

The Rape of the Land

VANISHING LANDS. A World Survey of Soil Erosion. By G. V. Jacks and R. O. Whyte. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company. 1939. 332 pp., with index. \$4.

Reviewed by JOHN HODGDON BRADLEY

THIS book is much more than the now familiar jeremiad on man's abuse of the soil. Though not the most easily read, it is easily the best informed, the broadest gauged, and the most stimulating analysis of the tragedy of soil erosion that has yet appeared.

Much of the book deals with the genesis of the misfortunes which are the only crop that mistreated soils are sure to yield. Overplowing, overgrazing, and deforestation may at first be extremely profitable, but they ultimately lead to failing harvests, droughts, spreading deserts, dust storms, floods, poverty, and social unrest. The authors play a host of variations on this theme, with detailed information about the rape of the land on every continent and under every soil and climatic condition. Though this information (supplied largely by Mr. Whyte) is dressed in language that may tire some readers with its technicalities, it is intrinsically interesting and important. It paints a picture of soil erosion as a major world problem.

In the last half dozen chapters Mr. Jacks considers the economic, social, and political causes and consequences of erosion the world around. It is these chapters that the average reader will doubtless find most engaging. The American reader who does not already know it will be glad to learn that the American landscape can be saved. Though abuse of the soil has caused the pathetic conditions which Steinbeck's last novel has brought to general attention, it has also led to the creation of the Soil Conservation Service. Through this and related organizations, more and more farmers are learning and adopting conservation practices. The United States, in fact, is one of the most advanced countries in the development of a conservation agronomy. It may reasonably be hoped that in time it may learn—as northwestern Europe and Japan have already learned—to live on the land without bleeding it to death.

The problem of soil erosion is highly varied as far as the land is concerned, but it is pretty much the same in all countries as far as men are concerned. No telling measures against erosion can be effected in any given region unless all the land users coöperate in a plan of action which is based on the topographic and climatic conditions of the entire region. A few men debauching their acres for quick profit may conceivably wreck the conservation program of the area as a whole. As the authors put it, "The United

States has not plunged for collectivism as Russia has, but the obvious impotence of the individual to control erosion or even maintain soil fertility in the face of present economic conditions is driving the nation in that direction." Though they may growl while doing it, Americans are coming round to the belief that curtailment of personal liberty is bad but starvation is worse.

Intense nationalistic spirit, according to Jacks and Whyte, is a powerful aid to soil conservation. Nations striving for economic self-sufficiency are not likely to allow individual folly and greed to destroy the fertility of the land. Under the whip of nationalism the densely populated industrialized countries may be expected not only to take good care of their own soils but to relieve the strain on the soils of drier countries.

The nigger in the woodpile of this argument is the that when nationalism leads to war, as it has done in Europe, soil abuse on a large scale is almost inevitable. All the good accomplished through the threat of war will very likely be erased by the war itself. Not only will the warring na-

tions probably debauch their own soils, but other nations will probably follow suit in the hope of juicy profits. So the world problem of soil erosion is apt to be with us for some time. Also for some time this book by two English authors is apt to remain the best treatment of that problem.


Literary Reference

THE CONCISE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE. New York: Oxford University Press. 1939. 592 pp. \$2.50.

THIS competently edited manual is based upon Sir Paul Harvey's "Oxford Companion to English Literature," with additional items for contemporary writers of both England and America. It is essentially a condensed encyclopedia of authors, important works, characters, mythological references, and such general topics as "Ballad," "Biography," "Standard English," etc. The conciseness of definition and description is excellent, the choice of topics careful. The items of American literary history reflect critical judgments sometimes a little out of date; yet, on the whole, it would be difficult to find a more satisfactory handbook.

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Second Large Printing

BOBBS-MERRILL

Poor Whites Are Not Idiots

FACES WE SEE. By Mildred Gwin Barnwell. Gastonia, North Carolina: The Southern Combed Yarn Spinners Association. 1939. \$3.

THE SOUTHERN POOR-WHITE FROM LUBBERLAND TO TOBACCO ROAD. By Shields McIlwaine. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by JONATHAN DANIELS

IN a world in which we are all propagandists whether we know it or not, Mrs. Mildred G. Barnwell, whose publisher is The Southern Combed Yarn Spinners Association, will be properly set down as a propagandist. She is. She has undertaken to show, with the help of some very good photographs, that the people who work in the mills of the association which publishes her book are good people in good jobs.

It is not my business to support her thesis. Everything she says seems true, but I am not sure what that proves. By selection of its title her "Faces We See" may be taken to be in a sense answer to "You Have Seen Their Faces" by Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White — which, of course, is propaganda also, if only for a better world. I doubt that it is an answer, for the two books merely present the best and the worst modern aspects of a long literary preoccupation with people who had not been well-off in the history of the South.

There has been a swollen romanticism which has spread the rich planters down to deep poverty and the pitiful poor up to the big house door. Most of us between have gotten very little attention. This story of the "Poor-Whites" Shields McIlwaine has traced with scholarship, good sense, and humor, through the printed pages from

William Byrd's "History of the Dividing Line," published in 1728, to Erskine Caldwell's "Tobacco Road" of 1932. It is a squalid story, which runs from contempt through humor to concern. But Mr. McIlwaine did not assume the task of defining the limits of the "Poor-Whites" as a breed in the biology of the South, if indeed there was any such breed. He has recognized that in some cases the term was improperly extended. And the truth probably is that there have been poor-white people and white people who were poor through the whole history of the South—of the world, also.

Mr. McIlwaine is concerned with the historical aspects of the literature of the "Poor-Whites," but Mrs. Barnwell and her yarn spinners are concerned with the practical impression made by literature that the workers in Southern textile mills are a combination of the degenerate and the exploited. She undertakes to show that the workers in the best Southern textile mills are

people of decent stock decently living, which ought not to be new. (This, of course, is not the whole story of Southern industrialism.) She is not Erskine Caldwell, but she has written in liveliness and conviction a picture of Southern workers who, as a group, are as intelligent and as pleasant to behold as any similar workers anywhere, who are, indeed, of the same stock as the mill owners. And I doubt if her propaganda on the Right is any more distorted than the propaganda on the Left which is called realism. This romance of the yarn spinners is not the whole truth, but it is as much truth as is usually presented by any on the Right or Left who tell only one side of a tale.


Together the two books should help the understanding of the poor in the South who have always been composed of people of diverse morals and abilities. Most poor whites now as in the past have been people in economic difficulty and they ought not to be confused with unconfined idiots of whom, like the rest of the world, the South has a share.

The Criminal Record

The Saturday Review's Guide to Detective Fiction

Title and Author	Crime, Place and Sleuth	Summing Up	Verdict
THE NORTHS MEET MURDER <i>Frances & Richard Lockridge</i> (Stokes: \$2.)	Spirits of lively N. Y. pair only slightly damped by discovery of nekkid corpse in vacant apt. bath-tub. "Loot" Weigand elucidates.	Falters slightly when amusingly irrelevant Norths are offstage, but that's seldom enough, and affair as whole comes off beautifully.	Delightful
GRAVE WITHOUT GRASS <i>Donald Clough Cameron</i> (Holt: \$2.)	Abelard Voss, on trail of old murder in Long Island town, encounters four more, but finally stops "extravaganza of homicide."	Occasionally borders on fantastic, but thrills are incessant, deducing slick—with neat twist at end—and Voss more credible than before.	Good
THE MAN WITH TWO NAMES <i>John Palmer</i> (Dodd Mead: \$2.)	Tragic tale of British importer and dope merchant whose daughter becomes coke addict and spills beans on double-dealing pater.	Methods of British narcotic squad interestingly described. Character competently drawn, and story moves deliberately to logical end.	Dramatic
A PICTURE OF THE VICTIM <i>J. S. Strange</i> (Crime Club: \$2.)	Newspaper pix-man-sleuth Gantt assigned to photograph Long Island tycoon, snaps his fresh murdered corpse. Three more die before final exposure.	Barring extraordinary privileges allowed amateur detective, especially in final scene, and rather unobtrusive killer, story presents neat problem cannily solved.	Good
GALE WARNING <i>Dornford Yates</i> (Putnam: \$2)	Vengeful English four-some—including girl—expertly trace murderous and slippery duo to sub-Pyrenean chateau where hell pops.	Excitement of chase keeps interest at fever heat. Men very British and very noble; girl unbelievably desirable; villain blacker'n night.	Romantic thriller
THE HOUSE PARTY <i>Edgar Allan Poe, Jr.</i> (Lippincott: \$2.)	Death strikes twice at gay Delaware gathering, sparing neither guests nor servants. Insp. Grimes handles case efficiently.	Amorous didoes of socialities give body to tenuous but reasonably eventful yarn with solution that jells insufficiently.	No masterwork
SHADOWS BEFORE <i>Dorothy Bowers</i> (Crime Club: \$2.)	Arsenic finishes two in English country-house; bludgeon a third. Insp. Pardoe overhauls relentless slayer on nick of fourth.	Solidly constructed puzzle, with final pieces falling into place at slightly confusing speed. Sleuth undistinguished but competent.	Adroit

3rd Big Printing



The Eagles Gather

the new novel by the author of "Dynasty of Death"

TAYLOR CALDWELL

★

"Undeniably powerful."
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