

# Looking at Trouble

*DAYS OF OUR YEARS.* By Pierre van Paassen. New York: Hillman-Curl. 1939. \$3.50.

Reviewed by EUGENE LYONS

**T**HIS book by the former roving correspondent of the *New York World* will be thoughtlessly tagged as another autobiography of another newspaper man. That tag, however, will cover only a small portion of the book's area and will not even suggest its significance. While there is newspapering galore in its 500 crowded pages, and adventure and crucial world events in close-up, the volume adds up to the history of a robust human spirit. Exposed to the life of our epoch at its most brutal depths—international and internal wars, sadistic dictatorships, squalid and exploited colonies in Asia and Africa—that spirit lost none of its native vitality.

A record of intense action and uncompromising thought, "Days of Our Years" never descends to the merely smart or merely shocking. It is pervaded by compassion and a certain moral cleanliness that take it out of the run of newspaper men's memoirs. Two things, above all, set it off from the more typical now-it-can-be-told reporter's book. First and most obvious, its superb writing—only Vincent Sheean's prose, among books in this category, approaches van Paassen's. Second and more important, a quality which I can only describe as spirituality. In the larger sense of the word, the author is religious. He is aware of the actual or potential dignity of life, its flashes of beauty—an awareness that shines through even the most sordid and disheartening events described in these pages.

Lest this frighten off anyone contemptuous or scared of the deeper implications of mortal existence, I hasten to add that as sheer narrative "Days of Our Years" will hold even the most frost-bitten pessimists. Mr. van Paassen fought in the World War and covered every major blood-letting of the next two decades, including those in Ethiopia, Spain, and Palestine. Enjoying the blessed advantages of an unrestricted roving assignment, so envied by correspondents tied to specific posts, he was able to witness nearly all the dramatic events of these our years; to interview nearly every statesman, warrior, and maniacal messiah worth interviewing. Of all these matters, and many besides, he writes vividly and with an intelligence that lights up obscure corners.

Born and raised in the rigorous Calvinism of a small Dutch town, but brushed even then by the wings of liberalism, the author ripened into a skeptical—but not cynical—modernist. His liberalism is not narrow and partisan. From Holland he moved, with his family, to Canada, where

he prepared for the ministry and actually attained the status of assistant pastor—among the *Hernhutters* and *Dukhobors* of Alberta, of all places. Then the war and its aftermath diverted him, almost by accident, into American journalism.

Evidently he was not too happy under the restrictions of routine American reporting, despite his wider latitude. "When I could not cry out in print against the events I saw, my blood boiled, and sometimes I would pitch in physically . . . I always forgot that my role was confined to that of a neutral observer of trouble." Ultimately he got himself expelled or barred from practically every country in Europe—including the France that he loved deeply, until the advent of Léon Blum made him more acceptable.

Dozens of amazing tales stud the record, some of them purely personal, others intimately related to world affairs. His dramatic reconstruction of the legend (which he wishes were true but cannot confirm) that Pope Benedict XV appeared in the Champagne trenches and walked into no man's land pleading for peace. His account of the true facts of the siege of Alcázar. His extraordinary interview with Marshal Luyatey, wherein the colonial militarist blamed Pontius Pilate for not having disposed of that rabble-rouser Jesus Christ more expeditiously. His experience with a *Poltergeist*, or ghost or emanation, that haunted his own home outside Paris. I could fill pages merely listing the exciting episodes of Mr. van Paassen's career.

The author's interest and, in the end, passionate personal involvement in the fate of the Jewish race is among the most unusual stories in recent autobiography. The orthodox Calvinists among whom he spent his youth lived by the Old Testament and felt themselves, in a sense, the heritors of Israel. Again and again in his journalistic career he came up against the tragedy, and the sublimity, of the Jew in his modern ordeal of persecution. When his assignments finally took him to Palestine and the Near East, his growing preoccupation with the problem came to a focus. "If Palestine is the Jews' national home, it is my spiritual home," he writes, and readers, having followed the evolution of the author's mind, will not doubt the statement. In the last few years, the reviewer understands, Mr. van Paassen has devoted much time to the Zionist cause. His estimate of the Palestine situation today is significantly close to that offered by William B. Ziff recently in "The Rape of Palestine."

No review can do this rich, well-written book full justice. I recommend it highly.

*Eugene Lyons, author of "Assignment in Utopia," has recently become editor of The American Mercury.*



Matthew Arnold

## Arnold's Influence

*MATTHEW ARNOLD.* By Lionel Trilling. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 1939. \$3.50.

Reviewed by JAMES ORRICK

**A**RNOLD was the most influential critic of his age; the estimate must be as unequivocal as this," writes Mr. Trilling. The fact that his influence on the present age is not greater proceeds largely from the over-emphasis placed on certain aspects of his doctrine (the word comes naturally in connection with him) in academic circles. Mr. Trilling speaks of the "frank and simple dualism which made Arnold in part congenial to the Humanism of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More." What he elsewhere calls "Arnold's subtle critical dialectic" has provided a refuge for the type of mind which wishes to make the best of two worlds. On the other hand, Arnold is easy game for the clever writers (some of them actually Victorian themselves) who specialize in the entertaining exposure of Victorian inconsistency.

In a really notable book designed "to show the thought of Matthew Arnold in its complex unity and to relate it to the historical and intellectual events of his time," Mr. Trilling takes Matthew Arnold seriously without being pious about him. The importance of the book is that it is a comprehensive study of the whole man. For Matthew Arnold was not primarily a literary critic; the clue to his enigma is that he was really a social critic.

"The secretary of old Lord Lansdowne, the Liberal peer, was a singularly handsome young man whose manners were Olympian and whose waistcoats were remarkable. He was most ironic; his very serious university friends were often annoyed with him because he laughed too much." The prevailing sadness of his first volume of verse seemed to his friends an astonishing contradiction; but it was the first step in the unfolding of the true Matthew Arnold.

In a remarkable and absorbing chapter,

Mr. Trilling shows how much of the true Matthew Arnold was the product of Dr. Thomas Arnold, certainly one of the most interesting men of the Age of Reform which was England's answer to the challenge of the French Revolution. "England," writes Mr. Trilling, "reacting from the religious indifference of the 18th century and from the French Revolution, went into black broadcloth and Rugby cut the new fabric. Young Matthew Arnold's physical and spiritual waistcoats were a salutary protest against the prevailing wear." Matthew Arnold remarks somewhere that we enter into our maturity "shorn of many beams." Shorn of his waistcoats, he is revealed as the son of his father, as a social reformer. At the core of Dr. Arnold's thought, Mr. Trilling finds the assertion

that there is nothing essentially antagonistic between democracy and the State, that, indeed, each demands the other for completeness, that democracy does not imply laissez-faire, that organization does not imply repression. In this synthesis of the two dominant and seemingly opposed tendencies of his time and ours lies Thomas Arnold's political achievement. Matthew Arnold's, more complex, is not basically different.

Mr. Trilling does not oversimplify, however. With learning, penetration, and common sense he analyzes Arnold's career from lyric poetry, through literary and political criticism, to the religious writings which his contemporaries found so baffling. He does not perhaps make quite enough of the poetry for its own sake, but that is subsidiary to his main purpose. At every step Mr. Trilling not only unfolds the sources, the provocation, and the contemporary reaction, but almost casually weaves in so many citations from writers and thinkers of the present day that he hardly needs to point out the enduring significance of Arnold's criticism. This is a book for all who are seriously interested in how the twentieth century grew out of the nineteenth. It is certainly the best book which has been written about Matthew Arnold for a long time.

*James Orrick is the author of a study of Arnold and Goethe.*



"Phil Stong carries on his revolt from the Revolt-from-the-Village movement" . . . (From the jacket of "The Long Lane")

## Fair State

THE LONG LANE. By Phil Stong. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by RICHARD A. CORDELL

IN his new novel, apparently somewhat autobiographical, Phil Stong carries on his revolt from the Revolt-from-the-Village movement in American literature. Long before Lewis, Anderson, and Masters (and Mencken in his best Free State Billingsgate) set out to blacken the character of the Mid-West village, Hamlin Garland had painted a thoroughly grim picture of the Middle Border. Garland spent his youth in Iowa, but one can hardly imagine gift editions of his autobiographical works with illustrations by Grant Wood. His Iowa is not Phil Stong's.

"The Long Lane" is a pleasant addition to Stong's Iowana begun so auspiciously seven years ago with "State Fair." The new novel has the same endearing and sound virtues which in "State Fair" won Stong immediately a discriminating and hopeful audience: a racy, swinging style, a gusto that does not weary, a gorgeous sense of the comic, a group of interesting characters (unlike Lewis, he rigorously excludes dullards from his pages), and a three-dimensional setting not a local color back-drop—as authentic in detail as a drawing by Doris Lee, inseparable from the warp and woof of the story.

The new novel possesses also one defect of its predecessors: although the characters are interesting, their behavior is not always credible. Ken Brubaker, the young protagonist, is torn by a very real double allegiance—devotion to his farm and to his father, who flees to the city. The adolescent boy has an earthy love of life and a sensitiveness like the young Eugene Gant, but both in thought and speech he is unconvincingly sophisticated. His father is a somewhat stodgy county official until domestic calamity transforms him swiftly into a successful big business man. Ken's Dresden-china mother, in high heels, "turning out" all the upstairs rooms in one half day of

fall house-cleaning, is equally incredible.

The first half of the book is almost continuously delightful, and although the plot is hackneyed—a misunderstood wife falls in love with her husband's handsome, breezy young brother—Stong makes the climax exciting and fresh. Later, when the deserted husband and son are in Des Moines, the interest lags; the contempt Stong feels for the clamor and dullness of the city seems to subdue the vigor of these pages. The "emancipated" reader may find the too, too happy ending a bit cloying, but he will relish the general unmorality of the novel, for, defying all saws of poetic justice, the characters eat their cake and have it, too.

"The Long Lane" belongs to the popular nostalgic literature of the late 1930s. In novels, plays, and autobiographies writers, like the Billionaire in Kaiser's "The Coral," seek a grip on an unplagued and stable past to steady them in these fretful days. In "Who's Who," Stong names as his address, Washington, Connecticut, but adds, "Home, Keosauqua, Iowa."

## Case History

DANGER SIGNAL. By Phyllis Bottome. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by KATHARINE SIMONDS

MISS BOTTOME has returned in her new novel to the background and approach of "Private Worlds." She is concerned once more with the psychological crises which suddenly make otherwise normal people become irrational and dangerous. Hilda, a more than usually attractive and intelligent London typist, reaches such a stage of desperate anger against her former lover, Ronnie, that she resolves to kill him. She is prevented by a woman psychologist, who, encountering her by chance, discovers her intention and disarms her psychologically.

In the earlier novel, Miss Bottome created a large group of sympathetic and interesting characters in whose lives the reader enjoyed participating. In this shorter and far thinner book, she has mostly dramatized, in her incomparably clear and careful way, a case history of a not very impressive subject. Hilda herself is neither individual nor touching enough to seem important; and Ronnie's devastating charm never enthralls the reader as it did all the other characters. Dr. Silla, the Czech psychologist, does indeed capture the stage, being both sympathetic and surprising; while Aunt Edith, whose mind is open in theory and shut in practice, and whose solution for every crisis is conversation, is excellent.

For the rest, however, "Danger Signal" is unsatisfying. The characters and situations are seldom banal, but in her enthusiasm for the effect of ideas upon people, the author often oversimplifies the people.