

WRITERS AND CONFERENCES

(Continued from page 4)

cerned about their manuscript's saleability than its intrinsic merit. Mr. Hansen in his admirable report on the Rocky Mountain Conference says enthusiastically, "Here I have heard debated all phases of the literary life. Should a reputable publisher sign an author up for three technical books and then withhold royalties on the first 800 copies? Should a house sign an author for three novels and take all but fifteen per cent of the movie and serial rights? Should stories be written for specific magazines to sell, or should genius suffer in silence with rejections and toil away until editors come on bended knee? What makes a play click? What makes a novel succeed? What are the perfect situation and the best dialogue?" For the answers to the first two of these questions or any others like them the young writer need only drop an inquiry to the offices of the Authors' Guild. For the rest I submit that they have more of a note of materialism than idealism. I am not inclined to agree with Mr. Hansen when he sums up "For while the best work is done by writers when they work alone, the best inspiration comes from knowing what is in the air and how to go about it." The best inspiration comes from giving your ideas expression whether they are in the air or not, and in expressing them in a way you have worked out for yourself. If you are

the first to put them in the air you will be indeed fortunate.

"All of the actual writers said repeatedly that they were being stuffed and stultified beyond endurance," writes a mature author who has attended two different conferences as a student and has since then published a volume. "They said they got more from the few clinics at the end when they had a chance to tear up each other's writings. Speaking for myself . . . just hearing Mr. — read my work and hearing the questions, criticisms, (praise and blame) from the rest of the group was worth, for me, the entire first nine days of blankness."

It would seem from all this that the Writers' Conference shot-gun creates too wide a pattern on the target or rather it aims at too many targets. Perhaps the purposes of the conferences need relating in more specific language. Perhaps they need to be decreased in number and given more emphasis. In some cases at least it is evident that the Conferences do not accomplish what the writers in attendance expect of them. As a staff-member I came away with the realization that I had had a lot of fun and that I had enjoyed associating with stimulating companions. But I also felt reasonably certain that the writers of real talent who were present had wasted most of two weeks that could have gone to productive thought.



Robert P. Tristram Coffin finds the summer conferences stimulating but exhausting.

of a series of generalizations, which sometimes cancel one another out, or trail off into the thin air. They are the generalizations, moreover, of a man who is fairly ignorant of American history and who appears never to have travelled further west than Buffalo or further south than Virginia. When Mr. Lewis uses the word "American," the reader is occasionally tempted to ask him if he knows what he is talking about.

Within his narrow limits, however, Mr. Lewis has something to say. He is sometimes shrewd, often amusing. In two chapters—Provincial Decay and If I Were A British Agent—he discusses certain changes which, in his opinion, America is now undergoing, and certain other changes which England must shortly undergo. If you juxtapose the two chapters you will find them extremely speculative but also most suggestive. They throw, as it were, a little sunlight on the future. They might almost be said to justify the whole book.

What I Know About You, Etc.

AMERICA, I PRESUME. By Wyndham Lewis. New York: Howell, Soskin & Co. 1940. 298 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by GEORGE DANGERFIELD

THE game of printed ping-pong between English literary visitors to America and American literary visitors to England is, as everyone knows, numerically an unequal one. Since the days of Charles Dickens, more books and articles have been batted at America than at England; there have been more Provincial Ladies than Margaret Halseys; more Priestleys than Hawthornes. Everybody agrees that the reason for this is that England provides few lecture audiences and no Hollywood; and that, in consequence, when an American author travels to England, he does so at his own expense. This makes him more charitable and more silent.

Whether this is a good thing, admits of some doubt. It is not healthy

for the English writer to have it all his own way. It makes him careless. Here, for instance, is Mr. Wyndham Lewis, who has something new to say about England and something new to learn from America; and who, in "America, I Presume," seems not unwilling to proceed along these lines. But Mr. Lewis has what one can only describe as the extraordinary carelessness to write about a comic soldier who comes to America on a lecture tour. This approach to the subject—with its resulting disquisitions upon hospitality, lion hunters, lions, and the rest—is so horribly familiar that the reader might be excused if he puts the book down after the first two chapters. To do him justice, Mr. Lewis only uses this soldier in order to lurk behind him; the appearances of Major Corcoran are intermittent. But why bother to lurk?

Apart from this, the book has its little drawbacks. It consists (as is only to be expected in a work of this size)

SOLUTION OF LAST WEEK'S DOUBLE-CROSTIC (No. 336)

FEUCHTWANGER

THE JEW OF ROME

Let me be a rainbow, Jehovah,
Quick to dissolve, but ever new-born again;

Glittering with many hues and yet
made of one light;

A bridge from Thy earth to Thy
heaven,

Born of water and sun,
Always there

When sun and water mingle.

History of the Negro

THE NEGRO IN VIRGINIA. Compiled by Workers of the Writers' Program of the WPA in the State of Virginia, Sponsored by The Hampton Institute. New York: Hastings House. 1940. 380 pp., with index. \$2.50.

Reviewed by JONATHAN DANIELS

THIS story of the Negro in Virginia, free from both bitterness and prejudice and equally free of sentimentality and pretentiousness, is not only one of the most significant books to come from the whole work of the Federal Writers' Project. It is also, I think, one of the most valuable contributions yet made to the American Negro's history, which has been left in darkness even when it was not presented in distortion. Though it deals with the Negroes of only one state, it is still the most satisfactory story of the Negro in America that I have seen.

In important aspects the story of the Negro in Virginia has been the story of the Negro in America. He began there around the widening, land-wasting tobacco plantations. He stirred in Virginia the sense of justice toward man and shame in slavery of such great Virginians as Thomas Jefferson. In Virginia also under Nat Turner his violent revolt created also the violent repressions of the latter days of slavery in America. In Virginia he was closer to the war which freed him and closer also to the forces, good and evil, which moved from the North in his name after the war.

The method of this book should be model for the other histories which need to be written. It follows the documents but is not limited by them. To the formal sources in every aspect of the Negro's history are added the voices of old folk recalling their own past and the earlier times told them by their fathers. Such testimony of the old folks has its faults certainly. But it is needed as corrective in writing such a history in which the written records are almost exclusively white and angry, white and sentimental, white and apologetic. The recollection of these old Virginia Negroes, told I presume to young members of their own race, give a credibility to the Negro's own story which could not have been based upon the documents alone.

The half-lost history of the old past seemed to me to be the best part of this book, superior to the adequate and intelligent but more familiar story of the Virginia Negro's present. Even that, however, is told with an honesty, often with a humor which recognizes the weaknesses of the Negro while it recounts his accomplishments. His

desperate difficulties are told without any of the rhetoric of literary indignation. There is no effort to magnify pretentiously the successes of members of the race out of proportion to their meaning in the whole community. In the story of the Negro as laborer the book does seem definitely partisan for the C.I.O. against the A. F. of L., but while this may be controversy, I think any honest observer of the Negro and the labor movement must agree with it.

Altogether this is a grand book. There may be historical mistakes in it. They are trifles beside the great historical correctiveness in the whole impression which it gives. Splendidly

it is written under a direction largely Negro which no longer feels the need to make all the Negroes out as angels in chains and no longer the need to take the white South's story without scrutinizing it. Between the black buffoon and the ebony martyr it has produced the Negro as a real and unique human being in the land. The chief fault I found in the book was its geographical limitations, but it provides both the first step and the pattern for a satisfactory history at last of the Negro in America, a history we can all read with interest and to a clearer picture of the past of us all.

Jonathan Daniels is editor of the Raleigh News and Observer.

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