

The Dynamic Fragment

THE YEAR OF DECISION: 1846. By Bernard DeVoto. Boston: Little, Brown & Company. 1943. 538 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by PAUL I. WELLMAN

IT has pleased Mr. DeVoto to call his book "The Year of Decision: 1846." Perhaps it is as good a title as he could have selected. Perhaps it is even as full a title as might have been conjectured.

But certainly, although as the author manifestly intended, the year 1846 stands forth as the "central character," so to speak, of his drama, the scope of this magnificent volume far transcends any mere record of a year of history—significant as that year may be.

Mr. DeVoto is more than a historian. As he says, this phase of our history has been broken up into parts by the historians, and studied. And not put together. His contribution, modestly put, is in making clear the national orientation of these scattered pieces.

To do this he has with remarkable success recreated an era, a national frame of mind, a racial stage in culture, one of those great turning points in history where decisions are made—not so much by will or logic, but as if they were born involuntarily of the pregnant hour when instincts and events combine even more inexorably than ideas to produce inevitable outcomes.

Reading this book you cannot fail to gain a new conception of America as it was in the Forties—and through that conception, of America as it has been since, is now, and forever shall be.

DeVoto writes his history in the terms of social forces, world and continental backgrounds, the yeasty urge of races, and above all in the terms of people, both groups and individuals. Continually he weaves and counterweaves the threads of destinies of persons in his brilliant pattern. For example there were in Sangamon County, Illinois, three men who had been messmates in the Blackhawk war. One was a surveyor named Jim Clyman. The second was a farmer named James Frazier Reed. The third was a lawyer named A. Lincoln, preparing to run for Congress. They depart their various ways—Clyman to become a Mountain Man, Reed to have an indescribably macabre adventure as a member of the Donner Party, and Lincoln on his road to the White House and martyrdom. But their trails continuously interlace in the narrative.

This is but an example of a remark-

able achievement in the handling and bringing to the ordered attention of the readers a plethora of dramatis personae.

"The Year of Decision" opens with the United States at crisis—faced with possibility of war with both Mexico and England, while at the same time driven by expansionist fever to extend over into the territories to the West in spite of every threat and danger. James K. Polk is the president—single-minded and fanatical in the purpose of acquiring that West.

"Manifest Destiny"—the cosmic phrase coined by the Democratic editor John L. O'Sullivan—is the watchword of the era. The phrase becomes a battle flag. Under it Polk jockeys Britain into unwilling relinquishment of the Oregon Territory, and sets up the events which lead inevitably to war with Mexico.

Even before that war begins, however, the flood of emigration has burst its dam and is in spate. Toward Oregon and California surge the long caravans of white-topped wagons. The Mormons begin their heart-breaking hegira to the desert for the sake of peace, and the Donners start across the country to their horrible rendezvous with cannibalism in the Sierra passes. A young man named Francis Parkman is out in the Wyoming plains with the Sioux Indians, getting material for his epochal histories of the French and Indian wars—and missing the great significance of the movement he is witnessing because of his Boston snobbery.

Down by the Rio Grande, Mexicans finally attack Zachary Taylor's cavalry and the war is on. Taylor marches and fights, Kearny drives toward New Mexico and California, Doniphan makes his impossible anabasis to Chihuahua, Fremont stages his opera bouffe "Bear Flag Revolt" in California, and from the port of Vera Cruz Winfield Scott, in spite of politics and inefficiency at Washington and elsewhere, fights and wins the main phase of the war which settles the question of the possession of a third of the present United States territory.

Out of all this Mr. DeVoto has provided his readers with an inescapable impression of vast, cosmic movement. The American race is fermenting, stirring, boiling over. Its emigration seems as blind almost as the inexplicable flight of the lemmings which run down in their thousands to drown in the seas. Fortunately the Americans had the West to go to, and they went. In almost that one year of 1846—although Mr. DeVoto takes us on for a



—From a section of the mural by Ward Lockwood

way into 1847 also—they wrought many and great changes. The continent was occupied, the danger of foreign invasion was ended, the decisive issue of slavery was brought to the fore in such manner that the Civil War was an inevitable sequel.

In avoiding the pitfalls of confusion and irrelevancy which such a mammoth subject presents, Mr. DeVoto has been singularly successful. He keeps his narrative chronological, and that narrative is frequently filled with great moments. To this reader the chapters on the Mormon migration, the Donner tragedy, and the march of Doniphan's stark Missourians are the highlights of the book. But that is a matter of opinion.

Perhaps, after all, the finest achievements are Mr. DeVoto's portraits of people in his drama. President Polk, the single-minded fanatic of expansionism; Thomas Hart Benton, the prophet of the West's future; Francis Parkman, who missed his greatest historian's opportunity; John Charles Fremont, the flamboyant poseur; Jim Clyman, the stark mountain man; Zachary Taylor, fighting his war with an eye on the presidency; Brigham Young, taking the desperate gamble on which he risked the lives of all his people, in order to bring them peace in the desert—these and scores of others come to life on DeVoto's pages.

"The Year of Decision: 1846," is Bernard DeVoto's best book to date. And that makes it good enough to become a part of the permanent literature of the nation, and perhaps to mark an apogee in an historical method frequently tried but rarely with such effectiveness as this.

Paul I. Wellman is editorial writer on the Kansas City Star. His most recent book is "Angel with Spurs."

A Harvest of Wisdom

ART AND FREEDOM. By Horace M. Kallen. New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce. 1942. Two vols. 1006 pp., with index. \$6.50.

Reviewed by ROBERT BIERSTEDT

IT is sometimes fortunate that our language does contain adjectives of superlative degree. For once in a while a book comes along which deserves them. The present study by Horace Kallen, professor of philosophy at the New School for Social Research, is such a book. Having labored on it during the entire period between the two wars, he now gives us the harvest of his ripe wisdom in what is beyond any reasonable doubt the best book of its kind ever published.

The thousand pages in these two volumes detail what the author calls in his sub-title "a historical and biographical interpretation of the relations between the ideas of beauty, use, and freedom in Western civilization from the Greeks to the present day." The book succeeds in doing all of that and also, in a sense, in doing for art what Andrew D. White did for science more than a generation ago. For Mr. Kallen has discussed the warfare between art and authority in terms of a historical quest for the meaning of beauty. He firmly believes and amply demonstrates that of all human enterprises art can most effectively challenge totalitarian authority and totalitarian values, whether they be political or ecclesiastical. This art can do with laughter as well as with passion.

While Mr. Kallen's manner is interpretative and his interest philosophical, his method is historical. Beginning with Plato and Aristotle he discusses in turn all the figures in our tradition who have had anything to say about art, including the classical Roman writers, the neo-Platonists, the patristics, the scholastics, the men of the Renaissance, and the men of the eighteenth century, on up to the birth of a separate discipline called esthetics in the era of the industrial revolution. In the nineteenth century the treatment properly becomes more detailed, and the next four books deal first with the marriage of beauty to freedom in romanticism, the role of art in the workingman's struggles for liberty a little later in the century, the period which focusses upon the hegemony of Ruskin in the art world of Europe and which ends with the *reductio ad absurdum* of Oscar Wilde, and then the impact of the Darwinian insight upon the arts. In the following books the story continues with newer influences, scientific psychology and the new studies of motion which the elec-

trically-controlled camera made possible. In the succeeding book, the cinema, cubism, and the mathematical logic of Bertrand Russell are shown to have artistic elements in common. Enter next psychoanalysis and Freudian psychology, the disillusionment of the post-war period, and the "swing" manifestation of surrealism. The pe-



Horace M. Kallen

multimate book turns political and discusses the relation of art to totalitarian theories and practices, notably in Russia, Germany, and Italy, and also its relation to a free society in the days of the Great Depression when federal theaters, federal symphonies, and federal writers' projects injected new vigor into the artistic life of the people. In this connection there is special praise for the first head of a state to declare the liberty of the artist in a public pronouncement.

Although these pages are filled with the names of philosophers and artists, it would be false to label the book either a history of philosophy or a history of art. It is both, and neither. It is a history of the philosophy of art, but not even that in a traditional sense. It might most appropriately be called a history of ideas, particularly of the ideas of beauty, use, and freedom. With the "stereotypy of the philosophic cults" and with that rather barren sort of philosophy which goes by the name of esthetics, Mr. Kallen has little or nothing to do. He is much more interested in what art means to men than in what it means to philosophers, although all of the traditional esthetic theories are given their just treatment. He concludes his study with a "metaphysical reprise," a summing up which is the most thoughtful essay

on the philosophy of art and the esthetic experience yet to distinguish the intellectual history of our own century. It is a pragmatic account of the nature of art, a strong defense of the "*de gustibus non disputandum est*" maxim and of Montaigne's "*Chacun à son gout*," and a clearly reasoned promulgation of the author's own conviction that the true nature of beauty must be found in the category of relations and not in the category of things. Whatever powers there be that liberate the human spirit, whether they be powers of pattern and order or of disorder and confusion, beauty is the relationship between those powers and ourselves. The fact that beauty finds its meaning in a relationship of use makes of it a pragmatic theory, and one so cleanly articulated and so well developed that its author's name must be added to the list of the great American pragmatists.

But more than this, the book in its entirety is a defense of the fundamental and inalienable right of men to be different from one another while living with one another. The artist has a role to play in the enterprise of freedom, for the artist who is true to his being must of necessity be free. The book is thus a defense of the freedom of art, of individualism in art, and of the personal use of art, and an attack, powerful in its erudition, upon all values imposed from without. Let no artist lie on Procrustean beds, especially those manufactured by politicians and priests. When he does so he renounces his artistic heritage.

"Art and Freedom" is a tremendously learned book, but Mr. Kallen wears his learning lightly, and no academic dust disfigures the countenance of his pages nor afflicts the nostrils of his reader. There are a few footnotes, but they are hidden away at the end of the second volume. "Art and Freedom" is in no sense a reference book, but a book to read, to enjoy, and to study. In sum it may be called an intellectual history with special relevance to the arts and to the artistic enterprise. With the history of Western civilization as his text, Mr. Kallen has this above all to teach, that beauty is a relation whose consequence is use and whose consummation is freedom. Brilliantly conceived and beautifully written, profound as well as humane, it is a classic book, an altogether excellent book.

Award Winner

Dodd, Mead & Company announce the award of their thousand dollar war novel prize to John Lodwick for his story of the battle of France being published under the title of "Running to Paradise." Lodwick was the only Englishman to fight with the French from the beginning of the Battle of France.