

Sparks from Lawrence's Pen

THE LETTERS OF T. E. LAWRENCE OF ARABIA. Edited by David Garnett. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1939. \$5.

Reviewed by HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

THE publishers of this remarkable book say that Colonel Lawrence was a very great letter-writer. Their statement is probably justified, but it is hard to tell from a first reading. One needs to digest this author's correspondence. There are 850-odd pages of letters, packed with thinking, erratic with congested detail, allusive, elusive, witty, erudite, always familiar. They read as if sparks flew from the pen as he wrote. Personality electrifies them to a degree which makes the brain tingle, till the reader slows down. Few letters have less than a dozen subjects. There is the kind of tension in them which you get in a too witty play. Without annotation, some of them would be unintelligible to the uninformed,—but there is good annotation. An active intellect at work upon the complex life of our times is certainly displayed in this book.

Most of the letters are high-spirited, but not all. Lawrence writes from the camp where he enlisted anonymously as a private:

To Lionel Curtis
27.3.23 (Bovington Camp)

... Here every man has joined because he was down and out; and no one talks of the Army or of promotion, or of trades and accomplishments. . . . We are social bed-rock, those unfit for life-by-competition; and each of us values the rest as cheap as he knows himself to be.

I suspect that this low estimation is very much the truth. . . . The leisured world for hundreds, or perhaps thousands of years has been jealously working and recording the advance of each generation for the starting-point of the next—and here these masses are as animal, as carnal as were their ancestors before Plato and Christ and Shelley and Dostoevsky taught and thought. In this crowd it's made startlingly clear how short is the range of human knowledge, and what poor conductors of it ordinary humans are. . . .

The pity of it is, that you've got to take this black core of things in camp, this animality, on trust. . . . I can't write it, because in literature such things haven't ever been, and can't be. To record the acts of Hut 12 would produce a moral-medical case-book, not a work of art but a document. It isn't the filth of it which hurts me, because you can't call filthy the pursuit of a bitch by a dog, . . . but I lie in bed night after night with this cat-calling carnality seething up and down the hut, . . . and my mind aches with the rawness of knowing that it will cease only when the slow bugle calls for "lights out" an hour or so hence, . . . and the waiting is so slow. . . . However the call comes always in the end, and suddenly at last, like God's Providence, a dewfall of

peace upon the camp . . . but surely the world would be more clean if we were dead or mindless?

I get several impressions of Lawrence new to me from this book, and I prefer to write of them rather than to follow the course of the letters, which would be hopeless in a brief review, or discuss the revelations of inside history they contain, which would need expert knowledge and book length. But these revelations are not sensational. Lawrence disapproved of his age, his country's ways, and many of his superiors, but he bucked with rather than against them. He was that type common among England's best, a radical conservative.

The early portion of the book is essentially the lengthy journal of a young archeologist. The letters tell of the making of a scholar; and a scholar in war, and after war, Lawrence was and remained. His famous Arabian adventure fits into its place in his personal history, and becomes easily explicable—granting his undoubted genius. As an archeologist-historian, whose specialty was military castles, he approached the Arabian situation as a research problem to be solved by experiments based on the known facts. His job was to put together a strategy and invent a tactics from every kind of evidence available, precisely as an archeologist puts together a culture from his studies of fragments. This explains, I think, the experimental character of his exploits, his determination that they should all fit into a scheme, and his crushing disappointment when the war succeeded but Arabian unity failed. It explains, also, the intense personal zest of "The Seven Pillars of Wisdom." The author is neither soldier nor adventurer, but a research man with a creative brain, turned loose upon the management of life in a dynamic moment.

When the war was won, the peace lost, and Lawrence, disgusted with the outcome, was trying to conceal his too notorious identity, the same congenital scholar is at work. He enters the army to get the steadying effect of routine and freedom from financial anxieties, but equally to study the organization of an air force and work on the mechanics of flying boats. His editor guesses that his contributions in this direction may prove to be his greatest. And in the hours of leisure which day's end in a camp provided better than life in London, his mind ranges all over the field of contemporary intellectual activity, classifying, sorting, criticizing, constantly comparing the one book for which he was known with other contemporary achievements, usually to its discredit. Translating Homer came naturally to a man trained as an archeologist, passionate about great writing, who had lived in some measure at least a Homeric



T. E. Lawrence in 1935

life. Note in reading these letters, especially to Winston Churchill, or to officials responsible for the East, how he brings out his facts in flashes from any year, any place, but all documented, like a scholar producing cards from his catalogue. If Lawrence was a professional at anything, which he doubted, it was in constructive scholarship.

Another strong impression from these letters is that, though he insisted he was normal Anglo-Irish, Lawrence was a man quite out of this time, though not, perhaps, of the next. His eccentricities, vanities, and egoisms do not enter into this distinction, although they have helped to build up a legend of abnormality for a man who, to judge from these letters, was abnormal only in the speed of his thinking, and the intensity of his emotional reactions.

But everywhere you look in this book is clear evidence that this man was out of step with the type mind of the 10's and 20's and 30's. It took big men to understand him. He was at home with Doughty, Allenby, Hardy, Shaw, though like none of them. The truth seems to be that he completed very early in life a synthesis which H. G. Wells might have envied for his novels. He had retained the feudal tradition of loyalty to service inherited from his gentleman father, added the passionate desire for truth of a good scholar, and blended with these the twentieth-century creative scientist's willingness to abolish precedents and create a future. From this composite ideal came most of his troubles, if all of his success. The war, which was a nineteenth-century war of economic objectives concealed by words and conducted by military leaders who were servants of politicians, let him down constantly, although he always bobbed up until his job was done. He simply could not understand the motives of half-way men thinking in terms of material gain or loss. He is as outside the profit system as if he had been born in the twelfth century. This made him a marvelous fighter, for he was

concerned only with victory, but a poor prophet, since he kept assuming that a logical solution of the mess from the point of view of history was what the countries at war would eventually accept. They did not, and the tough little Irishman with roughened hair and finely chiseled mouth ran his motorcycle off the road and was killed at a moment which, considering his disillusion, many have thought fortunate.

I cannot feel so. Colonel Lawrence seems to me, after reading these letters, to have many of the attributes which are shaping for the next age. He was interested in action rather than security. His open mind took to science naturally and worked it into a creative scheme for enlarging men's powers. Most of all he had a faculty for seeing men and events historically as involved in a process of change where nothing shocks the creative mind that understands how things have happened. All this seems in accord with the trend of a mid-twentieth century, where, unfortunately, minds of his brilliance, and sanity, seem to be rare.

Looking for the Best

REACHING FOR THE STARS. By Nora Waln. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1939. \$3.

Reviewed by DAVID H. POPPER

SUBTLE tragedy, deep understanding, tenderness, and hope pervade the pages of this book. In it Nora Waln, Quaker and student of Oriental philosophy, has distilled the essence of four years of observation as a resident in Nazi Germany, and has portrayed the impact of totalitarianism on the German people with rare sensitiveness. It was not an easy task. Superficial personalities can praise or damn a people unreservedly, but individuals of insight cannot do so. In Germany Mrs. Waln was confronted by the age-old paradox of secular government. Like most Americans she was enchanted by the lovable qualities of the people. To her they were and are "the most generously kind, the quickest to sympathy," the cleanest and most efficient people she had ever known—Nazis and non-Nazis alike. Yet on the foundation of such humane characteristics has been erected an implacably chauvinistic and tyrannical regime. The question was insistent: how can such things be? Is the old Germany, the Germany of free art and culture and scientific investigation, dead? Or does it lie "as Snow White in a trance from eating a poisoned apple?"

For four years Mrs. Waln sought to plumb the depths of the German charac-

PARADISE PLANTERS: The Story of Brook Farm. By Katherine Burton. New York: Longmans, Green & Co. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ODELL SHEPARD

THE author of this book tells us in her foreword that it contains "no interpolation of fancy." She wishes us to understand that "the facts told in these pages have been culled from existing documents and so has the conversation. Whether it is utterly correct in detail I cannot promise. But I have tried to keep this book fact and not fiction, for surely imagination should have no part in biography when one can find actual data from which to build a life or a history."

One knows, of course, the absurdities recently perpetrated in biographical writing from which these assertions, and in-

ter. She studied carefully the works of the Nazi revolution—its propaganda methods, its dicta on history, labor, and marriage, its psychological grip on people whom it had rescued from despair. Her conclusions will give heart to those who have sickeningly feared, these six years, that the wonderful nation they once knew has been consumed in the Nazi fire. With the habit of obedience to political authority ingrained in their very souls over a pe-

riod of generations, the German people as a whole have not had the moral courage or the civic responsibility to protest the arbitrary and capricious persecution to which they have fallen prey. In instance after instance recorded in this book they have dumbly, passively, fearfully acquiesced in injustice at the hands of the Party. Yet Mrs. Waln is firmly convinced that the spirit of dissatisfaction is rising, particularly because of Germany's belligerent foreign

policy. Unlike some other observers she finds that blind allegiance to the Führer is most common among the middle-aged, while many of the youth are torn by doubts. The propaganda of anti-semitism and the creed of international hatred have in many instances failed to take root and sometimes have even provoked an adverse reaction. As her German friends are forced to seek refuge abroad and tales of discontent percolate out of Germany to her, she is emboldened to prophesy a drastic change in German government. Millions, abroad and in the Reich, will pray that her faith is justified.



Baldridge
Nora Waln

deed the chapters of the book that follows them, are a reaction. It has been pointed out before, however, that whenever we attempt to escape from Scylla, Charybdis is always waiting.

Completely faithful and consistent in the application of her theory, the author has "culled" her facts and conversation from journals, letters, books, and articles written at and about Brook Farm by a considerable number of persons, important and obscure. With little concern for chronology and with scant attention to continuity of thought or of topic, she has wedged these materials into a pattern of events which has slight discernible resemblance to what actually went on at Brook Farm. Much of what she reports as conversation she has drawn from written discourse, frequently with a complete change of context. Seldom does it give the effects of living speech, but all too frequently one hears in it the sententious ring of Transcendental rhetoric. A good many of her facts give the impression of falsity because they are misunderstood and misinterpreted. Taken as a whole, the book has only the most distant relationship to the truth of Brook Farm—and this precisely because there is no adequate and controlled work of the imagination in it.

The Brook Farm Community was a group of highly interesting persons who formed one of the most fascinating societies America has ever had. It is clear that Miss Burton has meant to present them as a social group, but it is also lamentably clear that she has failed in her purpose. After complaining that Mr. Van Wyck Brooks has failed, in his "Flowering of New England," to present the religious background of Transcendentalism and of Brook Farm, she herself really does fail to give her readers any coherent account of that background. The realization that George and Sophia Ripley, Charles Dana, John Sullivan Dwight, and Isaac Hecker were passionately devoted to an ideal of reform does not emerge from her pages. She presents them as amiable chatterers, playing at life and making agreeable little speeches to one another *à propos* of little or nothing. Her people give the effect of marionettes performing in a tiny play that has no plot.

Mr. Van Wyck Brooks worked out for himself in his "Emerson" a style of writing, highly useful when put to its proper uses, which has had an unfortunate effect upon this probably unconscious imitator. In the work of Brooks it is a style held taut and true by sound thinking, by extensive knowledge, and, most of all, by imagination. But it is a bow of Odysseus which others had better not try to draw.

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