who mistake what is happening in Russia for "socialism" in practice will damn Serge's book without reading it, but that will not prevent its essential truths from becoming known. Readers accustomed to the sweet fatuities of the Durantys, Fischers, and Anna Louise Strong's will find Victor Serge indigestible. But those among them who respect their own minds will chew and swallow the bitter facts notwithstanding.

Eugene Lyons's book on his experiences in Russia, "Assignment in Utopia," has just been published.

Pioneers in Medicine

DOCTORS ON HORSEBACK. By James Thomas Flexner. New York: The Viking Press. 1937. \$2.75.

Reviewed by MABEL S. ULRICH, M.D.

NO chapter in the story of medicine's climb from witchcraft to science is more colorful than that which deals with the accomplishments of America's frontier doctors in the years between the nation's birth and 1846. During this period — anesthetics and microbes, remember, were still unknown—the country's first medical schools were founded; bleeding as a therapeutic measure killed hundreds every year; unsuspected mosquitoes twice infected and almost depleted Philadelphia; a voyageur at Fort Mackinac was shot in the stomach and an obscure army doctor peered in the hole to discover the digestive process; a doctor in the South and a dentist in the North watched young men make whoopee at "ether parties" and asked themselves why bumps and skinned shins were unfelt during these gay jags.

From this American chapter in medical history Mr. Flexner has chosen seven extraordinary characters for his gallery of portraits, and so sure is his knowledge,

so deft his handling, that not only does each come alive with haunting vividness, but the era itself springs into a new and brilliant focus. That most laymen never heard the names of these men does not really matter, nor should it limit in the least the book's appeal. Certainly a more lively, dynamic group has not often been brought together within the covers of one book. The author is more concerned

with them as men than with their theories and discoveries, exciting as these are, and there is an epic quality to their struggles with ignorance and the wilderness.

After Morgan, who fought with Washington, and Rush, who fought against him, the horseback doctors followed settlement Westward. On the frontier, with a modicum of knowledge and the most primitive tools, they not only performed prodigious miracles but they established medical schools, carried on research, and

fought their associates for their beliefs and honors with a Billingsgate fervor and complete lack of restraint. Flexner's psychology is as sure as his history. He makes no attempt to evade his heroes' vanities and absurdities, but he shows them to us with a kindly humor and a warm understanding that serves to make us like them only the more.



BENJAMIN RUSH

Lives at First Hand

INSIDE OUT: An Introduction to Autobiography. By E. Stuart Bates. New York: Sheridan House. 1937. \$5.

Reviewed by EDGAR JOHNSON

IT is easier to find a plausible definition of autobiography than a good one. If critics, under the pretense of discussing books, are really talking about themselves, as Anatole France wittily maintained, and novelists, according to Mr. Cabell, are all writing "autobiography" (not to mention Max Eastman's high-spirited diatribe against poets talking to themselves), it is also true that every doctor writing about antibodies, every lawyer on the due-process clause, and every industrial monopolist praising free enterprise, is really talking about himself.

In a sense, every subject is autobiography; and every form may convey autobiography. We find more of it in a single sad paragraph of Johnson's Preface to his "Dictionary," or in the "Essays of Elia," or the fictional pages of "Remembrance of Things Past" than we do in the memoirs of General Grant or Lloyd George's many-worded and furious records of his struggles against the military type of mind. And if in one way autobiography is everything under the sun, in another it is nothing at all. The protean, elusive, million-sided, contradictory personality melts away, leaving the autobiographer baffled to say who he was or what he was really like; and the memory, that fantastic, whimsical servant, yawns, transposes, distorts, and invents in the most cavalier fashion.

This nebulous realm that Mr. Bates tries to explore in "Inside Out," however, is from another angle one of the most concrete and sharply defined in the world. For it is the absolutely unique source of evidence about what a human being is to the being involved. And it is direct, immediate, and irrefutable. We can never know what it is like to be Man-o'-War or a greyhound or a diamond in a mine; and, since they left no autobiographical records, we never shall know what it was like to be Titus Oates, Giorgione, or Marceline; but Rousseau, Henry Adams, Chesterfield, Yeats—and thousands more—yield us unique and indispensable keys to their personalities by telling us what they were to themselves.

Space forbids analyzing how through the exaggerative mendacities of a Cellini we identify the boaster and liar. The least reliable and most self-deceived of autobiographers in their very falsehoods unpack their inmost hearts to future readers. Autobiography at its best may be described as human personality reflecting itself in the light of its own growth and past experience, but even at



JOHN W. VANDERCOOK, IN NEW GUINEA, DRINKS FROM A COCONUT

its poorest it is one of the most richly revealing of all sources of insight into our nature.

Mr. Bates's purpose is to show autobiography as a great storehouse of firsthand, vivid, authentic information about human personality, in all its variety, beauty, depth, intricacy, squalor, and grandeur. Part I is devoted to common experiences: being a child, growing up, looking for adventure. And since most people are poor, and industrialism provides the environment in which we all live, there are separate chapters on poor people and business industrialists. Part II deals with those activities that "most lend themselves to become fine arts" and those that "tell us most about the germination and development of the fine flower of human life—personality." It ranges over art, religions, and the professions, the sexual impulse, and the experiences of failure and spiritual warping.

The chapter on "Poor Folk" is a tribute to the misery and courage of humanity. It includes, among almost as many others, Sitarāma, a sepoy before the Mutiny, Sam Noble, a sailor, whose oral story was taken down by a listener, Wenzel Holek, a Czech factory worker, Etienne Bertin, an agricultural laborer, George Edwards, a trades unionist, James Burn, a beggar, and Eddie Guérin and "Chicago May," thieves.

Such choices are typical of the pains with which Mr. Bates has combed the field. He does not celebrate St. Augustine, Gibbon, Ruskin, Franklin, Goethe—whose autobiographical writings do not need his comment—but those valuable records that have remained little known or not yet had time to become famous. Of these his text discusses over four hundred, drawn from twenty-three different languages.

Mr. Bates's book conveys at its best a brilliant impression of the lives he crowds into it. It is a monumental digest, an intelligent and vigorous study, and a book packed full of life.

Edgar Johnson is the author of "One Mighty Torrent," a history of biography.

Travel Book of People

DARK ISLANDS. By John W. Vandercook. New York: Harper & Bros. 1937. \$3.50.

Reviewed by HASSOLDT DAVIS

SINCE his most successful "Black Majesty," Mr. Vandercook seems to have lost some of his spontaneous appreciation of foreign lands. Perhaps he has lived in too many of them (sixty-six in all), and met too few characters approaching Christophe's stature to try his talent seriously. He still writes well, if somewhat half-heartedly, and his humor is acute and clear, but one feels of "Dark Islands" that it was simply another book to be gotten through with, a fagot to boil the pot until he could brew a better broth.

Still the book is interesting because the author himself is, because he traveled "for the fun of it." With his wife he crossed the great Fiji islands of Viti-Levu, attended by savages "who practise pure communism—under the authority of absolute chiefs," though British instruction is rapidly changing them. Climbing the peaks, watching native ceremonies, doing his own laundry clothed only in a beard while the native damsels speculated upon him, he had time to ponder the advantages of that instruction, remembering the Superintendent of Education who after twenty years became so doubtful of his service that he bewitched himself and committed suicide.

In New Guinea Mr. and Mrs. Vandercook visited many primitive tribes around the Delta Division of the Kikor River. They went to the Solomon Islands upon the modern equivalent of a blackbirding boat, and explored the mountain villages while the blacks were being subtly "recruited." Mr. Vandercook didn't like the missionaries who lived more luxuriously than many of the Governors-General. But he defends, with quite reasonable argument, the many kindly and successful beachcombers he encountered. This is a travel book of people, rather than of scenes, and they are all well realized.