

The Point's the Thing

MINORITY REPORT. By Bernard DeVoto. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1940. 346 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by JOHN TEMPLE GRAVES

LEE was beaten at Gettysburg because he acted under a plan too ideal, Mr. DeVoto says, and because his opponent, Meade, acted by rule of thumb, meeting successive events as they came, doing the immediately expedient thing without too much schedule. The federal victory was one, too, we are given to believe, for Mr. DeVoto's Point. That is a Point against the ideal, against theories, arbitrary plans, generalizations, abstract logic, simplifications, things deduced rather than inducted. Mr. DeVoto is brilliantly persuaded to be a "pluralist, a relativist, an empiricist," and through or between his magnificent lines the absolute is lambasted as it has not been since Greek met Greek on the subject years ago.

Lee, of course, was attacking, and had to have a plan. Meade was being attacked and couldn't. Lee was being a progressive (insofar as Little Round Top was concerned) and there is no progress, naturally, without something which Mr. DeVoto recognizes perfectly even if he does not like to have it look like an ideal or an absolute. Meade, standing pat on top of the hill, required nothing better or worse than the spur of the moment. Mr. DeVoto's failure to report this distinction does not mean that he has overlooked it, for he overlooks nothing. It means rather that his Point against certain absolutes absorbs him and that a Point in favor of certain other absolutes must be left to someone else. At high school in Ogden, Utah, back in 1910, he may have been the boy on whom they called for proof that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points—for you can prove that empirically by personal walks from point to point. When it came to proof of what the square on the hypotenuse of a right-angle triangle equals they probably called on someone else, for that is a truth which has to be deduced and is flavored, therefore, with distasteful absolutes and unempirical ideals.

Mr. DeVoto's Point makes him, like Meade at Roundtop, something of a stand-patter. It hasn't always done that to people but it does it to Mr. DeVoto. The comment is on the nature of the times, perhaps, and of modern progress. But the Point does something else for Mr. DeVoto whose benefice must be more unanimously regarded. It gives him the peg on which he hangs the most svelte and sturdy literature being written anywhere today. "Literary journalism" he calls the selected



Marshall Studio

Bernard DeVoto: Blaster of the Absolute.

contributions to *Harper's* and *The Saturday Review* which make up his new

book but we day-by-day journalists who have no language of our own would call them essays.

Bernard DeVoto's world is full of a number of things, and he is very happy about them because he knows what to do. Light-footed, strong, sharp-sighted, immensely learned, primitively American, he romps through them all, and ever and anon, makes his Point. Because he has a theory against the theoretical and an ideal against the ideal the world of contemporary letters is being enriched. Because he can't endure the report that something came down from Sinai, history and science and the modern scene are coming in for fascinating comment. Because somewhere in his not-so-dim past an absolute must have hit him when he wasn't looking and an ideal must have done him wrong, there are now within Messrs. Little, Brown's covers essays which make a volume whose reading is an experience approaching in stimulation the absolute and the ideal.

John Temple Graves is a member of the editorial staff of the *Birmingham, Ala., Age Herald*.

Life and Fun

MR. LITTLEJOHN. By Martin Flavin. New York: Harper & Bros. 1940. 306 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by PHIL STONG

I CANNOT credit the publishers with any extraordinary perspicacity in "finding" this book because anyone who reads a dozen pages of it is certain to "find" it. And the jacket blurb, "as gay and tender and heart-warming a novel as the 1940's are apt to see," aside from the off-putting adjectives, seems ridiculously conservative to me. It is about as engaging and perceptive and humorous and amusingly philosophic as any novel I have read since "Candide" and "Tristram Shandy" and neither of those was written in the 1940's.

In short, we have fitting company here for the charming gentlemen mentioned and for Mr. Pickwick and Don Quixote and even for M. Rousseau and de Koster's "Ulenspiegel" in their lighter moments. Mr. Littlejohn belongs with the whole splendid collection of perplexed persons who simply went away from whatever they happened to be doing, because it didn't make sense, in the happy conviction that by mere physical travel one may arrive at Eden or Carcassonne or at least a few reasonable definitions.

The author provides two refrains for Mr. Littlejohn, comments of equal substance, "If life isn't fun, what is it?"

Upon being told that it is fun or is

not fun, he remarks with all the profundity of a Socrates: "Hum!"

The companions of the voyage are varied but brilliantly selected for Mr. Littlejohn's research—a blind violinist who lives by the illumination of a past but perfect love; a hearty wench who communes with spirits and nearly runs Mr. Littlejohn's legs off in her attempts at less ethereal communications; a communist agitator who is always getting in fights because he is Irish and always taking a licking because he is Jewish; a Negro chicken thief who wants nothing from the world but an amiable "Cap'n"; a motion picture writer grown candid enough to be demonstrably crazy; a dog for whom life is fun because he has nothing to worry about but his devotions—folks and food—and a whole museum from contemporary and timeless life.

Naturally this deserter from the tooth paste and hair tonic industry lands in a madhouse, from which he escapes, for further fun and life with his dog by the almost incredibly fairytale-ish device of picking his own lawyer's pocket. It doesn't hurt to give away the ending because the delight of the book is from page to page and paragraph to paragraph.

Even the italics are fun, but if this book gets abroad in anything like the measure its qualities deserve, one dreads to contemplate what will become of the hair-tonic, preaching, and other cosmetic industries in this country.

Distilled Disillusion

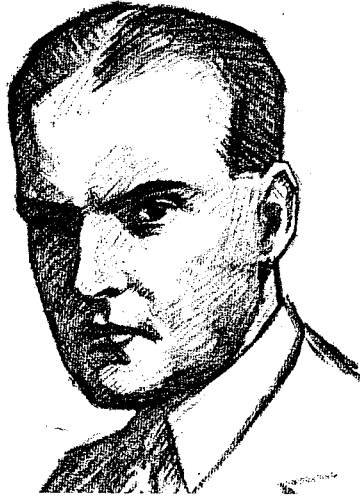
LOUIS HACKER

EDMUND WILSON, our foremost literary critic, has the courage of his intellectual interests. A number of years ago—before the Moscow purges got in their deadly work, to disillusion many in the Marxian dream—Mr. Wilson sat down to study the history of communism. Certainly up to 1936, communism held the key to the resolution of our present-day dilemmas for a great many thinkers and moralists and up to August, 1939, for a remnant of diehards. Capitalism, after its fine functional achievements of the nineteenth century, had run its progressive course; flying the banners of liberty and democracy, creating a mighty mechanism for wresting abundance from nature, opening up the whole world to the strivings of men, it had brought with it, nevertheless, war, periodic breakdown in the economic processes, and—worst of all—such a universal despair that peoples everywhere were eagerly grasping at false moralities in their desperate hunt for salvation.

Small wonder that the ideas of communism and the vision of a new society attracted new supporters. Human history, previously, had seen similar unrest and activity on the part of intellectuals. Erasmus and Rabelais, within the body of Catholic Europe, by their uncertainties, doubts, and challenges, had prepared the way for the Protestant Reformation and the smashing of the sacramental system as the sole instrument for achieving grace. Later, Locke the Englishman, Vico the Italian, and Voltaire the Frenchman had unleashed forces which were to thunder on until the French Revolution freed men's minds from the authoritarianism of the absolutist state.

So it was with our own generation. And Mr. Wilson, whose interests previously had been with esthetic matters, began his education in the realms of communist theory and politics, because communism (so it seemed) stood in the same relation to our modern perplexities and needs as had the humanism of the Renaissance and the rationalism of the Enlightenment to their bewildered epochs. Communism was to be the mighty instrument to free the hearts and spirits of men.

"To the Finland Station"* is the result of that process in self-education



Drawing by Roy C. Gamble

Edmund Wilson "has carried through his process of self-education austere-ly."

undertaken by Mr. Wilson. In a sense, but even here only obliquely, the author admits the partial failure of the experiment. In a few illuminating passages toward the end of the book, he pays his compliments to and expresses his abhorrence of Trotsky's morality: and in so doing he permits the inference that he has rejected the political methods of communism because they end in moral bankruptcy. Earlier in the book, although at greater length, Mr. Wilson has questioned the so-called scientific foundations of communism, that is to say, dialectics and the theory of surplus value. Mr. Wilson, in fine, ends up by being no communist; one may assume, however, that he still believes in socialism, or the cooperative society or democratic collectivism.

BUT the resolution of this debate, which has stimulated the minds of thousands of thoughtful persons during the past decade, is not the purpose of this book. "To the Finland Station" is an examination, in terms of the thinking and doing of its leading protagonists and antagonists, of the development of the theory and politics of communism; that is to say, the seizure of political power by the proletariat because the logic of history made that class its agent in the interests of the creation of a classless society in which production was to be based on social need instead of human exploitation. Mr. Wilson does not complete the story. He ends it with 1917, with the arrival of Lenin in Petrograd at the Finland Station; hence the book's title.

Mr. Wilson has carried through his process of self-education austere-ly, and we are in his debt as a result. All intelligent persons will want to read his book not only because it represents Mr. Wilson at his best but equally because it is the most discerning guide to the faith and vision of communism that we have. It is informative and wise and understanding; it is not didactic nor polemical nor ill-natured. In its pages Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky—and indeed a whole host of lesser though no less turbulent figures, Owen, Lassalle, Bakunin—come alive as sensible and sentient men. In short, the book is a notable achievement in collective biography and intellectual history.

The book's design is somewhat complex. The theory and politics of communism had an elaborate preparation in the agonies and thinking of eighteenth—and nineteenth—century Europe. It is enough to mention the outstanding of these forces: the rationalism of the Enlightenment; the egalitarianism of the French Revolution; the natural law of English classical economy; the direct-action tactics of Babeaux, and the left-wing English Chartists; the fine humanity of the English and French Utopians; the trade unionism of Lassalle, the anarchism of Bakunin; and always and persistently the Hegelian logic. Mr. Wilson has studied these influences and has used these materials with great skill to create a rich background against which the founders of communism enact their roles. Marx and Engels and Lenin and Trotsky are the chief characters in a great drama in which, as Mr. Wilson says, they "are trying to make the historical imagination intervene in human affairs as a direct constructive force."

So much for the general intention of the book. The method employed is also somewhat complex: at any rate, this is true of its first third. Mr. Wilson calls the device he uses the "spot-lighting method," that is to say, his imagination and intelligence pick out outstanding individuals whose thinking and careers bring into sharp focus the prevailing tendencies of their times. The aspirations of the Enlightenment are presented in terms of Vico's vision that "the social world is certainly the work of man." The lift that the French Revolution gave to men's hearts is presented in terms of

**TO THE FINLAND STATION. A Study in the Writing and Acting of History. By Edmund Wilson. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1940. 509 pp. \$4.*