

The Rains Still Came

WILD IS THE RIVER. By Louis Bromfield. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1941. 326 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by BESS JONES

UNLIKE many writers of fiction, who treat character and plot as if they were small annuities that had to be spread out over a long and steadily thinning literary life, Mr. Bromfield spends his copious talents with the lavishness of one who never needs to save for a rainy day. His output in the last decade and a half, averaging almost a book a year, shows amply that when the rains come for him they are the kind that make abundant the crop. Nor does his most recent work reveal the slightest diminution in his brilliant skill for setting, swift action, or romantic, even glamorous characterization.

His latest subject, perfectly suited to these marked abilities, is New Orleans under the occupation of the unlamented Butler, who, for no discernible reason, is thinly veiled under the name of General Wicks. It was the paradise of the Yankee military, the carpet-bagger, the scalawag bent on pillaging a town, a people, and a civilization. Mr. Bromfield could have treated it tragically in a way that has more meaning for us today than it would have had even two years ago, but he has preferred to make of his American Paris a scenario ripe for a Hollywood supercolossal plucking. It is entertaining, it has enormous gusto, swagger, voodoo mysteries, wonderful black women who devise love potions for good American dollars, aristocratic Creoles, moonlight, fever, sultry heat, jasmine and wistaria, a deluxe brothel, a pretty sprinkling of French words and patois songs, the Puritan conscience all the way down from Pinckney Street and Concord, balconies, French arias wafted across the night, and lots and lots of sex. One only awaits the climactic duet from Moore and Eddy.

If that catalogue of properties seems to belittle Mr. Bromfield's lively book, it is certainly not so intended. Mr. Bromfield knows what he is doing. He could have made his book another kind, certainly a more important kind, but since he set for himself another aim, and has achieved it so well, he is not to be criticized for failing to give us a "War and Peace." He tells his adventurous story on two levels. On one we are witness to guerilla warfare, the relatively primitive clash between the occupying Yankees and the captive, yet unconquered natives; between the exasperation of the winner who cannot collect all his take, and the quiet determination of the loser who refuses

to yield. Something of that we see every day under European datelines.

The other level offers more subtle complications, for on it Mr. Bromfield deals not merely with the conflict of temperaments between those on the same side, but with the psychological changes that overtake the outwardly unchangeable. Tom Bedloe, a Rhett Butler from New Bedford, dashing, sensual, avid for power, a devil with the ladies, lustily welcomes the magnificent chaos of New Orleans under Silver Spoons as a chance to free himself from the inhibitions of Massachusetts and the oppressive purity of his blond Boston fiancée, Agnes Wicks. For her pallid young brother David it is a means of conquering fear of love and the body and of becoming a poet, though he dies in the attempt. The exotic, coldly calculating young Baroness de Lèche, unwilling hostess to Bedloe, sees in him and his response to her evil nature her sole opportunity to regain her confiscated wealth and get back to Paris. But she would throw everything over to win the love of the one man, the gentle MacTavish, who had resisted her. And the fair, virginal Agnes, in the beginning obsessed by the desire to save her lover from himself and from the wicked women who are after him, discovers, through her fantastic voyage from Bos-



Louis Bromfield

ton to New Orleans, that she is not so pure as people think and that she has no wish, after all, to rescue her young man for a sedate life in Back Bay. There is MacTavish and the West calling. The indomitable Aunt Tam, who accompanies her, finds greater scope for her own energies and learns that experience is something more than a good story to tell back home. She, or Mr. Bromfield, forgot, however, that in 1862 it would not have been possible to report her exciting adventures to Margaret Fuller. That poor lady was drowned in 1850.

Triangle in China

DESTINY HAS EIGHT EYES. By Willard A. Hanna. New York: Harper & Bros. 1941. 305 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by N. W. SNOW

THIS novel of wartime China begins rather discouragingly in black and white tones with a racialistic tinge: the too-ugly and objectionable German-Jewish refugee, the handsome and charming White Russian engineer, the too-talented and artistic Chinese rival for Grishka's American wife. When the author has delivered himself of these stock characterizations, however, the story moves smoothly and his excellent handling of Ruth balances the picture. Writing in a carefully-limited first person as Fred Hornell, an American English teacher, Mr. Hanna finally succeeds in doing a very workmanlike job, with an informal, easy style and occasional good patches, such as when Herr Leinzig comments that it would be better for the city to fight than to capitulate to the Japanese: "If one must lose all in the end, it is best, I think, to lose all at the beginning—all but one's spirit, and if that must be crushed,

let it be crushed at one blow, not by slow and infinite degrees of humiliation."

These five individuals are brought together in Ningchow where Grishka is building a bridge, and the climax comes with the Japanese occupation of the city when the engineer faces having to destroy his work and each must choose whether to stay or go to interior China or Shanghai. The love triangle between Grishka, Zen-Fu and Ruth makes an engrossing plot, but the best part of the novel is the gradual unfolding of the personalities of the enigmatic Ruth and the much-disliked Herr Leinzig.

Willard A. Hanna, born in Pennsylvania in 1911, spent the four years after 1932 teaching in Shanghai and at Hangchow Christian College. The scene of his story is based on his knowledge of the beautiful city of Hangchow, and for one who was not actually present, he certainly gives an excellent picture of China at war. Mr. Hanna won an essay prize in the Avery Hopwood Contest in 1938, at which time he also began work on this book.

One Leaf Among Millions

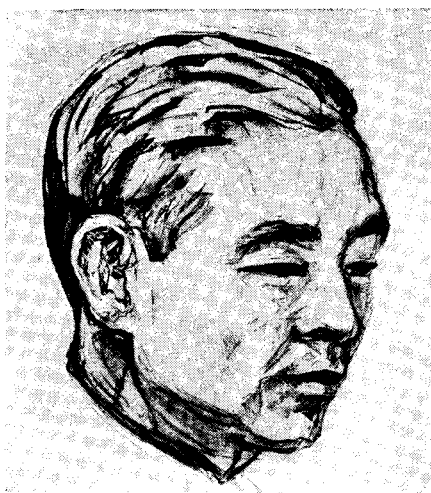
A LEAF IN THE STORM. By Lin Yutang. New York: The John Day Co. 1941. 368 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by NYM WALES

LIN YUTANG'S first novel was an exciting discovery. I read "Moment in Peking" against my will, for I was too busy to read any book on that particular day. What interested me most was the craftsmanship, which was a surprise, for modern China had not produced any major novelist as yet and I had been following the development of the new literary movement as well as I could. I laid the book down thinking: But, this is first-rate. It is also a modern "Dream of the Red Chamber." That book has stood for many generations as the classic of Chinese family life in its prime, and now Lin has epitomized the transition to a new social form. "Moment in Peking" (I resented the inadequate title) is probably the best job of novel-writing that has been done since the Chinese literary renaissance began in 1915, though it may not be recognized by the Chinese because of its being written in English.

"A Leaf in the Storm" is not a sequel, though the Yao family reappears and the continuity goes on. It is a triangle love-story with the present war as background, including the mass migration of refugees to the interior. The characters leave Peking for Shanghai, then Hankow, where the tale ends in 1938. Malin is a beautiful, warm-hearted girl who has been several times what she calls "a kept woman," as well as having been mixed up involuntarily with a pro-Japanese intrigue as the concubine of an important general. She is an easy conquest for Poya and becomes his mistress, aspiring to supplant his wife and find her place "in the garden" of his wealthy family. She seeks a home and love, however, not money nor position. During the exigencies of war she is protected and inspired by their older mutual friend, Lao Peng, a Buddhist ascetic and humanitarian, who soon makes up the love triangle. She changes her name to Tanni, which is symbolic of the new spiritual values which Lao Peng brings into her life by converting her to Buddhism, and does war-work in the interior. "Every leaf in the storm is an individual with a heart and feelings and aspirations and longings, and each is as important as the others. Our task here is to trace what the war did to one woman, one leaf among the millions," Lin says.

This original concept of a war novel was a very good one, but unfortunately the background is not organically integrated with the central theme. The



Lin Yutang

love-story could easily be lifted out of its context and put in ordinary surroundings. Such minor intrinsic changes as occur to its characters are brought about by influences that owe little to the great drama around them. It seems a waste of talent and labor that, with rich material at hand, Lin should have chosen such relatively insignificant, un-

typical, and in many ways uninteresting and unsympathetic central characters, and that he should have taken refuge in Buddhist philosophy and a far-from-epic love story, instead of grasping at the significant and fundamental changes that are in fact uprooting the lives of many millions during this upheaval. It is a delightful relief whenever Yumei speaks, for this healthy peasant girl-refugee, who acts as servant to Tanni, seems like the fresh voice of the people in an atmosphere of decadence and triviality, and Lin has drawn a charming portrait of her.

In "Moment in Peking" Lin showed a sure hand. Here the story falls between his fingers. He is as charming as ever, though, and gives a colorful panorama of China at war, interspersed with many true episodes, not neglecting Japanese atrocities. There is too much crowding, too much exposition, and too little of the indirect method, to bring its dramatic potentialities to fulfillment. Though it falls disappointingly behind the promise of his first novel, it is an exciting story and an important book for Americans to read. As in Lin's other four books, it contributes tremendously to our understanding of China.

Colonial New York

L. BAXTER, MEDICUS. By Knud Stouman. New York: Greystone Press. 1941. 406 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by PHIL STONG

THIS Dutch-American, colonial, medical romance deals with enticing topical matters and deals with them well, with simplicity and Dutch vigor. Lourens Steenwyck Baxter is the nephew of the early New York mayor, Cornelis van Steenwyck (Mayor, 1668-70 and 1682-3), and son of an English sea captain. He takes an early interest in what was regarded, not without reason, as the inferior profession of healing. The intriguing argument over whether pulverized bone from a Negro's skull is as efficacious as that from a Dutchman's in the preparation of "weapon salve"—salve applied to a weapon to heal the wound it has inflicted—awakens Lourens to the charm of science.

He works out an apprenticeship with a doctor who has become fairly successful through his expertness at empirical therapeutics, then goes on to the university at Leyden, leaving the sweetheart of his nonage in New York. In Leyden, he learns what is to be known of anatomy at the time, a little more medicine, and a good deal of scientific thinking from Leeuwenhoek with his microscopes. He is faith-

ful (in his fashion), to the American sweetheart, the fashion including a semi-official lady of comparatively high birth, and a mistress whose excellently detailed charms are enhanced by the fact that her mother's skeleton, slightly damaged, since the lady was hanged, is one of the prize specimens of the Leyden anatomical museum. There is a little of the weird fragrance of the great deCoster in some of these passages.

After a term with Sydenham in London, Lourens returns to the Dutch-English town on the Hudson, where he is only fairly successful because of the long established faith in such conservative remedies as split toads, viper's-flesh poultices, and ground unicorn's horn. Being half Dutch he marries his first sweetheart according to program and produces children; being half English he is annoyed by her intolerance for everything but cleanliness, cooking, and propagation.

The romantic elements of the plot are disentangled by the Leisler Rebellion, and it is indicated that the survivors live happily and adventurously ever after, or at least as long as L. Baxter's skill can preserve them.

The story is told with direction and economy, as befits a work in which settings and circumstances contribute plenty of high color and action.