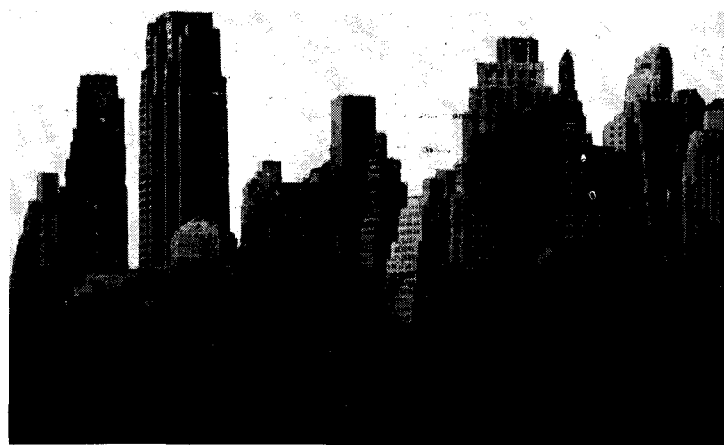


# John Dos Passos

BY

JOHN CHAMBERLAIN



From the jacket design of "Adventures of a Young Man."

**W**HEN John Dos Passos was leaving Moscow in 1928 a group of young Soviet actors from the Sanitary Propaganda Theatre (they were factory workers by daytime) came to him to see him off. "They want to say goodbye," the theater director told Dos Passos; "they like you very much, but they want to ask you one question. They want you to show your face. They want to know where you stand politically. Are you with us?"

One who knows Dos Passos can imagine him standing there in the cold northern twilight, the piston-rods of the engine already pumping slowly beside him. . . . Scrupulously polite, given to deprecatory gestures, he starts up like a flushed partridge, his baldish head bobbing, his near-sighted eyes soft with pleased surprise. He wants to be kind, to make a gesture of solidarity, yet there is something in him goading him on, as always, to the absolute truth. "But let me see," he fumbles; "but maybe I can explain. . . . But in so short a time . . . there's no time." No time to tell about the Bill of Rights and Thomas Jefferson and Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and Voltaire and Fighting Bob La Follette; no time to go back over the nineteenth century fight between Marx and Bakunin over the corrupting nature of power and the inherent viciousness of the State. No time to quote his friend, e. e. cummings, the Amerikanski poet:

but I mightn't think (and you mightn't, too)

that a five-year plan's worth a gay-payoo.

No time, no time . . . the train is moving, and he has to jump for it. Back to the old habits of thirty years, back to the West and its "carpets and easychairs and the hot and cold bathwater running and the cheerful accustomed world of shopwindows and women's hats and their ankles neat as trottinghorses' above the light hightapping heels. . . ." And away (though he does not say it) from the fear that he has seen in the eyes of those non-conforming Russians who expect a visit from the police in the dead of night. . . .

A decade has gone by since Dos Passos left Moscow and the country around it

that reminded him so nostalgically of the rolling sections of Wisconsin and the birch-growths of cut-over lands in New England. Many things have kept Dos Passos busy in that decade: work for the oppressed Kentucky miners, and travels in France, Spain, Mexico, and all parts of the United States, reporting demonstrations, repressions, revolutions, and conventions. And, most important of all, there has been the writing of his trilogy, "U.S.A." All of this moving about and "writing objective" ("U.S.A." is a book that rigorously excludes any overt special pleading by the author) has served to keep Dos Passos from documenting his "but maybe I can explain. . . ." His instinctive, all-pervasive sympathy for the underdog has caused the communists to hail him, at various times, as Number One Literary Fellow-Traveler, the granddaddy of the modern proletarian novel. But even when Granville Hicks was praising him most fulsomely as the Proletarian Moses (praise that was later half-retracted), John Dos Passos was nursing his doubts of monolithic political systems and the One-Party State. All along Dos Passos has insisted that he is not a Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist; all along he has argued that writers should not bow to the exigencies of politics. ("Writers of the world, unite. You have nothing to lose but your brains," he once said sarcastically.) To those who call him Red, he answers: "You're wrong. I'm merely an old-fashioned believer in Liberty, Equality, Fraternity." And now, in his "Adventures of a Young Man,"\* he has finally gotten around to the explanation he had no time to make back in that Moscow autumn of 1928.

By comparison with "The 42nd Parallel," "Nineteen Nineteen," and "The Big Money," the three novels that go to make up the trilogy of "U.S.A.," "Adventures of a Young Man" is admittedly slight. But it is most important to the student of Dos Passos, for it clearly shows the trend of his mind. The protagonist of "Adventures of a Young Man," Glenn Spotswood,

is the idealistic son of a professor who lost his job at Columbia University during the World War for conscientious objection. Glenn has that "ethical yearning" which Waldo Frank has described as typically American; he needs a Cause, and the only valid Cause of his particular period in time is that of the workers. The early 1930s were a time when objections to the harsher phases of the capitalist order were so obvious that they tended to obscure other considerations; hence Glenn, without much thinking of where political monolithism inevitably leads, became a member of the Communist Party, using the name of Comrade Sandy Crockett. Glenn is not a mere auctorial substitute for Dos Passos; he differs in numerous ways from his creator, for he is an active organizer and agitator, willing to have his head smashed by company police. But his intellectual autobiography converges with that of Dos Passos, for he finally comes to abhor the undemocratic features of what he once so glibly accepted as Marxist "ideology." Like Dos Passos, Glenn Spotswood wanders off the reservation; but unlike Dos Passos, who merely quarreled with his friend Ernest Hemingway over the shooting of anarchists and libertarians by Loyalist Madrid, Glenn Spotswood is "liquidated" as a "Trotskyist" in Spain. The lesson is disillusioning, even (as the communists claim) defeatist. But the point which Dos Passos makes elsewhere (see his "Farewell to Europe," which was printed in *Common Sense*) is that it is only defeatist so far as the Old World is concerned; in the U.S.A. things move on a somewhat different tangent, and the choice may never be narrowed down to the barbarous one between monolithic communism and monolithic fascism.

In "Adventures of a Young Man" Dos Passos has turned full-circle, re-empha-

Next  Week

THE CAMBRIDGE ANCIENT HISTORY  
Reviewed by Elmer Davis

INSIDE ASIA

By JOHN GUNTHER

Reviewed by Varian Fry

\* ADVENTURES OF A YOUNG MAN. By John Dos Passos. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1939. \$2.50.

sizing in dramatic fashion all the libertarian values and feeling for the poor, dumb, driven common man that have controlled his thinking from the very beginning. Symbolically enough, John Roderigo Dos Passos was born in Chicago in 1896, both the place and the year being those of William Jennings Bryan's great cross-of-gold, crown-of-thorns speech. His father, who went to the Civil War as a drummer boy only to be invalided out of the Army of the Potomac at the age of fourteen, was a "self-made literate," as Dos Passos describes him, the son of a Portuguese immigrant who had settled in Philadelphia as a shoemaker. Possibly John Roderigo Dos Passos's amazingly intimate feeling for the Iberian and Latin American lands comes down from the grandfather. The son's relationships with his forebears, however, never comes clear in his books, although it is noteworthy that the father was a corporation lawyer and an anti-Bryan Democrat, two things which John Dos Passos distinctly is not. Probably the young Dos Passos's affections were chiefly centered on his mother, who came of old Virginia and Maryland stock and who bore her son at the age of forty-eight. As



Harold Weston  
John Dos Passos

a boy John Roderigo was carted hither and yon all over the map, living in Mexico, England (where he went to private school), Belgium, Washington, D. C., and on a tidewater farm in the Northern Neck of Virginia. (Memories of these early years can be pieced together by the alert reader from the stream-of-consciousness Camera Eye sections of "The 42nd Parallel," first panel in the U.S.A. trilogy.)

For a time Dos Passos hoped to enter Annapolis, largely because of a love for the sea which he got from reading the novels of Marryat and from living just inside the Virginia capes. But, after being graduated from Choate School, he compromised on Harvard, which he entered in 1912. His classmates included Robert Nathan and Robert Littell. The period, as Malcolm Cowley has described it, was that of the Harvard esthetes—of e. e. cummings and Gilbert Seldes, smart young men who went on from college to write for Schofield Thayer's *Dial*, which was considered "decadent" by Professor C. T. ("Copey") Copeland, the Cambridge warden of Beautiful Letters. Dos Passos, however, had a seemingly contradictory and entirely unesthetic hunger for raw experience, and after sailing for Spain in 1916 nominally to study architecture, he turned up in Paris as a member of the ambulance service. After the war was over there came the years of wandering as a newspaper correspondent and magazine free-

lance through Spain, Mexico, and the Near East. His Bible throughout his adolescent years had been Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire"; it was from this, and not from Karl Marx, that Dos Passos presumably got his taste for history in great perspectives. The travel habit and the love for open water have persisted from Dos Passos's earlier days; year by year his normal routine is to mix expeditions to strange places with periods of quiet living on Cape Cod, where he writes in the mornings and swims and sails in the afternoons. Since he hates literary affectation and shop-talk, Dos Passos shuns others of his trade, preferring to spend his leisure dabbling with painting and sketching. His wife, Katy, writes for the magazines under the name of Katherine Smith.

Malcolm Cowley has called Dos Passos "two novelists at war with each other." One is "an esthete traveling about the world in an ivory tower that is mounted on wheels and coupled to the last car of the Orient Express." The other is a "hardminded realist, a collectivist, a radical historian of the class struggle." But Mr. Cowley shrewdly notes that the "art novel," or the novel about

"the poet against the world" (see Dos Passos's early "Streets of Night" for a prime example), is not really in antithesis to the "radical history" of "The 42nd Parallel," "Nineteen Nineteen," and "The Big Money." Both types of novel spring from the same central attitude towards a society in which the quest for money tends to crush other human aspirations. (As Edmund Wilson has pointed out in "Axel's Castle," all the vital art forms of the past hundred years, whether Romanticist, Symbolist, or Realist, have derived from the writer's natural antipathy to the values of the bourgeoisie.) The "art novel" and the novel as "radical history" are, in psychoanalytic language, "linked deviations." When Dos Passos is writing about young Boston esthetes who wish they were "leansouled people out of the Renaissance" (as in "Streets of Night") or a musician (as in "Three Soldiers") or a poet (see Jimmy Herf in "Manhattan Transfer"), he is lamenting the fact that artists are frequently run over by the juggernaut of what John Dewey has termed a "money culture." When he is writing about ordinary people (the Italian Fuselli of "Three Soldiers," or sailor Joe Williams of "Nineteen Nineteen"), he is objecting that the same money culture robs the average human being of chances to loaf, to exercise, to work at jobs of his own choosing, to drink wine, to make love. Solicitous of both the acts of artistic creation and the

acts of refreshment and renewal, it is the same Dos Passos no matter what type of novel he is writing. Personally, I think Dos Passos wastes some of his sympathies: after all, good poets manage to write even in spite of their times. Nevertheless, the fault of being over-sympathetic is a lovable fault—and if Dos Passos has assigned too little importance to the human will in his earlier books, he is, as we shall see, now making up for it in a character such as Paul Graves in "Adventures of a Young Man."

The inner conflict of Dos Passos (if it can be called a conflict) is typical of his writing generation, for most of the "Harvard esthetes" (or Yale or Princeton esthetes) of the war period had the same ambivalent desire to Escape From It All and to See It All. There was Eugene O'Neill, for example, whose tramp and sailor days were a mingled effort to Get Away from the humdrum and to experience the life of submerged and humdrum people. The pattern runs through the work of a whole group of young men who went to France along with Dos Passos to drive ambulances back in 1916 and 1917. In their constant fluctuation between the poles of Walter Pater and Emile Zola, the early novels of Dos Passos accurately reflect the same *Zeitgeist* that has pushed the "exiles" of the 1920s from Dadaism to Revolution. This *Zeitgeist* breathes through Dos Passos's first crude attempt at fiction, "One Man's Initiation," which was published in England in 1920. In this very adolescent book Martin Howe drives his ambulance through the bloody welter of war-time France, listens to radical criticism of the war—and spends his leisure moments admiring French cathedrals in the manner of the dilettantish Henry Adams. "Three Soldiers" (1921) continues the same mood, although it is orchestrated in terms of two supposedly hard-boiled babies, Fuselli, the Italian store clerk, and Chrisfield, the farm boy from the Middle West, and one softie, John Andrews, the sensitive musician who deserts after the Armistice. "Streets of Night," which was published in 1923, is the only pure "art novel" that Dos Passos has written, and it is significant that it is his worst book—a sickly manifestation of the *fin de siècle* spirit that reached these shores two decades after it had sputtered out in London and Paris.

The obvious turning-point of Dos Passos's career as a novelist came in 1925, with "Manhattan Transfer," a book that is both an "art novel" and an attempt, the most successful to date, to paint a collective portrait of the huge sprawling organism of New York City. It is in his travel books, however, and not in the superficial changes in his novelistic technique, that the evolution of Dos Passos can best be followed. In his first travel book, "Rosinante to the Road Again," Dos

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## Getting to Know the Neighbors

INTRODUCTION TO ARGENTINA. By Alexander Wilbourne Weddell. New York: The Greystone Press. 1939. \$3.

Reviewed by ERNEST GRUENING

NEW literature of information is a natural concomitant of the strengthening of ties between the peoples of the Western World. In the case of Mexico, this output preceded the declaration of the Good Neighbor Policy by several years. But recent material concerning our Hispanic neighbors is sadly lacking, though Rourke has contributed a realistic biography of Juan Vicente Gomez, the late dictator of Venezuela; Carleton Beals has written vividly on Peru, and Erna Fergusson has published two excellent volumes on Guatemala and Venezuela.

Now Alexander Weddell, until his recent transfer to Madrid the U. S. Ambassador to the Argentine, has issued a useful and readable compendium of information on perhaps our least understood Hispanic-American state, though one of the greatest in area, population, in economic and cultural development—in short, in general importance. A descriptive and anecdotal account, it is frankly uncritical. This is not merely because Mr. Weddell likes Argentina and its people but because as a continuing member of the United States diplomatic service he had to be more than circumspect in order to offend no sensibilities. Indeed, his book is clearly a sequel through the printed page to his six years of earnest and effective labor to increase good-will between the two countries.

His foreword says frankly that he desires to remove some North American misconceptions about Argentina and hopes some equally well-disposed citizen thereof will render a reciprocal service

for the United States, which has been presented to Argentines by foreign writers, and some Americans, as a land of vulgar materialists, of gangsters and kidnappers. With this motivation and the inevitable inhibitions imposed by propriety, we cannot expect a deep and searching analysis of social and economic trends, an exposé of national virtues and vices. Instead, we have a non-controversial guide-book which conveys just what the tourist and first-time visitor to the Argentine are likely to require. From it emerges a clear picture of the physiography, the life and society, manners and customs of the country of San Martin, of the great modern metropolis of Buenos Aires where dwells one-fifth of the population, of the land that stretches from the tropics to the sub-Antarctic, from the great Plata river system that empties into the Atlantic across the pampa to the loftiest Andes. Numerous excellent photographs greatly enhance the text.

## Japanese Soldier

WHEAT AND SOLDIERS. By Corporal Ashihei Hino. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1939. \$2.

Reviewed by T. A. BISSON

A JAPANESE soldier, already a minor literary figure before his call to the colors, writes superbly in this book of his experiences in the war. Out of a collection of letters home, of reflections set down in his diary, he creates an unforgettable little masterpiece. Within a few months it sold nearly half a million copies in Japan. Its artless simplicity conceals the hand of a matured craftsman. The landing at Hangchow Bay before dawn of November 5, 1937, or the bitter struggle of the trapped Japanese column north of Suchow in April, 1938, shows the common Japanese soldier in all the physical tortures and emotional intensities of modern warfare. Mud and filth,

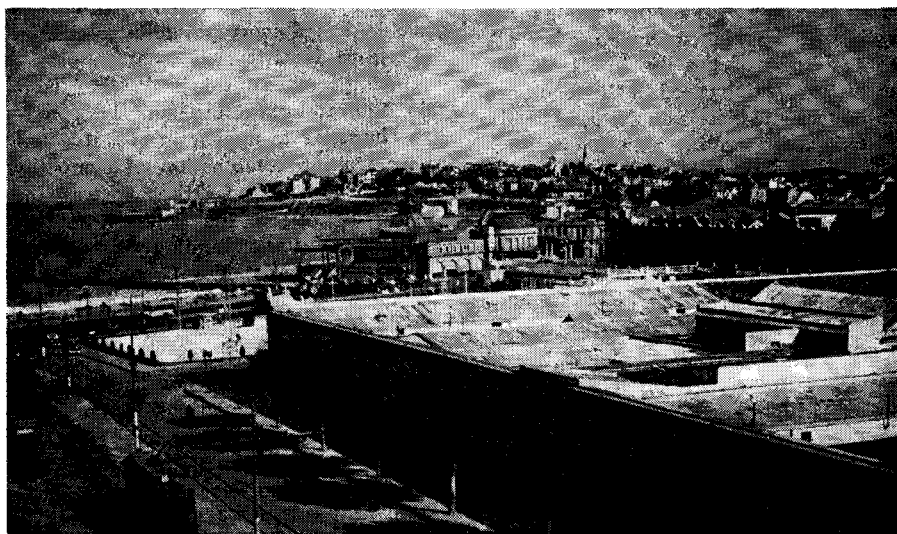


Corporal Ashihei Hino

the gnawing fear, thoughts of home and friends, the agony of prolonged marches, the lust to kill, the grasping at life's simplest sensuous pleasures—flowers, rest in the sunshine, good food—all these are set down as living experiences virtually as they occur. The translation by Baroness Ishimoto, clothing the direct, concrete sentences of the original in common American idiom, is itself a literary achievement of unusual merit, and should go far to mitigate the suspected anti-war proclivities for which she was jailed in December, 1937.

The Japanese authorities did well to allow this book to become a best seller. If it stirs even the foreigner's pulse, how much more deeply it must move the Japanese people. The most intimate chords of patriotic feeling are subtly touched—the veneration for the Emperor, the mystic "thousand-stitches' belt" sewed by Japanese women for protection of their husbands and sons, the comradeship of men in arms, the cremation of the dead on the battlefield, the careful attention to the wounded, the solicitude of officers for the men. The brutality and filth is there, but it is somehow transfigured, so that it blends into a stirring appeal to the nation. And the book will have no evil effects on the American public, unless the reader is able to jerk himself out of its spell. For it sheds a new light on the role of the Japanese army in China. As Corporal Ashihei Hino tells the story, the airplanes do not crash their bombs into the helpless civilians of crowded Chinese cities; they come as messengers of relief to beleaguered troops. Chinese women and children are protected, and prisoners of war—except in one instance, where three are executed—are well treated. Corporal Ashihei Hino and Baroness Ishimoto have, in fact, done their bit. By the very merits of its artistry, "Wheat and Soldiers" becomes a transparent idealization of what, after all, is a brutally aggressive assault on a helpless people.

T. A. Bisson is on the staff of the Foreign Policy Association.



Edmund S. Besseltre

"A land that stretches from the tropics to the Sub-Antarctic. . . ." Mar del Plata (from "Introduction to Argentina").