

# Taming of the River

*THE COLORADO CONQUEST. By David O. Woodbury. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 1941. 367 pp., with index. \$3.*

Reviewed by EDWIN L. SABIN

**I**N a rugged and picturesque narrative Mr. Woodbury dramatizes the forty years' grapple by man and man's devices to harness the Colorado River of the Southwest desert. From its canyons in the northern high country the Colorado flows generally south, at last to spread into a delta at the head of the Gulf of California in Mexico and drain on into the Gulf. But as illustrated by Mr. Woodbury's handy sketches, the Colorado Desert to the west along the river's lower course drains not to the south but to the north. It is moreover a great basin below sea level, and is lower than the river screened off by a line of dunes and flowing over a silt-built bed.

"The Colorado Conquest" details the gigantic efforts to capitalize this phenomenon of natural drainage not into the sea but into the interior; by means of a take-off canal around the dunes at the border to put a ring in the nose of the "Red Bull" and through controlled irrigation bring millions of flat, desert acres, named Imperial Valley, into production. Water was to be sold to colonists induced to file upon

government land that without water was only a torrid waste. Nevertheless, to engineers and promoters it represented the pride of accomplishment.

The Colorado, however, was no meek Nile. By the droughts when the slow current of the silt-laden water shallowed the canal and filled in against the head gate; by the "flash" freshets when the cloudbursts in the upper country swelled the current until it raced to devour soil and buildings, the Colorado, like a crafty demon of Indian legend, sported with the trifling energies of man. Capitalists, engineers, water companies, land companies, the Southern Pacific Railroad, the "little people" who toiled with plow and spade, fought the Red Bull. Alkali, speculators, defective land titles, a disapproving over-paternal Government, Mexico through which the canal crossed—this combination aided the discouragement by drought and flood.

The saving outcome was that Boulder Dam which mastered the river in its canyons, controlled its range and changed its power into far carried voltage. To this vaster project, debated over by the jealous interests of seven states and made to run the gantlet of state and Washington politicians, Mr. Woodbury assigns his closing chapters.

They are another story. The semi-fictionized but factual recountal of human endurance in the Valley's struggle for a dreamed-of Utopia is Mr. Woodbury's confessed dearer story. The great majority of the performers are on record; yet Rockwood, the engineer, fighting through until he died, worn out; Heffernan, the ex-army surgeon, loyal backer, adviser and doctor at need: these two, for instance, are no more real than are Johnny Gay and his girlish wife Gabrielle, types of the "little people" thrown to the Red Bull. As embodying the pioneer spirit, "to me these are America." Mr. Woodbury (himself of the Imperial Valley) says in his Preface; "of all the brave ones I love them best."

# White on White

*The following book review by William Allen White appeared recently in the Emporia Gazette. The book under review was "William Allen White, the Man from Emporia," by Everett Rich. It was reviewed in SRL, August 16.*

**F**IFTY-FIVE years ago or such a matter, when I was a brand-new reporter, aged 18, I had a tough assignment, probably the toughest I have ever had in all these years.

It was to write a review of a home talent musical show, in which my contemporary best girl was one of the stars. The tough assignment was in El Dorado, a little burg of 2,000, and all the town was watching me.

If I had said it was a good show—about which there were two schools of thought—I knew, even then. I would be accused of using the press corruptly to promote my private interests. If, on the other hand, I said it was a poor show, I wouldn't have any best girl. And if I wrote a piece full of ifs, ands, and buts, nevertheless and on-the-other-hands, I would be accused of carrying water on both shoulders. And the town could hoot at me. I just cut loose and praised the girl and let public opinion go bang.

Now another tough assignment—probably as tough as that one 50 years ago. It is to review Everett Rich's book, a biography of me. It is really a remarkable book. It reveals scholarly work, an immense amount of research, in which things are dug up out of a misty past that I had forgotten; probably forgotten because I wanted to forget them.

Nevertheless, Mr. Rich makes a consistent picture of a man who has grown, I hope, in grace, at least in breadth of viewpoint, in the 46 years he has lived in this town. It is generous, it is more than generous to me, kindly, charitable—perhaps I ought to say affectionate, and so put people on their guard. For I am not half so good as Mr. Rich would paint me.

But no matter what I think about the book, it is having the most extraordinary reviews from the nation's really important critical writers. The New York World-Telegram, the New York Herald-Tribune, the Saturday Review of Literature, the Atlantic Monthly, to name but a few, all join in the praise of the book, praise of Mr. Rich's craftsmanship, of his intelligent handling of a mass of unrelated details that he has put into a coherent, understandable story. They say he has made the picture of a man.

Maybe I am not that man, but it is someone. Maybe the Rich hero and I are just a couple of other fellows.

Listen  
to this  
Record!



**SPEAK  
SPANISH  
FRENCH, GERMAN, OR ITALIAN  
AT ONCE**

"Learn by listening" to Cortina records, the NATURAL way—quickly, easily, cheaply.

**Sent on 5 Days' Approval**

Most fascinating, most satisfactory method ever known for learning or perfecting yourself in a foreign language. Investigate!

**Booklet FREE**

"The Cortinaphone Short-Cut"—tells just what you want to know. Interesting. Get it!

**Write Today—NOW**

CORTINA Academy (Language Specialists for 50 Yrs.)  
Suite 839, 105 West 40th St., New York City

Please send me—without obligation—your free booklet, I am interested in (mark):

☐ Spanish ☐ French ☐ Italian ☐ German

Name .....

Address .....



## Cook...

*BOOT-HEEL DOCTOR.* By Fannie Cook. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 1941. 268 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by RICHARD A. CORDELL

IT may be that this lively novel has an unfortunate title, for many readers are surfeited with memoir-like books about country doctors, preachers, lawyers, etc. But "Boot-heel Doctor" is not so much a book about a physician as a sociological novel dealing with the plight of the share-croppers in southeastern Missouri, which is close enough to the deep South to provide a color problem as well. Tobacco Road is a longer highway than many realize, and although Simon Legree no longer beats Uncle Tom to death, he callously steals the Negro's Triple A government checks and sentences a family to malnutrition—favorite American euphemism for "starvation." The small-town doctor is a sort of *râsonneur* by means of whom we are able to study the problems from the point of view of a humane native of average intelligence, rather than from the point of view of a trained social worker or a government expert.

The Missouri boot, "the sixth finger of the South," was an ordinary farming community until Southern cotton planters, pushing north to escape the boll weevil, brought with them the worst evils of tenant farming and share-cropping. Living conditions for the masses reached a shockingly low level (how many Europeans peasants live as meanly and squalidly as these folk?) until the savage flood of 1937 brought their misery to a climax that made relief compulsory. The book does not suggest a cure-all, but it ends with two gleams of hope: the general public is made aware of the problem, and the victims themselves are regaining some sense of human dignity.

"Boot-heel Doctor" is not a sociological tract but a moving story of human beings trapped in an economic system they do not understand and exploited by ruthless tricksters whom they are almost powerless to resist. Mrs. Cook has taken the melodrama of headlines of the great flood and of the sharecroppers' roadside sit-down strike and turned them into drama. She airs no economic creeds but keeps consistently to the human point of view. The grotesque humor of Caldwell and the harshness of Steinbeck are missing, but the novel is never soft or romantic. In the early part of the book the writing is self-conscious and studded with overvigorous figures of speech, but after a few pages it relaxes into a fresh and easy vernacular appropriate to character and scene.

## Williams...

*THE STRANGE WOMAN.* By Ben Ames Williams. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1941. 684 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by N. L. Rothman

MR. WILLIAMS'S latest book is one of his best, and that rates it as a very good story indeed. Generally, it spans fifty years of Maine history, from 1814 through the close of the Civil War, and the faithful minutiae of that period, which is woven so skillfully into the narrative, would be enough to make it attractive reading. But towering above the historic background is one dominant figure, the character with whom the book stands or falls. It stands triumphantly, for Jenny Hager is unforgettably portrayed, a woman whose strange character and devious fate Mr. Williams has plotted quite literally from the cradle to the grave. She is strong and willful and evil, and as beautiful and desirable as evil can sometimes be. It is possible that she may repel many as they read, for no fictional heroine, not Scarlett herself, has represented so remorseless a concentration of destructive force. Yet not entirely remorseless, for there are a few revelatory moments when the mask of beauty and deception falters, when she writhes at the mercy of her own demon. It is this crack in the perfect surface, briefly glimpsed though it be, which makes the characterization complete and credible.

So remarkable a figure needed to be revealed with a variety of color that the ordinary single narrative could hardly afford. Mr. Williams devised a method which seems, as we read, to be the natural and inevitable one. Jenny Hager entered and altered the lives of seven men (although the first only slightly), and Mr. Williams gives us his book as a series of seven histories. Into each comes Jenny, at different ages, seen at different levels of her growth and strength. There are natural overlappings and coincidences, like searchlights that meet at a spot in the sky, and the general effect is indeed of a comparable brilliance, one figure fixed in the glare of seven searching fingers of light.



# When bombs began to rain on "Our Town"...

It happened to be an English village—but it could have been any small town in the United States. For *THE OAKEN HEART* is a truthful story of what ordinary people must go through in total war. Margery Allingham's picture of "war in the small town" shows what amazing people the British really are; and this letter from an English publisher helps reveal why we believe her book is one you should not miss:

COPYHOLD FARM  
Curridge, nr. Newbury  
26th, July, 1941

Dear Mrs. Youngman Carter:

Bob Lusty has probably told you what I think of "The Oaken Heart" but the book has impressed me so much that I feel I must write to you about it and offer my congratulations.

Although I knew he was enthusiastic, I was—to tell the truth—rather dubious before I read the book: possibly because I have a sort of prejudice—hard to explain—against books about the war, especially books which deal with "the home front." Perhaps I expected something like "The Provincial Lady in Wartime"; or something hearty and cheerful like those absurd "Keep it Dark" Fougasse posters or worse still, something grim and pseudo-heroic and Kiplingish.

None of these things seems to me to get within a thousand miles of what people in this country are really doing and thinking. But your book really does go to the heart of things. No one could doubt, whether they read the book now or in years to come, that that is just how people did talk and behave in the anxious days before and since the war. And the book is so much more than a faithful record. I can't remember ever reading anything which crystallises so well the courage and good humour and common-sense of ordinary people.

As an interpretation of English character it will take some beating. If this war produces anything as good, let alone better, I shall be surprised. And I shall also be surprised if the book is not generally acclaimed the best thing the war has produced. I can't imagine not recognizing its quality and sincerity; except, as I told Lusty, the Germans. It would baffle them completely.

I heartily congratulate you on the book, and I am proud to be associated with its publication. Lusty will, I know, do everything possible to make the book an outstanding success. He is very excited about it and I hear from another of my staff that no book with the exception of "How Green Was My Valley" has had such a build-up in the office.

Yours sincerely,  
MICHAEL JOSEPH

Margery Allingham's  
**THE OAKEN  
HEART**

\$3.00 • DOUBLEDAY, DORAN