

# Fighting Painter

*DIEGO RIVERA, HIS LIFE AND TIMES.*  
By Bertram D. Wolfe. New York: Alfred  
A. Knopf. 1939. \$6.

Reviewed by OLIVER LARKIN

THIS book has some of the qualities of a fresco: lively contrasting colors, abundant detail, vigorous and absorbing action. Two volumes by Mr. Wolfe have already described Rivera's work at two periods in his career; these 407 pages of text and 167 illustrations portray the Mexican "monster of fecundity" from childhood in Guanajuato to the year 1939. Intimate association with Rivera, and access to the painter's correspondence and other papers, enable Mr. Wolfe to narrate the European wanderyears; the partnership with men like Modigliani, Kisling, and Picasso in the "rapid dance of isms"; cubist experiments with "hidden universal structure"; the impact of Italian mural art on a man in search of a social-monumental painting which could nourish and inform the masses of his own countrymen; an amorous career involving three wives; the long succession of conflicts with individual and group patrons,—Mexican Governments, Soviet Russia, the Communist Party, the custodians of "culture" in Detroit, the dictators of artistic reputability in New York City, the proprietor of the Hotel Reforma. These chapters include such fresh and useful material as, for example, the story of Rivera's projected reforms in the San Carlos Academy of Fine Arts, his relations with Elie Faure, glimpses into the devious mind of Vasconcelos, and certain letters relating to the Rockefeller Center episode which prove not only how hopeless was Rivera's attempt to base his mural on the "fuzzy verbiage" of the assigned theme, but how ruthless was the destruction of the mural.

Comparison is inevitable between Rivera and Orozco, who, like Ingres and Delacroix, became "two unwilling chieftains of the rival feudist bands." The Dartmouth Orozcos would seem to disprove Mr. Wolfe's assertion that modern society is too complicated for Orozco to grasp, that "his masses are multiples of nonentity," that his art lacks social affirmations, and that, as Rivera himself put it, his work will never "fill a mural role as part of a harmonic construction." The author quite properly reminds us, however, that one need not reject Orozco in order to praise Rivera, or vice versa; and he quotes the more laudatory phrases Rivera has applied to his colleague.

In attempting an estimate of Rivera's achievement, his biographer writes that "even on walls his facility at times has hurt him," and suggests that time will separate success from failure by "that pruning and rearrangement which his [Rivera's] 'biological' urge will not per-

mit him to attempt." The book ends with a question: "What reasons of clique or faction or interest, what waywardness of the painter, can justify to the future the blank spaces and the wasted years?" This remains the crucial question concerning Rivera; the others follow from it. How much of the Mexican's work is of enduring quality because embodying what Wolfe calls knowledge "felt as well as known, reacted to as well as apprehended, absorbed until it becomes 'second nature'"; how much embodies material crowded beyond endurance, described minutely rather than felt deeply, garrulous but not eloquent? Is the career

of this richly talented painter to be charted as an ascending curve which culminates in the great wall of the National Palace; or do those earlier frescoes which the painter now thinks of as mere "populism" possess in greater degree the "masculine and simple" quality he seeks? To what extent have those recurrent crises which have made Rivera the most turbulent of modern painters arisen from the inevitable conflict between revolutionary artist and reactionary patron; to what extent are they attributable to the ruthless egoism, the lack of self-discipline, the guerrilla temperament to which so many pages of this book bear witness? Laymen, artists, and critics who attempt to answer these questions will find that Mr. Wolfe has provided material which is indispensable for their purpose.

## At the Amazon's Mouth

*FEUDAL ISLAND.* By Desmond Holdridge. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by HASSOLDT DAVIS

THOSE who read that excellent travel book, "Escape to the Tropics," will recall the humor, verve, and authority with which Desmond Holdridge writes of both small and large adventures. His new book describes a social anachronism, the feudal society operating successfully on the island Marajo, in the mouth of the Amazon, which a few white families have dominated since the days of the Brazilian Empire. Though the brown retainers are still so dependent upon their patron that they can leave the ranch only with his permission, they are completely happy and economically secure; a suicide has never been known among them.

Holdridge and his wife spent the rainy season on one of the larger ranches, and joined in the round-ups and the great hunts for crocodile and wild buffalo. Oxen were broken to the saddle there, for horses could not travel through the swamps. The customs of the island, the dances, the magic, were diverting if not

always hygienic, and the author was particularly interested in digging for pottery, of uncertain origin, in the burial mounds; an art had been buried with it, for the modern natives were so unskilled in handicraft that they dug up and used the ancient vessels rather than attempt to reproduce them. Of more immediate interest were the other white visitors to the ranch, the ex-lion-tamer and the radium prospector, both German, who were suspect to the government, for Brazil was then having considerable trouble with the powerful Integralistas, the representatives of Nazi Germany.

Holdridge has a quick ear for the turn of dialogue or the sounds a ghost might make when walking through his waste basket; it is important for him to note the exact "eenk-a-da-unk-a-dunk" of his complaining saddle beneath him. His eye delights to find the view down a crocodile's throat "esthetically pleasing. In fact the whole animal is a functional joy, without a gadget on it. . . ." His nose revolts at the stench of a crocodile wound in human flesh, and his palate enjoys good rum. A man of great sensual gifts is Holdridge, and he imparts them extremely well.



Cowboys dragging canoe through the Mondongos, with a squall approaching. (From "Feudal Island.")

## An Artist in Fiction

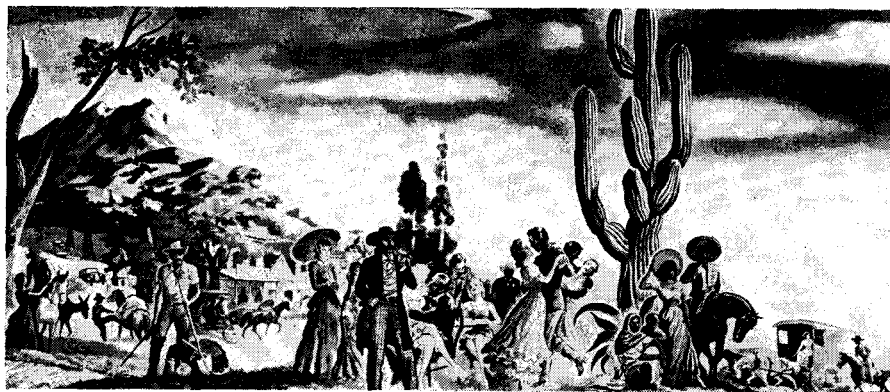
*PALE HORSE, PALE RIDER.* By Katherine Anne Porter. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by PAUL ROSENFELD

KATHERINE ANNE PORTER moves in the illustrious company headed by Hawthorne, Flaubert, and Henry James. It is the company of story-tellers whose fiction possesses distinct esthetic quality, whose feelings have attained harmonic expression in their work. Form, invention, and poetry to no uncertain degree were of the essence of the moving stories by this Texas woman collected a few years ago under the title "Flowering Judas." Even more definitely these properties distinguish the trio of tiny, affecting novels which comprise her present welcome volume. The book is that rare thing, the product of an accomplished artist in fiction.

Its artistic qualities do not draw attention to themselves. Beautifully modeled, petal-like sentences abound in the three novelettes. But unlike those of other conscious stylists, Kay Boyle for example, they never seem to stud the prose and pirouette in the direction of imaginary footlights. They move unobtrusively and precisely. So, too, do the narratives: without breaks and with inflexible steadiness and suppleness, easily, almost with sprightliness. Each of the narratives maintains its own tone—in the sense of effects of color and modulations and accents appropriate to the expression of its individual sentiment. And each of the poignant little dramas represented by them unfolds continuously and unpredictably, never betraying its ultimate turns, which arrive as shocks and surprises. Ideal beauty, a fugitive poetry, again and again flashes through the substance of the narratives. But the tone, too, invariably is unemphatic and quiet.

All these esthetic qualities are the expressive means of a singularly unified, rich feeling of life. This feeling, by and large, is a quick, subtle, sorrowful intuition of the eternal discord and harshness of things, their bitter-sweet, their baffling complexity. Wholly pessimistic this experience is not, since it recognizes—and with what keenness and delight—the smile of goodness, the shimmer of joy. Miss Porter's protagonists—simply drawn but solid and breathing—are gentle, naturally compassionate, but wrecked by fatal conflicts between character and circumstance, among them erotic fixations and maldevelopments. The first of them, the heroine of "Old Mortality"—who is seen through the wondering and half-comprehensive gaze of a child—is a



From the jacket of "Jubal Troop"

brilliant, hysterical, anesthetic belle of the old days who flees from marriage into death. The second, the principal personage of "Noon Wine"—possibly the most touching and perfect of the triad of novelettes—is an easy-going Southern farmer who, deprived of self-confidence by the chronic invalidism of his wife, crazily commits a hideous crime in the effort to intercept a gratuitous act of inhumanity. And the half-starved little newspaper-woman of the story which lends its name to the volume, finds a momentary lover in the boy who saves her from death, and then recovers to learn that he has died and left her in a void. Like the preceding tales, this last one with its magical recapture of the atmosphere of the war years leaves one at a peaceful distance from the world.

## Excitement All Over the Map

*JUBAL TROOP.* By Paul I. Wellman. New York: Carrick & Evans. 1939. \$2.75.

Reviewed by JAMES GRAY

HERE is "Anthony Adverse" all over again, but with new backdrops, new costumes, and a cast of 1000—count 'em, 1,000. It is, in other words, a vast panoramic melodrama which romps over the North, South, and West and pauses with simple boyish curiosity to watch whatever may be going on in North Dakota, Texas, Mexico, or Oklahoma in the way of murder, assault, intimidation, torture, or banditry. There is quite enough of all those interests to satisfy the very lustiest taste.

The central figure, who gives his curiously militant-sounding name to the title, is one of those conventionalized hero-villains whose character has been "tempered to hardness" by "his own harsh experience." At eighteen, he has killed his first man, the well-meaning husband of Jubal's tiger cat of a mistress.

Following that auspicious graduation into manhood, he starts out to make his way in the world, struggling through a blizzard with a posse at his heels.

That sets the mood for the rhapsody of violence that his life is to be. Jubal is in his element with gamblers, orgy-loving ranchers, hard-bitten remittance men. He has good luck and bad in the neat and orderly alternation of romance. At one moment, he mines for gold in the solitude of the mountains and makes a small fortune only to see it lost when his donkey goes hurtling over a mountainside with the bag of winnings strapped to his back.

Jubal's most savory little escapade involves his purchase from a Mexican bandit of cattle stolen in his raids. This is the cozy basis of the Troop fortune, which is further enlarged when, by availing himself of all the sly tricks which are just within the law, he manages to corner valuable oil land in Oklahoma.

All the while there are rather virulent ladies in Jubal's life. They love him, betray him, and love him again. For his part, he is true—in his fashion—to one alone, whom he follows unsuccessfully for years. Curiously enough, when he has caught up with her at last and married her, his enthusiasm seems to cool. He neglects her for business and lets her divorce him. But it all comes out splendidly. For when his fortune has been wiped out by Big Oil on page 583, his faithful Naoma returns to him and they are planning to begin again.

There are lively and amusing things in "Jubal Troop." Perhaps every incident could be paralleled by an actual happening out of the mad fantasy of the development of the South and West. But as Mr. Wellman has written his story it seems like the scenario for a monumental series of "Westerns." All the conventions of the hard-riding, quick-on-the-trigger, devil-may-care tradition are in it. Jubal Troop's individual psychology seems at once monstrous and infantile. Mr. Wellman discusses it with the passionately absorbed naiveté of a very clever and industrious little boy. His book can be recommended, without reservation, only to those who remember with reverence the movies that Bill Hart used to make.



George Platt Lynes  
Katherine Anne Porter