

Generalissimo

STRONG MAN OF CHINA: THE STORY OF CHIANG KAI-SHEK. By Robert Berkov. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1938. \$3.

Reviewed by DAVID H. POPPER

CHIANG-KAI-SHEK, says Mr. Berkov, was not even accorded the honor of a citation in the 1925 edition of "Who's Who in China." In the next two years he became the country's foremost military figure; in the third, he rose to leadership in a government which could claim to speak for all of China. There, by and large, he has remained ever since. Dramatic biographical material, this; and Mr. Berkov, manager of the Shanghai Bureau of the United Press Association, has done well with it. In the clipped, spare phrases of the journalist who must keep one eye on the cable tolls, he has set down an accurate and fairly sympathetic account of the life of the Chinese generalissimo. The facts appear to be as complete as it is possible to make them with the available information. And the interpretative material, clearly labeled as such, strikes a note of sober balance in which Chiang's actions are not always unreservedly praised.

China's strong man appears in these pages as a leader of ever-increasing stature. After a Japanese military education and a year of observation in Moscow, he rapidly became the military mainstay of the Kuomintang. Astute in the high art of Chinese political maneuver, he was neither more nor less scrupulous than his associates. Opposition he crushed wherever possible, whether it came from opportunist politicians, liberals who criticized his dictatorial methods, nationalists demanding war with Japan, or communists who proposed a drastic overhaul of China's decadent, semi-feudal economic organization. But it slowly became apparent to the country and the world that Chiang, ably assisted by his wife, was carrying out a policy of modernization and centralization of authority. Leading China toward a new era he became, as the Sian affair clearly proved, indispensable to the government. Admittedly he had enforced a right-wing dictatorship supported by the Shanghai financiers, but—as in Hitler's case—his apologists were quick to condone all of his tactics because he had "unified" China.

Are they justified? How and when did Chiang's motives outgrow those of the self-seeking war lord and encompass a truly national purpose? If Chiang survives the war, will he continue to crush every advocate of the much-needed agrarian revolution? It would be asking too much of Mr. Berkov to expect him to deliver a final verdict on a contemporary whose work may still be far from complete, and he very wisely makes no attempt to do so. But, to this reviewer at least, "Strong Man of China" would have been more interesting if it were not cen-

tered so exclusively on the record of political fact. The complex tale of the struggle for power in China tends to become a bewildering congeries of telegrams, manifestoes, resignations, coups, and rebellions with little apparent significance unless they are bound together by more analytical data than Mr. Berkov has furnished.

In many ways Chiang is an aloof and mystifying figure. This biography scarcely succeeds in bringing him, as an individual, closer to its readers. But it will be valuable for the solidity of its factual material. Here, one might say, are the bones of a good biography; but the flesh is still lacking.

ANOTHER LETTER FROM A SALESMAN

IN the *Saturday Review* of March 10, 1934, we printed a letter from our West Coast salesman, Ray Healy, concerning the first book by Isak Dinesen, "Seven Gothic Tales." Mr. Healy was one of the first to discover the beauty and importance of that book; his opinion has been liberally borne out by the judgment of the rest of America. We have just received another letter from Mr. Healy which we think will equally interest *Saturday Review* readers. We print it below.



Dear Bob Haas:

Remember how I wrote you four years ago en route to the Coast, concerning Isak Dinesen's *Seven Gothic Tales*? How I told you in ringing superlatives what a glorious jolt it had given me (it had to overcome a book salesman's ingrown dislike of collections of short stories)? How this then private enthusiasm of mine enabled me to get orders for tens, fifteens and twenty-fives, instead of the usual ones and threes, because I found, on reading it, that it was just as wonderful as you said it was (and you were in good form during that long ago sales conference)?

Well, here I am in Denver, and history is repeating itself. I've just finished reading Isak Dinesen's new book, *Out of Africa*, and, Bob, I think you've struck gold again!

I admit I'm amazed. If anyone had suggested to me, after reading that strange and elaborate performance, *Seven Gothic Tales*, that its author could turn personal historian, deliberately choose that part of her life which she spent on an African farm, and still be good—I should have said that it wasn't possible. Life in Africa would have seemed to me to be miles removed from that author's particular and exclusive sphere.

I'm tickled to death to find that I'm entirely wrong. I'm sure we'll all have to admit that Isak Dinesen belongs to that rare group of writers who can weave masterpieces out of whatever material comes to hand. Her *Out of*

Africa—compounded of coffee plantations and Kenya; of natives and the Ngong hills; of the Prince of Wales and the old blind charcoal burner; of Denys, the great hunter, on whose grave lions slept; of the ancient chief, proud of his 53 children; of big game: lion, rhino, elephant, zebra, buffalo; of Lulu, the lovely pet gazelle, and of the velvet African night—has little enough to do with the "Gothic" ladies and gentlemen of whom she wrote in her first book. And yet, somehow, I think it is an even greater work. For if the former was Byzantine, the new one is pure Greek!

Cordially,

P.S. I have just received your wire informing me that the Book-of-the-Month Club has definitely announced *Out of Africa* as one of its March selections. That is as it should be. I think that every person in America who cares for books will be reading *Out of Africa* before the year is out.



Note by the Publishers: We think that Mr. Healy's enthusiasm is not misplaced. *OUT OF AFRICA*, by Isak Dinesen, will be published on March 1st, price \$2.75. Your bookseller will be glad to book your order now. (RANDOM HOUSE.)

The New Books

Fiction

NOBODY'S IN TOWN. By Edna Ferber. Doubleday, Doran. 1938. \$2.

Miss Ferber's two short novels present two new evidences of the unimportance of the Important People in the America of today. She has contrasted the world of Mrs. Alan Career—dull, narrow, spoilt by privilege—with the gay, hard working, lively world of the people who have their way to make; and again juxtaposed the luxurious dissatisfactions of Mrs. Jared Content III, crossing the continent in a Pullman, with the desperate courage of the first Mrs. Jared Content, who crossed in a covered wagon. Returning, in method, as in theme, to "American Beauty," she presents a series of rapid flashbacks

The real Lafayette emerges greater than before, from the fire of modern research.

LAFAYETTE JOINS THE AMERICAN ARMY

By LOUIS GOTTSCHALK

TWENTY years old, enthusiastic, eager to be liked, impatient for glory, Lafayette set foot on American soil, 1777. His numerous accomplishments during his twenty months' stay laid the basis for the "Lafayette legend." Based on contemporary sources, this book reinterprets the relationship of Lafayette and Washington, of Lafayette and the Continental Congress, and of Lafayette as a military figure. (This is second in a series of monographs; the first, **LAFAYETTE COMES TO AMERICA**, \$2.00) \$3.00

What did the French Revolutionaries think of antiquity?

THE CULT OF ANTIQUITY AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTIONARIES

By HAROLD T. PARKER

THIS book traces the attitude of the French revolutionary generation from the time they were in high school until they were guillotined. "... witty as well as erudite, original without eccentricity . . . closely reasoned, subtle and discriminating." —*Journal of Modern History*. \$2.00

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drawn from the Old America and the new—or rather from a fluid and a static America.

It is always a puzzle why any writing so awfully good as Miss Ferber's is not first rate. Here is brilliant observation of the look and sound and smell of things; intelligent analysis of what goes on in people's minds; immense skill in setting up a scene and its actors; avoidance of clinch and cliché alike. And yet the true picture is somehow more complex and less stable than Miss Ferber's picture. There is more than meets her sharp eye even in Mrs. Alan Career and Mrs. Jared Content III. Moreover, the contrast between Mrs. Career's and Mrs. Content's ideas of their own importance, and their actual worth in the world, has long ceased to matter. Fran Dodsworth dealt them the blow from which, consciously or not, they can never recover.

K. S.

MY INVINCIBLE AUNT. By Dorothea Brande. Farrar & Rinehart. 1938. \$2.50.

Here is Dorothea Brande, author of "Wake Up and Live," in satirical mood showing what can happen when an elderly female takes the counsel of that book seriously. Mrs. Eben Willow, long since deserted by her husband, had been living peacefully with her schoolgirl niece in a small flat in Chicago whose quiet was broken only by the roar of the passing elevated trains and where their dearest delight was burying their noses in books, when suddenly she turned the last page of one, and announced, "Well, I guess we'd better get started." What she got started on was the sale of a cosmetic which before she was through had brought her immense wealth, and established her as the apostle of a cult based on her assurance that Kit Willow's Facial Secret brought happiness in its train. The story is told by the niece, but its heroine is the aunt.

Miss Brande is clever. She has some entertaining satire on what might be Couéism or even in part Buchmanism in her tale. She has scenes that are amusing and others that are ingenious, but many of her incidents are exaggerated and her success story incredible even in a land that has given rise to Aimée Semple MacPhersons. Miss Brande had an excellent idea but she could not make the most of it. As it is, her book is entertaining reading. It might have been much more had she been able to sustain her story as satire, not extravaganza.

A. L.

Travel

THE STORY OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY EXPLORATION. By Charles E. Key. Knopf. 1938. \$3.50.

That most critical traveler who explores from his arm-chair will find hard going on the journeys outlined by this book, for though the signal adventures of each are indicated, their presentation is as drab as Gobi dust. Twentieth century exploration, howsoever aided by mechanical contrivances, is still a vivid labor. Scott's ineffectual tractors at the Pole, Byrd's

and Ellsworth's planes, Sven Hedin's theodolite, Colonel Fawcett's pills, stole nothing from romance. On the contrary they enriched it by making possible the investigation of lands which until recently were considered inaccessible. Yet Mr. Key has apparently seen none of it, or has concealed it with understatement. Writing of the adventures of Scott's desperate men, he remarks: "To their surprise and mortification the explorers discovered that there was a shortage of oil," when actually that fuel shortage, as they knew, was to be one of the factors of their death.

Except for the omission of Cecil John Levien's important travels in New Guinea and Tilman's successful ascent of Nanda Devi, Mr. Key has pretty well covered the world with the explorers, mountaineers, and scientific adventurers of our time. His book would be the better for a bibliography, and more photographs and maps.

H. D.

Mary Shelley

By R. Glynn Grylls

"To make the acquaintance of Mary Shelley through Mr. Grylls's superbly human yet always dispassionate biography is to make the acquaintance of a truly great woman." —Percy Hutchison in the *N. Y. Times*. \$7.50

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