



Margaret Bourke-White

Family in Dahlonega, Georgia. From "You Have Seen Their Faces" (Viking)

Realities on Tobacco Road

THESE ARE OUR LIVES. As Told by the People and Written by Members of the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 1939. \$2.

Reviewed by VIRGINIUS DABNEY

THOSE who look upon the Federal Writers' Projects with a jaundiced eye, on the theory that the directors of such projects are necessarily maestros of the boondoggle, should consider this volume. It is the work of good, and at times distinguished, craftsmen. The WPA may have spent some of its money in fantastically extravagant ways—although I believe such allegations to be considerably exaggerated—but "These Are Our Lives" is not one of them.

Mr. W. T. Couch, the able director of the University of North Carolina Press, tells us in his preface that no volume of this precise kind has ever been published before in any country. Here are presented, in graphic form, segments of life in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia, as described by persons in various strata of society to writers on WPA. One has only to read these minuscule autobiographies to feel that they have the ring of authenticity. Of course, there is some unevenness. A few are lacking in that vivid incisive quality which lifts certain others in the collection to the plane of high art.

It is noteworthy that the editors have included interviews with the prosperous and the well-to-do, as well as the poor and the destitute. Hence we have here no Caldwellian or Faulknerian excursion into the cesspools of Southern crime, degeneracy, and lust. It is a balanced sym-

posium which makes no effort to gloss over the realities of life among the sharecroppers and mill hands, but which also exhibits an awareness of Southern initiative, enterprise, and thrift.

The idea that most Southerners of humble station are lunatics, pervers, sadists, or lynchers has been planted in many minds by the school of Southern writers which Mr. Gerald Johnson has cogently dubbed "the horror mongers." One thing which appeals to me in the volume before us is the absence of such degenerates. After all, degenerates are the exception, rather than the rule, both North and South.

At the same time, this book presents a vivid picture of the poverty and ignorance, the destitution and degradation of many Southern toilers. Yet a number of the poorest and most unsuccessful of those interviewed are seen to be persons of innate dignity, frustrated in their strivings for better things by the system under which they have been forced to live and work. Take Kate Brumby, whose poignant life story is beautifully rendered by Ida Moore. This illiterate and aging mill hand, whose fiancé died of typhoid fever when she was a girl, and who is "goin' to meet him in heaven one day too," might have achieved what is commonly termed "success," given decent opportunities and a different environment.

Such characters are vividly limned in "These Are Our Lives." Somehow they interested me far more than the relatively successful farmers and business men, who also are given a hearing. The dialogue, and particularly the dialect, is superb, and the whole volume is an important contribution to our understanding of Southern civilization.

No World for the Little Man

THE SALESMAN. By John Herrmann. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by N. L. ROTHMAN

BY one of those curious tricks of association, which have a logic all their own, this book calls up a vision of that long gallery of little business men who people Sinclair Lewis's novels. One sees at once, how happy they were! George F. himself, and Dodsworth, and that man who knew Coolidge, and even the traveling salesman in "Work of Art" who came roaring through the hotels on his yearly trip; happy, all of them, in a world they understood because it was exactly as they made it. Or was Lewis a romanticist all the time? Here, at any rate, is the other side of the medal, a portrait so real and drab and immediate that it hurts: John Herrmann's salesman is a little man immersed in conditions he does not understand, has had no hand in making, and can never, it is clear, manipulate to his own advantage. He is not a dreamer nor a hero, certainly not a thinker. But he is a good fellow who respects the virtues; the most tragic aspect of his story is his fidelity to duty, to loyalty and perseverance, to wife and boss, to all the copybook maxims that are never going to do him any good.

We watch Robert Crawford trying to sell his line of picture-frames, setting up his samples, sparring carefully with tough buyers, giving them all the planned arguments he knows neither he nor they can believe in. Business is contracting now. People aren't buying, merchants aren't ordering, the banks are waiting to gather in the small home he lives in; and Crawford has still to crack his lips with the smile and the optimism: "Let me double that order. You know what the Christmas business is going to be with all those men back at work and all the confidence there is in recovery this year."

And of course there isn't any watertight compartment to hold a happy, soothing private life. The whole thing seeps through—the grind, the despair, the failure, the fatigue, especially the fatigue—and poisons his relations with his wife. Has anybody ever written that a man can be too deflated of ego, too worn and humiliated by his work, to enjoy love? Herrmann has given us the process in deadly detail, by which a little man is stripped of his spirit. He has done it with the devices of naturalism, the authentic, stock phrasings of the Robert Crawfords, who never put two words together that have never been put together before, and a thorough-going, functional view of society in its contracting cycle, squeezing the Crawfords out of sight. This novel, soundly written, is to remember them by.

Collective Interference

THE NEW DEAL IN OLD ROME. By H. J. Haskell. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ELMER DAVIS

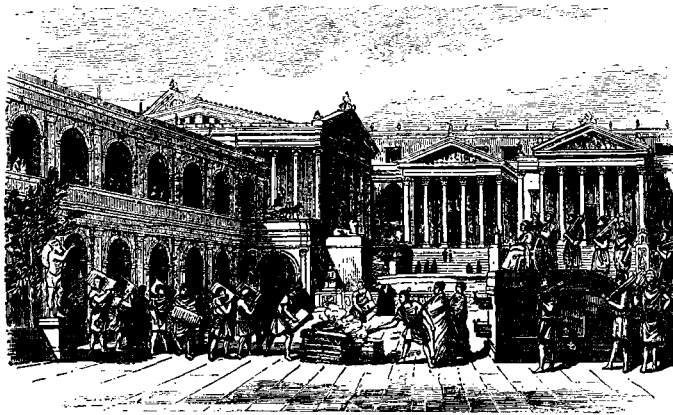
THE drawing of historical parallels is usually regarded by professional historians as beneath their dignity, and so is left to partisans or moralists who are apt to know little about either the old or the new. Mr. Haskell, editor of the *Kansas City Star*, has here shown how it ought to be done. He knows what he is talking about and he has no axe to grind; neither champions nor haters of the current New Deal will get much campaign ammunition out of what he truly defines as "an objective survey of instances of government interference." With a learning amazing in a man whose job must keep him busy, he has digested pretty nearly all the historians both ancient and modern, judging what he read with the coolly scientific eye of a newspaperman who has been professionally engaged for forty years in the study of contemporary politics and economics.

He knows that history follows the laws of Einstein, not those of Euclid; that there are no exact parallels. Accordingly he does not say, This is what the Romans did in this situation, this is what happened to them, and the same dreadful things will happen to us if we don't watch out. He says only, This is what the Romans did in a comparable though by no means identical situation, and this is what happened to them—sometimes dreadful, sometimes not. And a reviewer might summarize the conclusion something like this: In hard times the people will always expect the government to do something, usually the government will do it; sometimes it will work pretty well for a long time; even though in the end collective interference may produce no more than what Marx called a "retardation" in the operation of economic forces, a retardation of a century or two is often worth the effort.

On the other hand, political or economic measures are apt to have consequences unforeseen. Gaius Gracchus thought of relief as a purely temporary measure; but once it was started nothing ever stopped it except the reactionary dictatorship of Sulla, and that for only a few years; the early Empire recognized unemployment as a "chronic and permanent" problem and found relief the simplest answer.

Most of Haskell's conclusions you will find in the professional historians, but he

whittles them to a point, using the modern equivalent of ancient terminology wherever his historical conscience permits. When he calls the Roman friends of Polybius the country-club set, and substitutes for the misleading term equites "the Chamber of Commerce crowd," he is drawing parallels that are close enough, and more intelligible to his readers. And he finds plenty of new deals in Rome; the first one was the Licinian Rogations of 367 B.C., whose economic reforms had to be safeguarded by a constitutional change that channeled off popular interest, so that the economic situation was in the long run not greatly improved. The much more extensive New Deal of Gaius Gracchus was only moderately successful because "the fundamental causes of the farm problem had not been reached"—chiefly slavery, the ancient equivalent of farm mechanization.



Trajan burning the tax lists. Even under his benevolent despotism "the memory of oppression could warp the first-rate mind of Tacitus" . . .

But from that time on the government was constantly interfering with business. Augustus, with an easy-money policy and heavy government spending (which had to be curtailed when the accumulated treasures of Egypt had been exhausted) promoted a boom that finally blew up in the panic of A.D. 33. Tiberius had to relieve it with something like the RFC. Domitian set up an AAA, Nerva an FCA, Trajan an NYA, and so on.

After the colossal disasters of the third century, government was again the only agency that could do anything, and it concentrated on saving the framework of society without being able to worry about what was inside the framework. Rostovtzeff, writing thirteen or fourteen years ago, correctly described the system founded by Diocletian and perfected by Constantine as a "permanent and organized crisis"; the lapse of time has enabled Haskell to use a shorter definition, equally correct—the totalitarian state. (There was to be sure no Party in this later Empire, but the army—at first largely Illyrian, then largely German—

played a not altogether dissimilar role.)

Besides this story, familiar to students but here presented so that anybody can understand it, the reader will be interested in many of the insights of an observer who does not suffer from the handicap that so often biases the professional historian, the need of proving that some other scholar was wrong. Haskell thinks that Catiline, if not framed, was certainly slandered; and interprets the interaction in his character of personal bitterness and a genuine zeal for the underprivileged, with a plausibility possible only to a man who has known a good many disappointed politicians. He reminds you that Rome had its sit-down strikes too; when Aurelian sent in troops to clear out the sit-downers, as Frank Murphy did not, there was a fight that cost seven thousand lives and might at that particular moment have wrecked the Empire. He has some entertaining comments on the letter that Quintus Cicero wrote to his brother when he was running for consul, advising him to smear his opponents

(the reputation of Catiline proves that the advice was taken) and to promise the voters anything, on the ground that broken promises were always safer than refusals. (Ask Phil La Follette, who last fall refused to compete with his rivals in pension promises to senior citizens, and took the licking of his life.)

Useful too are Haskell's observations on the Golden Age, the century between Domitian and Commodus when civilization, instead of consolidating its gains and pushing ahead, slipped into gradual decline. The slave gangs had all but vanished from the great

ranches but Italy was cultivated by share croppers who had to "mine the soil" as share croppers must today. Industry used slaves instead of machinery, and consequently nobody felt an incentive to the simplest inventions that free workmen might have made to save themselves effort. Also—a point that nobody seems to have stressed sufficiently—Roman prosperity vanished with the disappearance of the open frontier. No doubt it is true that the "Italian nucleus" had already been spread pretty thin over a largely barbarian empire; but from the purely economic point of view the collapse was postponed so long as there was new country to be opened up and developed. Once the frontier was gone the problem that had always been waiting in the background had to be faced, then as now—how to distribute the products of industry and agriculture in a society more than two thirds of whose members were ill-clothed, ill-housed, and ill-fed, even in the days of Antoninus Pius; and then as now, nobody knew the answer.

There were other reasons, of course,