

Double Experiment

SWEET BEULAH LAND. By Bernice Kelly Harris. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company. 1943. 390 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by JONATHAN DANIELS

AS anyone who has ever heard a country Sunday singing from the church in the well-swept and hard-packed clearing beside the road must know, Sweet Beulah Land is heaven. It may mean Israel in the dictionaries but it is an Israel drawn in memories of ancient homesickness for a better land. And the singing out of such country church windows across the parked Fords and the cheap tombstones is no more native, no more honest and heartening than this novel of American country people by Bernice Kelly Harris.

The particular part of America in which Mrs. Harris places her story is the South but it seemed to me a story of land and people which would be in most respects true of every part of this continent. Certainly it is brilliantly true of the South, a truth born of an almost miraculous eye and ear for detail and a skill with words which matches Mrs. Harris's understanding of her people. As the South of this book happens to be my particular part of the South, I may be prejudiced in my pleasure over Mrs. Harris's picture of it. But as it happens to be my South I can also testify to the good reality of that picture.

Essentially the book is the story of Lan Holt, the wanderer, of Bit, the unwanted child of red-haired Sophie, and of Alicia Donning who was left behind in the inhibited uncertainty of her aristocracy. Actually, however, "Sweet Beulah Land" is the picture of the living of all of the people on "the Neck," black and white, weak and bad and kind, mean landlord and mean tenants, the lonely and the lost, aristocrats captured in a variety of inherited prisons and the numerous poor caught in old poverty.

There are few single-sided characters in this book. In the same people pettiness and dignity, the comic and the tragic meet in full humanness. They know both laughter and grimness, as well as hard going and good time. Perhaps Mrs. Harris slips occasionally with her aristocrats. Their own sentimentality about themselves marks her treatment of them. But when she creates such a figure as old Miss Partheny, it is such a character in our times as we hope the American pioneer woman was.

Obviously this is no war book. It is not designed to be current but it comes straight into these days, nevertheless.

and with a heartening conviction of the good strength of the simple people of America at a time when America needs their strength. The war does not enter the book's pages but one tenant's son is off in Hawaii with the Navy and must have been one of those there waiting for Pearl Harbor. At least one of the super-numerous progeny of the Lee's—the one who long

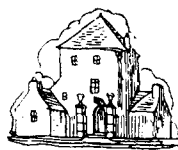
ago survived pneumonia at Christmas-time—flies in a blue plane over "the Neck." The story is that of his people below him—people often tough-treated by life but indestructible in it. And if their land is not a heaven worth raising hymn-singing about, it is, nevertheless, a country which stirs our confidence and does not merely deserve our concern.

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Religious Books in Wartime

Reading Today Reflects the Preoccupations of People

GEORGE N. SHUSTER

A FIGHTING man, Col. W. F. Kernan, furnished the text¹ for this brief commentary on religious books in wartime: "As we advance the colors against the New Paganism, let us repeat the creed of the ancient Christendom." Confident words these, which are echoed with deep sincerity in the fox-holes of the South Pacific, in the African desert, and even (so rumor would have it) in the trenches which not so long ago defended Stalingrad. They seem, indeed, to rise from the depths of the sorely troubled modern spirit. In Hitler's Germany itself the Bible has been more popular during recent years than "Mein Kampf." Some of the finest modern versions of the sacred texts have been published there since 1933, despite official hostility to both Testaments. Nor was Mr. Churchill serving the interests of rhetoric merely when, in commenting upon the discernible outlines of future society, he spoke of the reverence in which Englishmen have held the Christian faith. Finally, when the record of fearful persecution can eventually be written, there will be much to tell of the faith and fortitude of the Jew. Already we have one remarkable book—"The World of Sholom Aleichem," by Maurice Samuel, an extraordinary revelation of spiritual riches hitherto buried for most of us in the Yiddish tongue².

Not infrequently the worriers declare that their fellow-men are insufficiently awake to the challenge of this war. If one hearkened to them, stiff draughts of patriotic exhortation would be washed down with buckets of propaganda analysis. But you have only to step into a New York church to find out that the citizen is by no means asleep. What are these crowds desperately praying for if not for the privilege of realizing the import of Dante's unforgettable sentence, "In His will there is our peace"? You may be sure that every last man or woman among them is heart-sick and proud alike about some boy or girl in uniform; and that is considerably more important than a dozen more naughty

words about Hitler. It is only natural that their reading should reflect their preoccupations. The fairly surprising popularity which has come to certain religious novels—"The Robe," "The Song of Bernadette," "The Keys of the Kingdom," "The Nazarene"—testifies to the realism of the American outlook. Not all these books are first-rate. I shall agree that there is something factitious about Mr. Cronin's best-seller, and something unnecessarily fictitious about Mr. Douglas's historical imagination. But a public eager to read such books is a public concerned with the basic values which are at stake in this war. And in addition it is a public resolved "to put on the armor against danger, which is fearlessness," if I may quote John Erskine³.

IT is a public, above all, which is tired of being fooled. It knows that while forty times as many bathtubs as we now possess would add measurably to the sources of pride in many domestic establishments and still more to the triumphs of hygiene, they would contribute nothing towards cleansing the mind of man. And to the accumulated festering dirt in that mind we owe the grim disease of this conflict. Hitler is the product of a code of ethics, not the result of a column of figures. Our tragedy, "with its unlimited destructiveness and its utter disregard of legal and moral restrictions, is only the external symptom of the disease from which not only Germany and not only Europe but the whole world is suffering."⁴ I find these words

3. *THE COMPLETE LIFE*. By John Erskine. New York: Julian Messner. April 20, 1943. 350 pp., and index. \$3.

4. *THE JUDGMENT OF THE NATIONS*. By Christopher Dawson. New York: Sheed and Ward. 1942. 222 pp. \$2.50.



in Christopher Dawson, an excellent Catholic writer, but they could be quoted from Protestant or Jewish sources equally well.

Yet, though these things are true, it is a noteworthy fact that genuine contemporary religious thought does not seek to flay a patient already bruised to the bone and faint unto the point of death. Christ comes now as He once came to the leper and the woman of sin. The prophet's voice is choked with sorrow, but there is in it the luminous hope of Isaiah. A number of anthologies—the list is headed by Dr. E. Stanley Jones's "Abundant Living"⁵—are rich in the comfort and fervor of the Christian tradition. There is no other book in all the world from which so much inner healing has come as from Thomas A. Kempis's "Imitation of Christ"; and Father Edward Klein's edition of a glorious old English version of the text seems to me the best religious treasure of many years⁶. Of course, one may also try to bring the regenerating energies of faith to bear on harassed and disconsolate individuals. It may be that Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick's "On Being a Real Person"⁷ is a treatise on ethical pathology rather than an addition to theological discussion, but it does show us a devoted minister of the Gospel hard at work to help bring about the meaningful transfiguration of trouble into victory.

The social teaching of religion is likewise being clarified by the insight which comes through suffering. Some years ago, the bitter appraisal of modern civilization by such writers as Eric Gill⁸ and Alfred Noyes⁹ reflected the widespread apocalyptic mood which ushered in Nazism and the war. Perhaps it is not injudicious to say that one finds now a new and finer quality—an attitude blended of repentance and humility, of courage and hopeful resolution, which one can only wish to

5. *ABUNDANT LIVING*. By E. Stanley Jones. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press. 1943. 371 pp. \$1.

6. *IMITATION OF CHRIST*. Edited by Edward J. Klein. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1942. 267 pp. \$3.

7. *ON BEING A REAL PERSON*. By Harry Emerson Fosdick. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1943. 295 pp. \$2.50.

8. *AUTOBIOGRAPHY*. By Eric Gill. New York: Devin-Adair. 1941. 318 pp., plus 32 pp. illustrations. \$3.50.

9. *THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS*. By Alfred Noyes. New York: E. P. Dutton. 1942. 172 pp. \$2.

1. *WE CAN WIN THIS WAR*. By W. F. Kernan. Boston: Little, Brown & Company. 1943. 176 pp. \$1.50.

2. *THE WORLD OF SHOLOM ALEICHEM*. By Maurice Samuel. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1943. 331 pp. \$3.