

# America's Frontier

*THE NEW WESTERN FRONT.* By Stuart Chase, in collaboration with Marian Tyler. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company. 1939. Cloth, \$1.50; paper, 75 cents.

Reviewed by ELMER DAVIS

THE only front which Americans ought to defend is the shore line of the Western Hemisphere. So Mr. Chase argues in a rambling book full of brilliant phrases, with a few gaping lacunae in its usually sound reasoning. Most of the argument, as he is the first to admit, you have heard before if you follow the current debate on international relations; but you have seldom heard it said so well. And the opening chapter is his own—a chapter so striking and effective that the rest of the book is something of an anticlimax.

This is simply an annotated map of what the United States would be if it were like Europe—split up into twenty nations of which Mr. Chase supplies the boundaries, the names, and a brief sketch of each one's economic needs, national aspirations, and traditional grudges. His contention that there is not much hope of foreigners' being able to do anything for a continent which actually is so divided is so self-evident that he might well have rested his argument there. But when he goes on the reader begins to ask questions. Following Jerome Frank, he makes England the villain of European history for resisting attempts at Continental integration; it sounds as if England is still the villain, resisting Hitler's *Drang nach Osten*. Really Mr. Chase seems to have been unfair to Mr. Neville Chamberlain, difficult as that feat may be.

It is hardly likely that Mr. Chase would enjoy seeing Europe integrated by the only possible integrator now in sight, but he feels that all that is Europe's business, not ours. So it is if the integrator thereafter lets us alone or is unable to do us any damage; but Mr. Chase overlooks the possibility that England might prefer to be integrated too—with the reservation of a few *Sonderrechte*—rather than fight with the risk of being overthrown. That possibility compels a reëxamination of the logical bases of American isolationism, and few of us are at present bold enough to guess the answer. However, it might be just as well to file a demurrer to Mr. Chase's conviction that we were swept into war by propaganda in 1917 and may be so swept again. Propaganda played its part twenty years ago; but a good many people got their emotions set when the Germans marched into Belgium. And if many people are changing their opinions now it is not propaganda that is changing them but their own reasoning—faulty perhaps, but their own. So far as propaganda is concerned, the Chamberlain gov-

ernment has done itself more damage in American public opinion than a thousand British lecturers could undo; the late remarks of Senator Pittman were only one of many indications that the strongest emotional argument for isolation today is the character of the present British government.

But this is getting away from Chase's book, which even if a familiar argument is good reading matter. Admirable is his advice about Latin-American relations:

"Talk as little as possible about the Monroe Doctrine. Talk as little as possible about Pan-Americanism. Talk as little as possible about anything." Also some of his concluding remarks on domestic affairs: "There is a Nazi menace to us, and this is it—there is almost no unemployment in Germany, Italy or Russia. . . . If we can find an invention or a series of inventions [economic and financial, he means, not inventions that would start up that famous "new industry"] to conquer unemployment without piling up a mountain of debt, some day to be repudiated, we shall be as immune to foreign isms and ideologies as an iron dog is to rabies."

# The Life of Townsend Harris

*HE OPENED THE DOOR OF JAPAN.* By Carl Crow. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1939. \$3.

Reviewed by T. A. BISSE

IF the average American were asked to name his country's outstanding diplomatic achievement in the Far East, he might possibly choose the opening of Japan. He would almost certainly attribute this achievement to Commodore Perry. But he would be wrong. Perry merely pushed the door ajar. The more difficult task was performed by Townsend Harris, first resident American diplomat in Japan. Harris put nearly two years of unremitting effort into the negotiation and eventual signature—on July 29, 1858—of the American commercial treaty with Japan. During this long period he was virtually isolated from the outside world, and dependent for company on a single foreigner—his interpreter, Mr. Heusken. Much of the time he was seriously ill. Ships carrying his mail and supplies failed to arrive, and long overdue salary payments forced him to contract large debts to the Japanese. His initial reception at Shimoda by the Japanese authorities was the reverse of hospitable, and was followed by months of suspicion, obstruction, and hostility. Every conceivable obstacle was placed in the way of his diplomatic negotiations. In the face of all this he persevered, and—crowning triumph—won the respect and esteem of the Japanese officials and people. Today his name is revered throughout Japan, legends and plays have been built about him, and the places he visited have been commemorated.

The story of Townsend Harris's life is a remarkable one, not least because it has been ignored and virtually forgotten by his own countrymen. Carl Crow has made admirable use of his materials, notably the annotated journal of Harris prepared by Dr. Mario Cosenza. He has written a swiftly moving, full-rounded biography, which successfully blends scholarship with literary excellence. His own research



The four classes of society in Japan—soldier, farmer, laborer, merchant (from "He Opened the Door of Japan.")

adds new facets to the early life of the New York merchant, who used his Tammany associations mainly to further establishment of the academy which became C.C.N.Y. The dogged perseverance which led to eventual success in this enterprise was also turned to account in Harris's negotiation of the first American treaty with Siam, and most of all in his work in Japan.

His diplomatic activity occurred at a time when the Western nations were aggressively pushing into the Far East. The treaty of "amity and commerce" which he negotiated with Japan was taken as a model for similar agreements successively concluded at that period with other powers. A generation later Japan fought bitterly to throw off the extraterritorial and tariff shackles of these "unequal treaties." At the time, they smoothed Japan's inevitable transition from a policy of national exclusion to one of full participation in international life, and probably spared Japan forcible aggression on the scale visited upon China. Harris clinched his case by pointing out this fact to the Japanese authorities, but his success was due chiefly to his own personal efforts, to his skill, courage, and integrity, unbacked by any display of force. It was this which won him the hearts of the Japanese people, who do well to honor him. America might well follow Japan's example.

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## Man Alone and Men Together

THE STRICKLANDS. By Edwin Lanham.  
Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by OLIVER LAFARGE

IN his new novel Mr. Lanham applies matured, skillful writing and craftsmanship to a meaty, exciting story. We speak of a novel being "laid in" a particular section, implying that the novelist, having thought up a good plot, then proceeds to pick out a desirable setting for it. It would be more correct to say that "The Stricklands" is built out of the very soil of the Oklahoma hills. Hill-billies, share-croppers, Indians, Negroes, politicians, all the strange new mélange that makes Oklahoma the strangest and most interesting of states, are genetically part of the story.

It is a sectional novel and a social document which ought to do as much to make Americans vividly conscious of the situation of our poorest farmers as all the protests and publications issued to date. It will do this because it will be read for its own sake, for pleasure, as a fast-moving, even melodramatic, story.

In a curious way, without conscious intention, this book is a completion of the incomplete statement which forms the basis of "To Have and Have Not." Pat Strickland, the outlaw, whose flight and death carry the action of the book, is the man alone, trying by single-handed violence to change his lot, and failing. Jay, his brother, the tenant-farmer organizer, is the other half, the man devoting his life, risking his life, to make possible the basic change without which the individual is helpless. Mr. Lanham states his definition simply, in the father's words to Jay, "I know things have been bad fer us and I can see why you couldn't stand fer it, neither of you. It made you want to go out and fight to make things better and it made Pat want to go out and kick the world in the pants."

There is a further parallel to Hemingway's novel in the virility and solidity of the Stricklands and their fellow farmers, white, Indian, and Negro, as against a certain thinness in the more favored people thrown up against them. The difference is implied, not stated, coming out through actual contact, without attempting the symbolism of "To Have and Have Not," which only a great stylist could handle. "The Stricklands" never deviates from the narrative of certain entirely understandable human beings, thereby retaining the quality of story, the constant desire to know what happens next, fundamental to good fiction.

In a story such as Steinbeck's remarkable "In Dubious Battle," the organizers come from outside; communists, they are engaged in a long war of which their present endeavor is only one small battle. They follow an international creed, to further which they manipulate the workers to gain their larger end. Out of this comes a sense of discouragement, which is exactly reversed in Mr. Lanham's book because of the faith one is allowed in the people themselves, and in the organizers who have arisen among them simply because they are men, Americans, fighting for themselves and their own. This hopefulness centers in the spontaneous reaction of the white hill-billies to the beating



From the jacket  
of "The Stricklands"

and death of the Negro organizer, Rock Island Jones, the angry response of free men to attempted intimidation. Incidentally, the development of Jones is one of the prettiest technical jobs in the book.

"The Stricklands" starts rather slowly. Mr. Lanham uses a variant of the internal monologue in which the thoughts of his main characters are fully expressed in their own colloquial speech. The result is dragging in spots, heavily until one becomes used to it, then cumulatively more and more effective. A cutting of as little as two or three percent would make a great difference.

A week or more after reading it, "The Stricklands" leaves an impression of power, of remembered pleasure, of a good bet for the Pulitzer Prize.

## After the Gilded Age

ROPE OF GOLD. By Josephine Herbst.  
New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1939.  
\$2.50.

Reviewed by RICHARD A. CORDELL

THIS is the third volume of Josephine Herbst's trilogy of documentary novels begun in 1933 with "Pity Is Not Enough," the story of a Western family during the Gilded Age, a saga of gloom. The second novel of the trilogy, "The Executioner Waits," which was clearer in its Marxian ideology, pictured the chaotic social and industrial conditions in America in the years immediately following the World War. In "Rope of Gold" the reader must infer that what was chaos is now undeniably disintegration, that American society is swiftly crumbling. Sitdown strikes and farmers' revolts are not accidental phenomena, but surface manifestations of a volcano that will blow us sky high any day.

It is difficult to write a proletarian novel fairly and difficult to judge one fairly. In both "social" novels and plays the tendency to vilify the employer, exalt the



Robert McAfee

Josephine Herbst

laborer, and patronize the middle class seems irresistible. Miss Herbst will not grant one laudable quality to the capitalist; the middle class by many thistly insinuations she makes completely ridiculous. The reader begins to feel very sheepish that he ever engaged in any such fatuous, bourgeois pleasures as playing bridge, staying at home evenings with his family, pottering about his garden. But Miss Herbst does not idealize the "workers." (The narrow use of this word is amusing to many of us outside the Party.) Her laborers and organizers, for all their high social ideals, make messes of their private lives, and the author does not attempt to blame the economic system for all their botch-work.

Josephine Herbst's early novels were obviously influenced by Dos Passos, but "Rope of Gold," although similar to "1919" and "The Big Money" in general treatment, is a powerful, original novel. It is better written than any of Dos Passos's novels, and depends little on tricks. Miss Herbst's style is less laconic and pinched than formerly, and if not exactly rich, it is right for her subject matter. No one, not even Hemingway or Lewis, has a surer sense and command of the vernacular, and as a matter of very small consequence, it might be added that Miss Herbst yields nothing to Dos Passos or Hemingway scatologically. One suspects that the author has a strong sense of humor, but she rigorously limits its use.

"Rope of Gold" will delight those readers who share the author's political and economic beliefs. Other readers will not find the book dull, but they may wonder whether such modern proletarian fiction is any more effective as a medium of propaganda than was the sentimentalism of Dickens in "Hard Times" or the plain, unvarnished accounts of oppression in Garland's "Main Traveled Roads." At any rate, "Rope of Gold" will give them an interpretation of our age of labor problems and general unrest sharply different from that afforded by their newspapers.