

New Sights and New Sounds

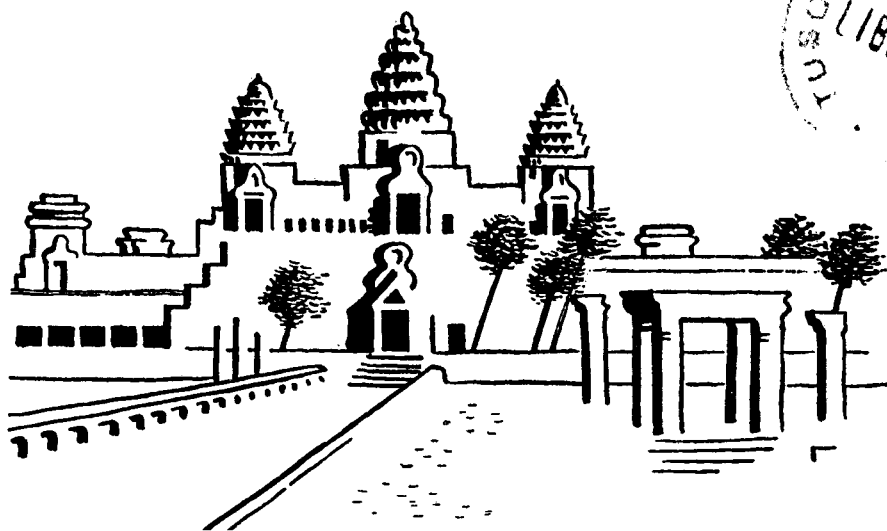
ESCAPE WITH ME. By Osbert Sitwell. New York: Harrison-Hilton Books. 1940. 322 pp., with index. \$3.

Reviewed by UPTON CLOSE

HERE'S a book whose body is part of the eternal delight of human living, and whose title is a fragment of the unbelievable, tragic irony of the times! Osbert Sitwell, of England's outstanding post-war writing family (consisting of elder sister Edith, Osbert, and young brother Sacheverell)—who wrote "England Reclaimed" in 1927, and "All at Sea" (with brother) in the following year, and then settled down into the English landscape with "Winters of Content" (1934), now publishes "Escape with Me." The points of escape to which we are invited are Indo-China, where the destiny of free China, the French empire, and the industrial world's richest corner are being settled by violence timed to Tokyo's rhythm, and to Peking, capital not only taken captive by the conqueror but prettified for his purpose and taken to bed for long ravishment!—As, next, Paris, and—who knows—London?

Osbert Sitwell couldn't have known this as he wrote so understandingly of everlasting human nature, taking as his examples French colonial officials and their wives on shipboard, kings, lords and slaves of ancient and dead Angkor, and a number one boy of modern Peking.—Or did he know it—with the presentiment of the poet? Was his muse trying to tell him and us, between the lines of lush description and crisp fun and believe-it-or-not curiosities, that there is always escape into the lovable, laughable, cruel, generous, vagariousness of human nature, posturing as conqueror or submitting as conquered, whether it be human nature of one thousand years ago, haunting the stones of Angkor until the stone figures of the dead city seem more alive than today's political party conventions, or human nature of a European ship in the Red Sea or Chinese curio dealers and gourmets in Peking.

"Escape with Me," subtitled "An Oriental Sketch-book," beautifully published on this side of the water, goes down as a travel book. But this is not the travel book of the youngster who wants you to gasp: "How *did* you"—or "How *could* you"—"do it!" nor yet the travel book of profound emotional experience in which we see a soul learning, and both mellowing and steeling itself, such as Graham Peck has recently done so movingly in "Through China's Wall." "Escape with Me" is the travel book of the poet and



Angkor Vat

From the book.

philosopher, of the polished man of letters, who already knows everything and has seen everything in his mind's eye and has the words with which to express it, who is surprised at nothing and delighted with everything, to whom new sights and sounds and smells and incongruities are only further bright examples of the charming illogic of yearning, everlasting human nature.

Of its kind, Mr. Sitwell's "Escape with Me," is one of the best, and should be a permanent classic, like Marco Polo and Doughty's "Travels." It would be dangerous to plunge into some of its descriptions and speculations without four points braced, but some of its yarns would make sparkling magazine articles—so varied is the tempo of the book. (The divorce-promoting monkeys of Gibraltar, for instance;—or the "League of Nations" bird (flamingo?) whose dignified rear end was target for hoodlum simians in Cambodia).

No one hates to pass up a good story more than a poet or a philosopher, for if he were not interested in the unusual, and alert to use every instance to provide a metaphor or a deduction, he would not be a poet or a philosopher. And so, to the old timer on the Asia coast, Mr. Sitwell may, on occasion, seem somewhat willingly taken in—notably by his China boy. In my considerable experience, the Number One boy more often uses intimate moments to "make a touch," to "bury his grandmother," than in confidences about his hidden proprietorships in flourishing businesses. Mr. Sitwell can also draw wrong conclusions, as, for instance, that Annamite amahs hide their black teeth with their hands when embarrassed and forget to do so when feeling at home—whereas they actually do so when calm and con-

ventional and forget to do so when excited. However, Mr. Sitwell does not have that affinity for wrong deductions which has plagued some other recent travelers.

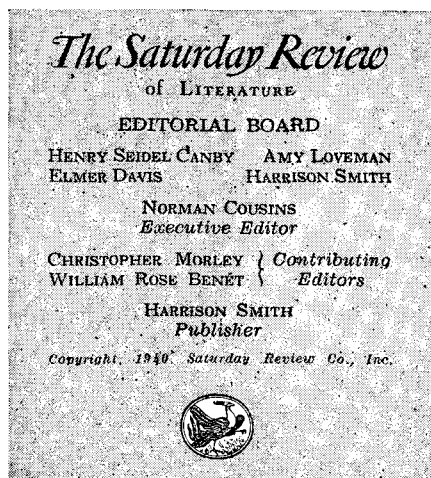
No wonder people want to read this book, and that its royalties promise the author a practical means of escape, if that yet prove to be necessary, from his own green island, which rides heavily, indeed, today.

On the serious side, Mr. Sitwell gives us the first English version which I have seen of French sinologist Paul Pelliot's translation of Tchou Ta-kwan's (that's the awful French spelling) record of life in Angkor in the years 1296-7. As we owe to an old Chinese traveller—perhaps the first real travel-book writer—our knowledge of the birthplace and times of the Buddha, so, now, we owe to another the solution of the world's greatest mystery: the story of who were and how lived the people who built and inhabited its most massive deserted city.—Maybe, before Japanese incendiary bombs partly made in U.S.A. destroy all Chinese libraries some old Chinese writer will be discovered who lived in and observed the habits of the virgins of Atlantis, and of the Aztecs!

And meanwhile, where is Paul Pelliot, whom I last saw so happily bickering with his young wife on the banks of the Seine? Is Paris already (looking through a little lens of time) another Angkor, the Eiffel Tower a less enduring Bayon Wat? And is London next?

But the Tchou Ta-kwans and Paul Pelliot and Osbert Sitwells are an undying line . . . and if one gets lost for a few centuries, another will yet uncover him.

Upton Close, lecturer and writer on Oriental life and literature, is the author of "Land of the Laughing Buddha."



WINE FROM OLD BOTTLES

IN an eloquent little book published not long ago, "Candle in the Dark," an admirable tract for the times, Irwin Edman, commenting on the catastrophic fact that "for the second time in a generation the brutal futility of war has broken out in the very heart of the civilized world," goes on to say: "Whatever be the causes, whatever the necessity, the fact that there could be such causes and such necessity has already eaten like a canker into the bloom of every value we enjoy and every ideal we cherish. It has seemed to make a mockery of all our hopes, and nonsense of all our knowledge. It has turned the faith in education into an irony and has reduced to triviality the arts on which men have lavished their technical mastery and their lyric flame. It has made even private joys seem precarious and shame-faced." It has done this for non-combatant peoples as well as for combatant. And, indeed, how could it be otherwise in a day when the events of war are bruited abroad on the very waves of the air and when the impact of disaster is as immediate and direct on the furthestmost reaches of the world as on the area of strife? Yet, unless the night of despair is to close down on us all, we must continue to live by those delights and pursuits which in the face of the agony of millions it seems to us callous to allow.

War demands of peoples a moral toughness which is something apart from what we know as morale, an invincible resolution not only to endure valiantly but to think rigorously. In each of us there is a fifth column that threatens disaster to our strength, all those impulses of pity and horror and fear which are insidiously in conflict with our convictions and which batter against our determination to allow no quarter to the forces of destruction. It is so easy to translate sympathy into condonation, not of wrong but of courses of action which may entrench wrong, so difficult amidst the general

turmoil to keep judgment unclouded and opinions straight. Now, as never before, we stand in need of that long range vision which can project itself into the consequences of emotionalism and of the philosophical detachment of mind which draws courage for the future from knowledge of the past.

Attention has of late been much focussed on the young, and much criticism has been passed on the fibre of their thought. Yet for what the youth of today believes, for the confusion of its loyalties, its pessimism, and its fears, the generation of its parents is greatly responsible. It was they who proclaimed the futility of war, they who uncovered the cankers in American civilization, they who denounced the men and policies of Versailles. They themselves were the product of war, with the impress of its animosities, its problems, and its disappointments upon them. They had been called upon to endure heroic adventure, had gone into it with optimism, and come out of it with what looked like success, to find as the years went on that their hopes were progressively betrayed. They passed on their disillusionment to their children, but not that background of certainty in democracy and America which had been ingrained in themselves. And, tragically, the depression helped further to shatter the confidence of the young.

Nor, in the literature of their time, have the young found much to sustain them. For the literature of the twenties was a literature of disillusionment, and that of the thirties a tapering off into less bitter denunci-

ation but no less grim realism. And now, when literature should speak with fervor and conviction, the more important authors seem to have been immobilized by the immense calamity of war. It is easily explicable, this paralysis which has fallen upon them. For they are constrained from writing not only by the impact of war upon themselves but upon their public. Nothing that they can say can appear dramatic or significant against the background of conflict. They cannot, in a world of flux, achieve a perspective that permits of prophecy. They cannot maintain serenity in a war which is at every man's door. They cannot persuade a public informed almost hourly of the progress of battle to any long range philosophy. But the older writers can, those whose works have already been tested by time and whose spirit is a torch for the present. To them we can turn for solace, for, as Mr. Edman says, "Life is always at some turning point. Great poets and seers have taught us in the past, they may teach us now to behold the view. Stopping thus to behold it, its urgency, though not its tragedy, may be removed. And then we shall be enabled to behold what men have always beheld when they have raised their eyes to see; the serene, unending recurrences in Nature, the eternal forms and types of happiness and suffering, of cruelty and wisdom, of barbarism and saintliness, that perpetually return on the human scene." Or, as Winston Churchill put it last Sunday, they may glimpse "the sunlight on the uplands."

A. L.

Epitaph

By Brooke Byrne

WE were not many, and no bronze asserts
Our unheroic living between the ultimate guns.
We the despised, whom no allegiance supports.

Our spiritual country was a bridge.
It went out in the floods. Not even the piers remain,
No ford for crossing from hostile edge to edge.

Or we were divers under the wave of the world,
Living precariously out of our native air,
Clumsily swung in a world where blood is cold.

They had names for us, the not-quite-single-brained,
The dubious and unvaliant, the exiled, the finally dead:
Who neither fought nor surrendered, and died unclaimed.

There was no great need to kill us in haste.
The smoke of the burning books, the folds of the flag,
We stifled in them as others died in the past.

Having learned silence, we went to the earth
And practised silence, or spoke to silence forever.
Be merciful: it was our condition of breath.