



Ham on Rye

FLETCHER PRATT'S article two weeks ago pointed out the fallacies of the novelists who have prophesied the nature of this war. There is also a growing body of literature—for want of a better word—not specifically concerned with the war, but intimately connected with it in the expression of collective insecurity. These novels, several of which have appeared recently, have in common a technical dexterity, a slick surface, and an obvious air of having been written for the market. There is no harm in writing for the market, but we question the effectiveness—if only that—of using serious events, tragic in their implications to millions of people, as window-dressing for essentially frivolous fiction.

It is not a simple question as it applies to such novels as, for instance, Somerset Maugham's "Christmas Holiday" and Geoffrey Household's "Rogue Male," because it is hard to know just how seriously the authors intended to be taken. Competent reviewers are in wide disagreement as to the merits of Mr. Maugham's new novel: to some it seems a slick reconstruction of stock situations with an intellectual veneer, to others it seems a brilliant analysis of the forces of evil disrupting the modern world. Most readers would probably agree, moreover, even those who admire "Christmas Holiday," that it does not make the most of its material. The essential relationship of "Christmas Holiday" to the contemporary complex is in its portrait of the young man undergoing a self-imposed Spartan discipline by way of training himself to be the head of the coming British Gestapo (the story of the Russian girl whose husband has been transported for murder has an indirect relationship to the state of the world, but is principally a story for its own sake, without special contemporary reference). The young

man, Simon, is plausible, interesting, convincing on a superficial level; but he is explained only from the outside, his long speeches convey his ambitions but not his motives. He is presented as a case history in the psychopathology of the will to power, and he does not come off as such, because Mr. Maugham has not taken the trouble to give the character all he's got.

"Rogue Male" is excellent of its kind—the story of a man who took a pot shot at a dictator, escaped under almost incredible circumstances, and hid out from the (presumably Nazi) avengers until they tracked him down—but it raises the same question. It is about something that is too big for its method. It reduces the self-preservation of the human race to terms of big-game hunting, and for this reason it makes the reader feel uncomfortable in the midst of a genuine excitement induced by expert narration.

Two other novels published within the last month are in the same category. Graham Greene's "Confidential Agent" would be a first-rate spy

story, but that it too intimately and painfully suggests the most horrible realities of the Spanish Civil War. The story of a man whose wife was executed by a rebel firing squad is not, however ingenious in plotting, appropriate material for a streamlined Oppenheim; or so we submit. Paul Gallico's new novel, "The Adventures of Hiram Holliday," gives us an American newspaper man who rescues a damsel in distress—but rescues her from the Nazi kidnapping machine, which works much too realistically to mix with the otherwise fantastic, lighthearted, and distinctly agreeable adventure.

So many books published in so short a time indicate that the events leading up to the present war have been widely seized upon to give timeliness and an appearance of reality to what is essentially a standard brand of escape fiction. The trouble with it is that the effect on the reader is just the reverse of that which escape fiction tries to produce. Or are we alone in this feeling?

The Loon Cried Out

Sept. 4, 1939

BY ELIZABETH K. PHELPS STOKES

"HERE is the scientist from England,"
Well, shall we sit on these logs and listen?
Back of this Adirondack island at dusk,
With a fearless splash,
A doe bathes
No, this man cannot be still
For the thumping in his head,
A poor day for this visiting research worker!

Strangely silent as burdened with unutterable jest,
For distraction we paddled up the lake,
Following some foolish ducks abreast,
"It's a great laboratory here," he said,
His mind could not rest,
In the depths of his voice despair was wild,
"No idea your country was like this,
I am called,
I sail next week,
I leave Maida and the child."

He is young; I am old,
Thank God, he knows only what he has been told,
I know how far away that other war seemed and how bold
We felt,
Now I know how near this invader is unless
Repelled;
Within this hour waves of the lake are regimented,
Spruce and mountains are marching in,
Sparks from our fire shoot through the air,
Mist from the orchid marsh our smoke screen . . .
We were neither wholly here nor there
When suddenly another visitor took part,
A loon in crescendo shrieked and cried,
Could it be that he mocked,
"What's the use, the use, the use?
Show me a neutral heart"?

Letters to the Editor: *The War and the Prophets*

Bombardment of Cities

SIR:—The *SRL* has confounded my estimate of it. Since September 1 it has become more than a pleasant way of keeping posted on matters literary; it has become necessary to my thinking. Congratulations and thanks.

Provocative and well-documented as the articles have been, it wasn't until today that I was moved to animated argument with my wallpaper. How can Fletcher Pratt write "The War and the Prophets" without mentioning the word "Warsaw"? He did, you know. After criticizing authors for their partiality to descriptions of aerial bombardment of cities, he wrote "the effects of violent air raiding appealing to many authors as the surest way of breaking down normal life." Is there anything but collaboration of this belief in the insanity and terror that swept Poland, or the cholera and typhus raging now?

By cleverly denouncing authors of war-prophecy books, Mr. Pratt leans over backwards. These books were not scientific treatises — they were novels. Nor has their message been refuted. "This fear of extinction would seem to lie at the root of practically all the prophetic literature of the war that was to be tomorrow's and is now today's." Even when Mr. Pratt says, "See, this war isn't so bad as the novelists said," he is dealing with technicalities and is overlooking the horrors of war that are fundamental.

KAY DEALY.

Philadelphia, Pa.

Mr. Pratt Replies

SIR:—Miss Dealy's criticism seems to separate itself into two parts—the question of Warsaw and the question of war.

Now I deliberately avoided mentioning Warsaw for two reasons. The first is that we have, as yet, no really reliable information as to what happened in Warsaw; all the news has come through censored sources, that is, it is propaganda. The curious fact about Warsaw is that it was to the interest of the propagandists on both sides to make the bombardment look as deadly as possible—the Poles, to arouse sympathy, the Germans, to warn the rest of Poland and the Allies as well not to monkey with the buzz-saw of their military machine.

The second reason for the omission of Warsaw is that what information we do have about it speaks of the town as being under heavy artillery as well as aerial bombardment. We need go no farther than Vicksburg, Miss., to discover that artillery can make a mess of a city of wooden frame houses; but I think it has not yet been demonstrated that the unaided airplane can do so.



"Don't render it, Miss Auchincloss, just read it."

As to the question of the war in general, the fault seems to be mine for not sufficiently emphasizing the fact (as I see it) that the war of 1914 was the exception, and the current war is a return to the norm of wars throughout the centuries. The error of the fictional prophets has lain in adopting the war of 1914 as a new norm.

FLETCHER PRATT.

New York City.

Thoreau and the Civil War

SIR:—Mr. Fletcher Pratt, in his interesting "The War and the Prophets," is quite right in saying that in 1863 Thoreau could turn his back on the Civil War, since in 1863 H.D.T. was dead and buried! He is wrong, however, in implying that Thoreau had no concern in the war. After Sumter, and when Lincoln had taken his stand, his interest, in spite of his failing health, was deep and constant. Not even Bull Run detracted from his optimistic faith that at last the nation was about to make the right prevail. There was some moral naiveté in his view of the conflict, but not an ounce of indifference.

HENRY SEIDEL CANBY.

New York City.

From a Charter Subscriber

SIR:—Permit me to congratulate you on the issue of *The Saturday Review of Literature* of October 14: "Required Reading," by Elmer Davis is

good and "Adventurous Writing" by Anne Morrow Lindbergh, a sublime criticism of a grand book. Being one of the first subscribers to your magazine, I watch its development with devoted interest.

MARY SUYDAM.

Perrysburg, Ohio.

Biography of Dr. Harvey Cushing

SIR:—Mrs. Harvey Cushing has requested me to prepare a biography of her husband, the celebrated surgeon, and I should be most grateful to anyone who wishes to make letters, anecdotes, or other memorabilia available.

Copies of all letters, no matter how brief, are desired, and if dates are omitted it is hoped that, when possible, these may be supplied (e.g., from the postmark). If original letters or other documents are submitted, they will be copied and returned promptly.

A new Medical Library building is being erected at the Yale University School of Medicine to receive Dr. Cushing's library and collections, including his letters, diaries, and manuscripts. Any of his friends who wish, now or later, to present correspondence, photographs, or other memorabilia for permanent preservation among the Cushing papers will receive the appreciative thanks of the University.

JOHN F. FULTON, M.D.

Yale University School of Medicine,
333 Cedar Street,
New Haven, Conn.