

# Crisscrossing French Landscape

**HOME IS THE HUNTER.** By Gontran de Poncins. Translated by Haakon Chevalier. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock. 1943. 271 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ROBERT PICK

**R**EADERS of "Kabloona" still remember the strange beauty of Gontran de Poncins's first volume. Outwardly but the sober report of an amateur ethnologist on his travels among Eskimos, that book on every single page gained in breadth and stature. An uncanny understanding of an exotic way of life had met with truly poetical qualities.

These elements are present again in his new offering—which, in a metaphorical sense, leads the reader again among people of an exotic stock. For the author's portrait of patriarchal French country life, while bearing the marks of sincerity and utter insight, will appear highly alien to even those foreign tourists who have widely crisscrossed France's landscape. Again, as in "Kabloona," M. de Poncins achieves his results without any psychological contrivances or artifices.

His book has no plot. It is all about the return of Jean Ménadiéu, a retired domestic, to the aristocratic family he has served for forty years—the same way as that land-owning family itself for centuries has felt the obligation to serve its possessions. The threatening disintegration of the milieu forms the background, or rather the counterpoint, of the narrative. The author passes not the shadow of a critical judgment upon the handful of his characters. He accepts their inherited traits and their personal demeanor as the old servant accepts the peculiarities of his masters. And like Jean Ménadiéu he accepts them with love.

A slight change in the spelling of that protagonist's name, however, suggests something beyond a mere bucolic genre picture: Ménadiéu . . . mène a dieu . . . leads to God. And the unusual dedication of the book leaves no doubt that humility forms the core of its author's philosophy—humility vis-à-vis the phenomenon of man, humble acceptance of, and stubborn perseverance upon, one's allotted place on earth. *Service* is the key word throughout the story. From the human angle, the old lackey is as touching a figure as any aged house slave in a Southern nineteenth century romance, and due to his creator's gifts creditable *ad unguem*; and if the reader permits himself to be carried away by the idyll—as he is pretty sure to be—neither the austere feudalism of the lord of the manor nor the pride of his tenant farmers to be his, are any-

thing like repulsive. But all this cannot gloss over the fact that these are medieval concepts, and whatever their individual charm, come perilously close to the homely slogans which, alas, so well succeeded in making social and political reaction palatable to certain Continental classes.

Now M. de Poncins's philosophy of serving is miles apart from Charles Maurras's dangerous formula of the "France of my clan, my family, my friends" as the only valid concept of his country. But yet there remains the question whether the author was altogether fortunate in his decision to reveal France in her most parochial, even if in one of her most spiritual, aspects.

Writing as an exile—and as a French exile at that—he is working under the impact of nostalgia, and nostalgia is bound to center around the most intimate images of the longed-for land. And of the element of time nostalgia knows nothing. Perhaps if M. de Poncins insisted less than he does on con-



Gontran de Poncins

veying a moral message by means of a society whose lasting value is controversial, the reader would more greatly enjoy his well-nigh magic talent of presentation. In any case he will, after this new volume, look forward to the future development of a highly remarkable writer.

## The Return to the Soil

**THE OUTSIDE LEAF.** By Ben Field. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock. 1943. 237 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by N. L. ROTHMAN

**T**HIS is an American novel wound hard and tight about its central theme: a passion for the land and its produce; and the chief protagonist is a Jewish tobacco farmer. A new twist, we feel at first, a new character playing one of our standard natives roles. Is it bad casting? That depends on how thoroughly sold we are on one of the many misconceptions of the Jew, as a congenial child of the city, a buyer and seller, a soft-handed keeper of books, and on how thoroughly we have forgotten his historic beginnings, before he had to assume so many successive roles. The Jew, says Ben Field, can be again the devoted husband of the soil, and can regain from it as from nothing else his old strength and integrity. For example we have Moe Miller, who works his Connecticut tobacco farm almost single-handed with Yankee stubbornness and Bunyanish feats of energy. He is huge of body, laconic of word, fierce-spirited, jealous of everything that might keep him from reaping the fruits of his land. The war interferes; he'll attend to that too but first the tobacco crop. There is no help; he does the work of three men. And final hurdle is the troubling Irish

girl, Mary Foley, who works for him, whose beauty divides him till he must solve it the only way he can, take her and the land together.

Moe is a hugely conceived figure, far out of the beaten path of the Jew in fiction. His strength proceeds out of the land; when he is thinking or speaking of it, or working on it, all the natural powers of man are unlocked in him, and he strides upon it like a hero. He never speaks poetry but he acts it out. Field knows and loves tobacco farming, and writes of it as an old, intricate, and beloved science. As a minor strain, calculated to twine melodiously about the dominant motif of Moe, Field gives us a couple of beautiful portraits of Moe's parents, Israel and Esther Miller. These are the minor-key Jews we know, sweet, desperate, and melancholy. Their history sings in their words, composed all of love for their son and fear of what he does. Mary Foley is a clear, wild bugle-note that seems to herald, for them, unspeakable disaster. It is for Moe to resolve all these things, as he does always in terms of his one preoccupation—the farm, the tractor, the beautiful, yellow, outside leaf. Field has written this out with such vigor and unity of effect and beauty that his book seems one of the best novels of the season.

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# A London Report

## *The English Still Know How To Take It*

HENRY C. WOLFE

**T**HE Luftwaffe is still raiding London. There was a raid every night during my final week there. Not big raids, of course. Veterans of the 1940-41 Blitz are not impressed by "what old Jerry" can do now. These night attacks are brief affairs, usually staged by small groups of from six to fifteen planes. For this purpose Goering is using fighter-bombers, machines that can come in fast, drop their cargo, and streak away, with a chance to outrun the RAF night-fighters. They seem to be mostly ME-410's.

In these hit-and-run forays the Nazis make little, if any, effort to aim at special targets. They do little damage of a military nature. But they usually hit something, often an apartment or a tenement house. And they nearly always leave destruction and death in their wake.

Londoners speak of this type of air raid as a "Goebbels." The Reich's propaganda minister, it is assumed, insists that for the record he has to tell the blitzed Germans that the British are being hit too. So Goering sends a few planes over Britain for the propaganda effect inside Germany.

Though these 1943 raids are a far cry from the historic attacks of 1940 and 1941, they make an exciting show for newcomers. Searchlights criss-crossing over the sky, the bursting flak, the destruction of some of the raiders—against London's incredible blackout these are a thrilling sight. But it's a pretty grim performance for people who have been through years of it.

An air raid is usually a tragedy for somebody. Some building comes out of it rubble. More often than not it is a humble home. Pathetic crushed bodies are dug out of the wreckage. During my stay in London people were talking about Edith Durant. A bomb got her little house. Her husband, her nine-months-old baby, her parents, her brother, and her husband's sister were killed instantly. Of all the household Edith alone survived. It took the heavy rescue squads thirteen and a half hours to dig her out. All night long this brave young woman, her legs crushed, her face heaped with plaster and dust, kept up her spirits. She called words of encouragement to her rescuers: "I'm all right. . . . Don't you worry about me. . . . I've been through it before. . . . I'll make you a good

cup of tea when I get out of here." Edith Durant symbolized the unblitzable spirit of London's little people.

Every night there are Londoners sleeping in the underground stations. Some of them suffer from "Blitz nerves," others prefer to sleep there because they will not be disturbed by sirens, flak, or bombs. And even though they tell you today's small raids are a welcome change from the fire and horror of the Blitz, they all know they are living close to the war front. It is only eighty-five miles from the Nazi-held French coast to London. In a matter of minutes a fighter-bomber can cover this distance.

The proximity of constant danger, the depressing effects of the blackout, and the crowded conditions of a war-time capital—old London lives through it all for just one moment. That is the moment of Prime Minister Churchill's first post-war order, "Lights on!"

If you go to London you may not be too much shocked at first by the changes, physical and otherwise, that you will find. You will not find a city in ruins. You can walk from Piccadilly to Oxford Circus without seeing a building that shows marks of the Blitz. Or from Trafalgar Square down Whitehall to the Houses of Parliament

and hardly come across a reminder that the Luftwaffe has been over London. In Trafalgar Square itself there are not many signs of Goering's aerial frightfulness. True, one of the fine old lions at the base of Nelson's monument had a right foreleg blown off. But St. Martins-in-the-Fields, overlooking Trafalgar, stands serenely, with only minor damage to its basement.

If you want to see factual evidence of what the Blitz has done to British cultural shrines, no better medium could be used than "The Bombed Buildings of Britain."\* Graphic pictures and text make this an outstanding pictorial record of what Britain endured during the days of the Luftwaffe's power. Some of these wrecked structures can be restored; others are gone forever. And still others will carry their marks of Nazi fury and destruction for all time. In coming years another generation, contemplating these pictures, may well ask: "How did the British ever live through such concentrated devastation?"

**T**HE newly arrived visitor to England may conclude that the country has not suffered much from the air raids. This is especially true if he came expecting to find London half destroyed. As his ancient taxi threads its way through left-drive traffic, he may see only an occasional wrecked building. He probably does not realize that some of the empty structures he sees are little better than the ruins that appall him. They are nothing bet-

\*THE BOMBED BUILDINGS OF BRITAIN. Edited by J. M. Richards. New York: Oxford University Press. 1943. 140 pp. \$4.50.



—From "The Bombed Buildings of Britain."

**Book browsing after a blitz. Londoners make their usual rounds of the library at Holland House.**