



The Good Earth

Pearl Buck and the Nobel Prize

THE awards of the Nobel Prize in literature have often been surprising, and, paradoxically, for that reason have inspired confidence. The Swedish Academy is no rubber-stamp institution. Pressure groups of one kind or another, which have been organized annually to push the claims of a favorite candidate—usually an English or American writer—have been notoriously unsuccessful. The Academy makes up its own mind, and it is credibly reported that when its committee suggests a possible choice or group of choices, each member must read all of the works of the author or authors in question before voting.

Their standards are high, but evidently they are also flexible; otherwise it would be difficult to account for the recent award—the third for an American—to Pearl Buck. For Mrs. Buck is clearly not the destined subject of a chapter in literary history, and would be the last to say so herself. She has no series of novels to her credit, like Sinclair Lewis, each one fitting into a pattern of achievement which has become a part of durable American literature. She is not the author, like Eugene O'Neill, of works of the imagination which have set up new points of view of universal human nature and new techniques of expression. Indeed it is questionable whether she is preëminently a novelist at all, in spite of the easy flow and readability of all her fiction. Her art of fiction is inferior to that of several other American writers—Miss Cather and Miss Glasgow among them—sometimes markedly inferior.

Where she excels is in biography, and particularly autobiography. But even in this field, which, it must be remembered, depends for its success upon a creative imagination, her two best biographies, "The Exile" and "Fighting Angel," sympathetic and penetrating studies of her remarkable and not always sympathetic

parents, would surely never have reached up into the high air where the lightnings of the Nobel Prize strike. As for fiction, let the questioner read her last novel, "This Proud Heart," a biographical—in a symbolic sense, an autobiographical—novel, and decide for himself. It is a good story, well written, significant, but not the stuff of which greatness is made.

Evidently the commissioners of the Nobel Prize had their own idea in this award, and it is not hard to guess what it must have been. They are not crowning a lifetime of achievement; they are, they must be, crowning one book, a masterpiece which richly deserves exalted recognition—"The Good Earth."

For "The Good Earth," the first volume bearing that name, not the trilogy, is a unique book, and in all probability belongs among the permanent contributions to world literature of our times. It was the effective contradiction of Kipling's dogmatic assertion that the West and East would never meet; it was the first interpretation in English of the Chinese variety of human nature to reach and stay in the Western imagination; it was the living commentary we had all been waiting for upon the pattern of life, and particularly upon the pattern of emotion, of a great nation which, thanks to steam, electricity, and gasoline, had suddenly come to be next door to our own.

"The Good Earth" was built up by the imagination out of the memories of a child who had lived and thought in the Chinese pattern without losing the detachment of her Western perspective. It was a document in human nature, in which questions of style—so long as the style was adequate, and of depth—so long as the surfaces were true and significant—were not important. It did not have to be as well written as it was, in order to be distinguished. This Nobel Prize, one feels and probably with justice, is the recognition of a masterpiece, which had, of course, already proved its power to stir the imagination by going round the world in print and on the screen.

How much the present situation in China influenced the judges cannot be known, but undoubtedly they were influenced. Chinese culture, already torn apart by an internal revolution of the new against the old, is being trampled in the mud by the egoism of a nation that has developed the will to power at the expense of the good life. A slowly transforming China promised—and still promises—much to the West. The hybrid culture of a Japan in which efficiency borrowed from us, a resurgent barbarism, and a distinguished morale, are dangerously blended, promises nothing but to teach us the error of our own not too enlightened ways. Thus a book which made us feel of the Chinese peasant that all men are brothers, shines with a light in 1938 that reveals its good qualities as

never before. Had it been published this year it would have seemed sensational. It deserves the sensation of a Nobel Prize.

We do not wish to be unjust to Mrs. Buck. Her total achievement is remarkable even though it contains only one masterpiece. Her impressive translation of the Chinese novel "All Men Are Brothers" was a gift to Western readers, who find so little Chinese literature, even when in English, that they can read. "Sons," the first sequel to "The Good Earth," was only less good than the first book. Her biographies of her parents are unquestionably the best studies ever done of the unique personal traits developed by the missionary fervor of the nineteenth century, which, some day, will be recognized as a very important part of the social history of Western civilization in that departed epoch. She has written a few admirable short stories, and the list of thirty-seven in her 1936 bibliography will stand comparison with the product of any American writer not of the very first class. Her influence on our thinking about China, the problems of the East and West, and the missionary question, must be great, for this same bibliography includes sixty articles published between 1923 and 1936, nearly all of which deal with these themes.

There is no reason to suppose any particular sympathy with the United States in this decade to account for three Nobel awards in literature in the eight years since 1930. We have not been popular in Europe, and in spite of the depression, we have not needed sympathy. Interest is the word, if a word is needed, not sympathy, to explain the rapidly increasing number of Nobel Prizes, in science as well as in literature, that are coming our way. Twenty-five years ago, the works of Jack London were all that were to be found on a newsstand or even in a book store in continental Europe. There was little interest in our art, our science, our writing, and far less interest in our politics than in the previous century. Europeans, and the Nobel judges with them, have begun only recently to study extensively what Americans write. Only recently have they begun to estimate contemporary American literature as worthy of comparison with contemporary European books, in which they have been a little ahead of perhaps, and certainly not behind, the pundits of American universities. In a way, the award to Pearl Buck, whose best work is not in the field of so-called pure literature, where art is the chief criterion, is more indicative of a growing interest in what is being done here, than the prizes which went to O'Neill and Lewis, who had to become a part of the international currents of literary influence before they were selected as American representatives for belles lettres.

HENRY SEIDEL CANBY.

Letters to the Editor: "Rewards and Fairy Stories"; "Democracy in the Making"

How Is It Done?

SIR:—Leaving my typewriter in a jaded condition (yes, we were both jaded) after a day spent in revising my own future best seller and tired to death (hyperbole) with being school-ma'amed by marginal scrawls—"Too technical—Too sentimental—Unfamiliar detail" and the like, I dropped into an easy chair to relax, and there on a taboret close at hand (unnecessary detail) was the S.R.L. face up, featuring (cliché) Arthur Train's article: "Rewards and Fairy Stories."

There was something so comfortably human about his picture that I wanted to know what he had to say—perhaps to learn what he was laughing at. Of course I found the article very entertaining as I went along—I found it exciting before I finished.

Again and again I turned to the "Show Boat" earnings. I imagined I saw Mr. Train on a platform facing an audience of neglected authors. A voice demands, "What has Edna Ferber got that I haven't?" Mr. Train repeats the question. "Can someone in the audience answer the gentleman from Bucyrus?" A dozen hands go up. "You there with the ear muffs! \$345,000! The gentleman suggests \$345,000; does that answer your question? Are there any other questions?" (The reference to large sums of money is repetitive and introduces material with which the average reader is not familiar.)

But how I wish I dared ask him how it's done.

L. B. FREEMAN.

Chicago, Ill.

Mr. Fraser Protests

SIR:—Surely, Mr. Allan Nevins, in his review of my book, "Democracy in the Making," did not intend to say: "Jackson and Tyler were totally different in temper and tastes. . . . They differed sharply on most public questions."

The truth is, of course, that Jackson and Tyler shared the same great objectives. On the two great issues of the day, the Bank and the tariff, they were in agreement. These constituted the main-springs of the Jackson-Tyler era.

At 22, Tyler had introduced resolutions in the legislature of Virginia opposing the Bank. At 26, as a member of Congress, he introduced a motion to issue a *scire facias* against the institution. In the Senate he announced his opposition to the Bank as unconstitutional, and voted to sustain Jackson's veto of the recharter bill. True, he opposed the removal of the deposits, but every student of the period knows that this was not out of any love of the Bank but only because he believed it was best to let the charter die of its own accord. In other words, he differed with Jackson on the method of destroying the Bank.

Even on nullification, which Mr. Nevins stresses, again it was a difference in method. John Tyler was absolutely and unqualifiedly opposed to nullification and declared South Carolina was wrong to assume such an attitude, but he was



"Ma wants it for me kid brother. It's about a bull that was a pansy."

equally opposed to the Force Bill. But, in point of fact, Jackson went even further than Tyler in the matter of nullification, for Jackson actually sanctioned it in refusing to enforce the decision of the Supreme Court on Georgia in the Cherokee case. As Mr. Herbert Agar has so admirably shown, it all depended on whose ox was gored.

Even in personality, they (Jackson and Tyler) were not different in "temper and taste." Both were men of high courage, respecting each other personally. Both were generous, even lavish entertainers. Both liked their liquor.

Yet it was on the fundamental issues of the day, however much they may have differed in method, that they were in the greatest agreement. When John Tyler succeeded to the presidency, Jackson was beside himself with joy. "The Lord ruleth, let our nation rejoice!", wrote Old Hickory to Blair.

HUGH RUSSELL FRASER.

Memphis, Tennessee.

Mr. Nevins Replies

SIR:—I am not disposed to quarrel with Mr. Fraser on questions of interpretation. But these facts should be noted. Tyler said he supported Jackson in 1832 not because he liked his political ways or doctrines, for he sternly reprobated both, but because Jackson was the "least objectionable" of the candidates. After he gave this support, his dislike for Jackson's acts was so extreme that it threw him immediately into the Whig Party. There he stayed till elected Vice-President. His opposition to the removal of the deposits,

which really had a broad basis, led him to support Clay's resolution censuring Jackson. When the Virginia legislature ordered him to vote for Benton's resolution for expunging this censure, he resigned rather than obey. On the tariff he believed protective duties unconstitutional, which Jackson certainly did not. As for nullification, he voted against the Force Bill and assailed Jackson's course with South Carolina. He was an extreme State Rights man, while Jackson is usually classified as a staunch Nationalist. Jackson's refusal to enforce the Cherokee decision sprang rather from his frontier contempt for the Indian than any belief that Georgia should be protected from the Supreme Court. I cordially grant that in detesting the "money-power" behind the Bank, Tyler and Jackson occupied common ground. That attitude, as I said in my review, furnishes the one strong cord binding Mr. Fraser's history together.

ALLAN NEVINS.

New York City.

Smollett Bibliography

SIR:—I am preparing a bibliography of the works of Tobias Smollett. To the end of making it as complete and accurate as possible, I should welcome any bibliographical information on Smollett's works, particularly old or rare editions. Any copies of Smollett's works or other material loaned to me will be given the utmost care and returned promptly.

LUELLA F. NORWOOD.

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