

violently annoyed when small inaccuracies of local tradition seem to detract from their character. For example, he devotes several bitterly sarcastic pages of "Trending into Maine" to refuting the story that Arnold's men enjoyed a meal of bear-meat and pumpkin pie at Fort Western. I have no doubt he is right and the legend wrong, but the interesting thing is the effect of this alleged gorge, not on the soldiers of 1775 but on the novelist of 1938. It is so obvious that he doesn't want those valiant men to have a square meal—it might make sissies of them, if only in his own imagination. The empty stomach and the full resolve—those are the memories which keep up our courage today, in the face of this dismal and undistributed abundance.

The book also contains a recipe for hot buttered rum, a good description of Aroostook County, and an indictment of the New Deal's dereliction at Passamaquoddy. If you like Maine and would prefer to see Mr. Roosevelt drawn and quartered, this is your bear-meat.

Hostile Ideals

OUR COUNTRY, OUR PEOPLE, AND THEIRS. By M. E. Tracy. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1938. \$1.75.

Reviewed by VERA MICHELES DEAN

THIS typographically striking book attempts to answer the innumerable questions which are daily raised about the relative merits of democracy and dictatorship by comparing the situation in Germany, Italy, and Russia with that of the United States. While the compact and clearly written analyses of each country's achievements are objective in approach, there is no doubt of the author's own answer to the problem. Democracy, as practised in the United States, is in his opinion infinitely superior to fascism or communism, whether weighed in political, economic, or social scales. Even if, as President Roosevelt has said, one-third of the nation is living below the American standard, "inferentially, at least" two-thirds are living up to or above it. "In what country on earth," asks Mr. Tracy, "are two-thirds of the people as well off? Certainly not in Italy, Germany, or Russia."

Mr. Tracy, editor of *Current History*, is not unaware that democracy, desirable as it may be, flourishes only in certain political and economic climates which may not exist in the dictatorial countries. In his excellent analysis of Germany's geographic situation, he points out that the German people, from the beginning of their history, have been plagued by a sense of insecurity owing to their central position in the midst of hostile or more powerful peoples. Nor does he overlook the fact that the United States, like Russia, is richly endowed with worldly goods, as compared with Germany and Italy, which lack most raw materials.

Life on an Ice Floe

ON TOP OF THE WORLD. By Lazar Brontman. New York: Covici-Friede. 1938. \$3.

Reviewed by MARIE AHNIGHTO PEARY

THIS is an absorbing narrative. While it is the work of a correspondent of a Soviet newspaper, it contains so many direct quotations from members of the party that it becomes, in part at least, the story of the participants themselves. There is a foreword by the famous Doctor Schmidt, head of the government bureau concerned with all Arctic affairs, in which he speaks with justifiable pride of the success of the expedition.

The book begins with a brief and somewhat incomplete résumé of Polar expeditions of the past, with the emphasis upon the dramatic and striking features rather than upon the actual exploration. The object of the Soviet expedition was to establish at the North Pole a base which could remain on a particular ice floe for a long period and thus take observations over a sufficient time to furnish a large amount of data with respect to scientific problems in very high latitudes. The idea was suggested by Nansen years ago but only the development of the aeroplane made the plan practicable. It will probably surprise most readers to learn that the plans for this expedition were the work of years; that the expedition was not attempted until a wealth of experience had been acquired by the government's experts in such work as the Northeast passage development and the Arctic aeroplane patrols along the north and north-west coasts of Russia. When it was finally

launched, the planning, organization, and preparation went forward with a speed, a sureness, and a meticulous attention to detail more generally associated with German ventures. It was, like all else in the Soviet Union, an entirely governmental enterprise and bears no analogy to the independently led expeditions with which Americans are familiar.

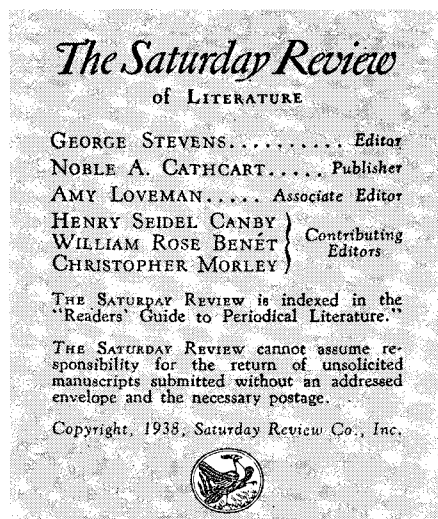
The author went with the planes from Moscow, by Archangel, Novaya Zembla, and Rudolph Island to the Pole itself. He stayed with the party until all the planes came back and left the four scientists to their vigil and their drift. It is this part of the book which holds the greatest interest for the general public because the story is told with a zest and an appreciation of the loyalty, energy, and unity of the party which makes the members of the personnel seem like acquaintances of the reader before he has finished the book.

The resourcefulness of the Soviet flyers, the confidence with which they handle their machines in the most trying conditions of temperature and atmosphere, the advance they have made in mechanical and engineering skill, and the sure judgment of the leader, Dr. Schmidt, make the book a startling revelation to people unfamiliar with the work of the Soviet in the North.

The last part is a series of extracts from the diaries and reports of the four upon the ice floe and, except for the final exciting days before the rescue, the narrative has a certain monotony which contrasts with the other vivid parts of the volume. Nevertheless, this book is an effective portrayal of a new country strenuously in action.



Visitor to the Polar encampment. From "On Top of the World."



Pressure for Purity

WE note the formation of The Council for Decency in Magazines, organized to combat obscene and offensive publications, with a list of officers from various religious denominations. Affiliated with the Council are several civic and religious groups, including the State Federation of Women's Clubs, the Knights of Columbus, the New York Urban League, the Society for the Suppression of Vice, and others.

On the face of it, this organization looks harmless. Unquestionably there are magazines published—some of the sex pulps, for instance—which are nothing but aphrodisiacs, and whose existence we could cheerfully see terminated, with no feeling that the freedom of the press was involved. However, legal machinery exists for the prosecution of obscene publications. There are already active societies in the field, and we question the need for another one.

According to the press report, one of the officers of the Council said that its work would be concerned largely with "border-line" cases. We take this to mean cases which are open to argument—publications which the Council considers objectionable, but which other enlightened citizens might consider harmless or actually beneficial to the public. Conceivably the birth-of-a-baby pictures in *Life* could come under this heading; so could a serious discussion of birth control or of the prevention of venereal disease.

The temptation of anti-vice organizations to step out of their field has been amply demonstrated in recent years by their attacks on books, from "Ulysses" to "God's Little Acre" and "A World I Never Made." For some reason, possibly the publicity value, anti-vice crusaders like nothing so much as a good row with the literary intelligentsia. The fact that the crusaders have lost all recent court fights on books which leading critics were willing to defend has not abated their zeal.

Public opinion, on which censorship in America ultimately depends, has been, and is currently, liberal and open-

minded. But there are abundant signs that the public is just now struggling against a bad case of the jitters. Every new pressure group supplies fuel for the flames of any fanatic's intolerance. And it is just as well to remember that the machinery of moral censorship, if made too inclusive, might be used indirectly for political censorship.

This may be looking too far into the future as far as it concerns the Council for Decency. However, to the best of our knowledge, John S. Sumner is still active. And one John S. Sumner is enough.

John V. A. Weaver

"JOHNNY" WEAVER, who died last week in his early forties, represented the wholesome old American life of neighborly families and gawky and artless young people. When he first made his appearance on the literary scene, he was as rootedly American as Tom Sawyer or Penrod. John loved ordinary people, he sympathized with them, he committed to memory their lingo, their rich turns of phrase. Henry Mencken recognized immediately that Weaver's dialect poems were far from being the ordinary homespun; they preserved the American language, with all its colloquial nuances, in monologues and narratives that were absolutely authentic. John wasn't putting on a mask and doing a vaudeville turn, like so many dialect writers.

Of course it was Mencken's book on "The American Language" which started John arguing that good serious poetry could be written in it, which started John proving his point by writing it. His books of poems are a national heritage. He did plenty of other work too, novels, plays,

motion picture stories. Several of his novels weren't bad at all, but his poetry was tops of its kind.

Certainly it was sentimental, with the sentimentality possessed by nine-tenths of the American population, by nine-tenths of the human race. Once in a while it gushed over that indescribable line that divides real sentiment from sentimentality. But not often.

John Weaver's death is a loss to our letters, just as Ring Lardner's was. Ring also knew how to write in American, and agreed that John knew how. Though Weaver could also write without dialect and do it very well.

The poet was a Southerner, born at Charlotte, North Carolina. He was named for his father, John Van Alstyn Weaver. He graduated from Hamilton College in New York State, studied after that at Harvard, went to Chicago and became assistant book editor on the *Chicago Daily News*. During the war he was a sergeant in the Ordnance Corps of the Army. He went back to the *News* in 1919 and then appeared in New York as literary editor of *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. He resigned after four years, to devote all his time to writing. In Hollywood he worked for several years, and one of his last jobs was the adaptation of "Tom Sawyer." Eventually, as it gets so many, Hollywood got him. But it didn't get him for good. He wrote one of the bitterest poems against its sham side that anyone could have written.

John's gone, and we're glad he lived to do his work and move among us with that mock-braggadocio and deep inner sympathy with plain ordinary people that he always had. He was a "breezy customer" and an honest man.

W. R. B.

Companion

BY TRISTRAM LIVINGSTONE

PEOPLE who live alone, they say, grow queer,
And tell mad stories to the rugs and chairs,
Or scold the table and the chandelier,
And trust old cupboards with their secret cares.

But every room still holds a little trace
Of those who were its occupants before—
You feel them shrinking in a narrow place
When you pass by; sometimes they try the door—

It well may be to them the lonely chatter.
There may, perhaps, be nothing odd at all
In those we overhear discuss grave matter
With candlesticks or portraits on the wall.

Neighbors will tell you that I live alone
With tables, books and chairs. They wonder why
And to whom I chatter in an undertone,
For they have never seen him, nor have I.

Yet he is more my friend than any man,
And will sit up to listen half the night,
While I recount how some old quarrel began—
And he is just, he knows I'm always right!