

# Caliban or Samson?



—From the book

**LABOR BARON, A Portrait of John L. Lewis.** By James A. Wechsler. New York: William Morrow & Co. 1944. 278 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by McALISTER COLEMAN

**T**HE labor reporter for the newspaper *PM*, which prides itself on its liberalism and its sympathies with organized labor, here gives us a rather bewildering portrait of the President of the United Mine Workers of America and the founder of the C.I.O. Though John Llewellyn Lewis is by no means an uncomplicated character, one wonders if the mine workers' head can be quite as complex a personality as Mr. Wechsler makes him. In the opening chapters of the book Lewis is pure Caliban. In fact, one chapter is headed "Blind Giant," which was to be the original title of the book. Then he is Stentor, calling out across the industrial wastelands to bring four million working people under his standards. Again he is Machiavelli, with a dash of Attila the Hun thrown in. Finally he is Samson, sitting in solitude among the ruins he has builded. Rarely in this quick-marching, eminently readable book is he the outstanding labor leader of our times who has gone through hell and high water to get for his rank and file those pieces of paper which are the reasons for being of every union official—the union contracts signed on the dotted lines by both parties to the agreements.

"There was no paucity of theories, speculations, post-mortems," writes Wechsler discussing the strikes in the captive mines of the steel companies on the eve of Pearl Harbor. Certainly

there is a richness of theories, speculations, and post-mortems, together with the sort of dream-stuff that fills the pages of *PM* in this "portrait." The author has caught from Washington commentators and the more intimate of our columnists the irritating habit of writing about Lewis as though he (Wechsler) had miraculously ensconced himself behind the shaggy eyebrows and were making notes of what went on back there. So that the reader wonders whether Mr. Lewis really did have in mind the sinister idea of making a negotiated peace with the Nazis in 1939, glimpsing "a favorable refuge for himself in the New World Order sweeping Europe," as Wechsler charges, or whether the note-taker, in his interventionist zeal, might not have misread his shorthand.

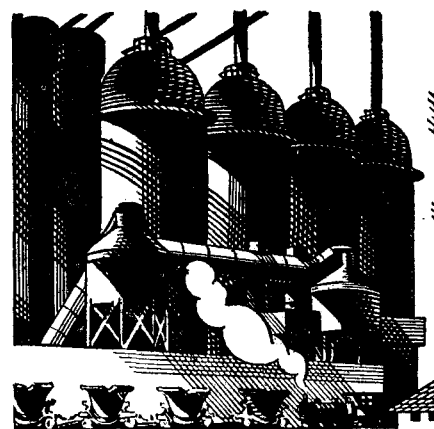
Far too great a section of the book is devoted to Mr. Lewis's attitude towards the war. Lewis, of course, was opposed to our intervention as were the vast majority of his miners, and for that matter, the majority of Americans, workers and others, but after Pearl Harbor, he came along, and his organization has given a good account of itself in the numbers of miners in service, in buying war bonds, etc., and most especially in production, this in spite of the four wartime strikes in the summer of 1943. However, having used the word "sinister" in respect to Mr. Lewis's earlier attitude, Wechsler apparently feels obliged to continue in this conspiratorial vein, so that he ranges Mr. Lewis, as did his "liberal" paper, on the side of dictatorial darkness against the democratic forces of sweetness and light in the Administration. Little by little, the impression is built up that it was the inept and fumbling Philip Murray, present head of the C.I.O., who was rallying labor on the production front, while moving darkly in the background, Lewis and the ineffable William L. Hutcheson, president of the carpenters' union, were plotting unnamed but undoubtedly sinister skulduggeries. All this makes exciting reading of the sort that *PM* customers devour, but it doesn't make much sense.

Mr. Wechsler is at his brilliant best when he takes us with him into the mine fields and out of the murky air of trade union politics. He was in and out of the miners' shacks in Pennsylvania when the wartime strikes started on May 1, 1943, and he gives us a sense of the "safety and confidence" which Lewis imparted to his rank and file in those tense days. A sense, too, of the age-old feeling of being apart, isolated from the main streams of American life, left on the cinder patches to

be forgotten, which is in the make-up of the American coal-diggers. For them the union is the only visible shield against a world of hostile forces, and quite rightly Wechsler writes: "It was not, for them, a matter of loyalty to Lewis. It was an issue of loyalty to the union they had so proudly made." So an incredulous nation had the breathtaking sight of a half million men acting in disciplined unity under the leadership of one man who has been excoriated in such terms as have rarely been applied to any other man in public life. The author, despite his obvious animus against his subject, is fair enough to admit that there must be something more to a man who can retain leadership of such an organization than a fondness for dark, nocturnal prowlings.

James Wechsler has long since won his spurs in the small company of writing persons who can make what is vaguely called "the labor movement" come alive for the average reader. When he recalls the fact that every trade union official, Lewis included, is measured not by essentially middle-class "public opinion" but rather by his daily performance in relation to the "good and welfare" of the membership of his organization, he is on solid ground. When he indulges in such fantastic interpretations of motives and moves as mar many pages of this book, he is in as full flight from reality as is Westbrook Pegler, on the other side of the fence. Despite all his probings, Mr. Wechsler has not told us with any certainty what makes John L. Lewis tick. All he can say is that the miners' chief is powerful, power-loving, and unpredictable. Which is not exactly news. It is this reviewer's opinion that if Mr. Wechsler had spent more time in the coal camps where the din of union politics is but vaguely heard, and less time around the haunts of Washington correspondents who always think of labor in political terms, he might have painted a more faithful portrait.

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# Strictly Personal...

## DOROTHY THOMPSON: THE SOFT VOICE OF OMNISCIENCE

ODD this, for me to be writing a *Strictly Personal*, almost completely concerned with Dorothy Thompson. "*Strictly Personal*" is supposed to be concerned with things that one has been thinking about and that lie nearest one's heart. Miss Thompson has never been one of my idols and I seldom think about her at all. I have certainly never before thought of philosophy and Dorothy Thompson in the same breath. But since she has brashly intruded herself on the subject, for once I am compelled to think of Dorothy Thompson and philosophy together. The juxtaposition has all the charm of the exotic and all the humor of the incongruous.

I should, I suppose, feel flattered to have Miss Thompson devote a page and a half of *The Saturday Review* to a castigation of my little review elsewhere of a little book by Croce, a review, which of all the reviews Miss Thompson read arrested her by its egregious wrongness and the fact that its author as a professor of philosophy should have known better. Miss Thompson's writings are usually (which is daily) world saving pronouncements on world shaking events, so to have even the attention of her strictures is a compliment of no mean order.

I note in passing Miss Thompson's gibe that I am "a philosopher, at least a professor of philosophy." I have used that easy insult about colleagues of mine in the profession for years, and I put it in print on page 147 of "Philosopher's Holiday," published in 1938.

Now Miss Thompson is, if not a philosopher, at least a columnist. Almost no columnist, with the possible exception of Bennett Cerf, can resist taking on himself the mantle of a prophet. After all, if one writes millions of words addressed to millions of readers for thousands of days, it is very hard not to begin to take one's self as seriously as one takes the world. Nothing is alien to the meditations—or the hysterics of—a columnist. The whole universe becomes the empire of the mind of Westbrook Pegler or Walter Winchell or Walter Lippmann or Miss Thompson. Miss Thompson takes herself more seriously even than most columnists, more than Walter Lippmann or Major George Fielding Eliot. There is nothing she does not know and know bet-

ter than anyone else. A professor of philosophy—and I do not claim to be more—is supposed to know about philosophy, and I claim to do so. But Miss Thompson claims to know all things, including the entire history of philosophy.

It is rather touching, therefore, and doubtless a subject of self-congratulation, therefore, to be instructed in my chosen field by Miss Thompson. Her six or seven years long ago as a bright girl reporter in Germany and Austria doubtless automatically fitted her out as an expert on Kant and Hegel. One can see that she regards it as part of her duty to correct the professionals in philosophy, as on other days of the week she corrects the statesmen, the artists, the educators, and the farmers. The whole duty of a columnist is to correct in an hour at the typewriter the stupidities of those who have spent their lives in a given field. The columnist in our day is *ex officio* omniscient. It is doubtless very good for me, therefore, to have the benefit of Miss Thompson's helpful though excited ministrations in the instance of my review of the new Croce book.

Miss Thompson is full, as usual, of her crushing crusading. She is a large woman and I imagine she has pounded many typewriters to bits. As usual anyone with whom Miss Thompson disagrees, is not only wrong; he is disreputable. She heads her article, "A Still Small Voice Is Answered by a Loud Mediocrity." The Still Small Voice is Croce. The Loud Mediocrity is I. To be called loud by Miss Thompson is praise from Sir Hubert. To be



—Disraeli

Irwin Edman: "The class is dismissed..."

called a mediocrity by that widely syndicated lady perhaps belongs in the same category. There are two observations to be made on mediocrity in this connection. Banalties are sometimes syndicated to as much as two hundred newspapers, and Miss Thompson might in her virulent moods be described as the liberals' Westbrook Pegler. Secondly, if I am mediocre as a philosopher, I think (as I propose to show in an analysis of her article forthwith) that she would be incompetent to know it.

Miss Thompson ought perhaps out of poetic justice to be dealt with in her own mode of vivacious vituperation. It is an easy game to play as perhaps I have already shown in the preceding. But after all, Miss Thompson's fulminating presumes to teach the public and me a lesson in the history of philosophy and in "humanity and truth." Her points, noisily made, ought to be dealt with quietly, consecutively, relevantly, three virtues Miss Thompson seldom has bothered to display as a writer. I, therefore, at the risk of seeming professorial to Miss Thompson, will try to summarize and deal with such points as are discernible in the emotional lather into which she whipped herself two weeks ago in this department. Her burning words, perhaps, did not burn themselves indelibly into the minds of the reader. Let us begin then with

Point 1. Miss Thompson makes a good deal of the point that I said Croce was a Hegelian and that I used that phrase as a convenient pigeon hole. (She later says that the question is whether Hegel is true or not, not whether he is a German). Croce is a Hegelian in essential points. By essential points, I mean that the whole structure of his system, his identification of Being and Thought, his conception of a dialectical unfolding of Reason and History, are all traditional Hegelianism. "Very traditional," I repeat, though Miss Thompson "wrinkles" her fine breathing nose at the phrase. I nowhere denied that Croce had studied and absorbed other philosophers. I said that his philosophy was characteristically Hegelian in its outline and temper, and if Miss Thompson had "some familiarity with his work," instead of merely being impressed by his name (which even Communists know) she would see this to be so (if she can ever see things clearly). Two books that would help her are Croce's "Logica" and "Practica." Unfortunately, they are translated into bad English. But there is an admirable little book by one of Croce's disciples, R. Piccoli, written and published in English. It is a good simple guide to Croce and would be a

good elementary introduction for Miss Thompson who, admiring Croce (as I do), may eventually come to care to comprehend him.

2. Miss Thompson claims that Croce's main thesis in his little book is that there are no German ideas, and that there is no nationality in ideas. This is simply not so. Croce carefully notes that there are German ideas, some good and some bad, some of the bad ones a thousand years old. He carefully distinguishes German from Nazi ideas. He admires certain ideas that are historically (not racially) German and some, as he thinks, that transcend history.

It is Miss Thompson, not Croce, who thinks that ideas have no national origins and no national consequences. A columnist has to write so much she doubtless has little time to read, or to read with any care what she does read.

3. If Croce is more Kantian than Hegelian, as Miss Thompson alleges, I shall gladly (no, not really gladly) eat the collected works of both philosophers.

4. As to "pinning Germanism on Croce," it is Croce who calls the chief essay in his book, "Confessions of an Italian Germanophile."

5. Croce's ideas on Germany, says Miss Dorothy, differ from those of Lord Vansittart and Rex Stout and myself. But by elementary logic (which Miss Thompson transcends or has never met) that does not mean that the ideas of Rex Stout and Lord Vansittart and myself are identical. I published over a year ago in *The New Yorker*, a poem attacking Rex Stout and the Stork Club patrioteers quite as virulent as anything Miss Thompson does.

6. "Ideas," says Miss Thompson, "have a life transcendent to nations." True, and a truism. The classic clarity of Greek thought survives happily in our own day, though unhappily not in Miss Thompson. Does Miss Thompson believe there is any gain in talking such nonsense as that there is no Greek thought and never was any?

7. Miss Thompson triumphantly points out that German thinkers have influenced French ones and vice versa. By her quaint reasoning, therefore, it turns out that there are no French thinkers or German ones. German or French in the tradition and palteur of their thought.

8. Hegel must not be condemned, she says, because he is German. His ideas are true or false. Good enough. But I never did condemn him because he was German. I found fault with him because he was the Hegel that proclaimed the Absolute Movement of history with the Prussian state as its

apogee in time. I found fault with Croce because he condoned Hegel's central exaltation of the Prussian state in his philosophy and did not realize it has a crucial part of it.

9. Miss Thompson correctly points out French roots of Nazism, in Count Gobineau, for instance. She also says it comes from Darwin and his idea of the survival of the fittest. Has Miss Thompson read Darwin with care—or at all? Space grows short and I can only say summarily that Darwin's idea of fitness for survival in a given environment has about as much to do with the theory of a master race as Miss Thompson has to do with philosophy.

10. Miss Thompson thinks it odd that a philosopher should speak "our ideals." And how they differ from German ones. If there are no ideals in the democratic nations different from those of the Fascist ones, what is this war about and what has Miss Thompson been shouting about from platforms these many years? Presumably many Germans have disagreed with Western ideals of liberty and culture, of "humanity and truth." Croce suggests they have been disagreeing for

a thousand years (almost Lord Vansittart is Croce at this point).

11. It is not Kant's ideas on peace that have survived in the German Universities for a century and a half. It is his idea of the categorical imperative, an absolute in morals nicely adapted to absolutism in politics.

12. Finally, I never questioned Croce's zeal for "humanity and truth." I questioned his sentimentality over German culture and his uncritical attitude toward it. This seems to me as useless as ferocity toward it. I called him a high minded Germanophile, and I call Sis Thompson that, too, also a loud mouthed one.

I, too, wish governments would listen to philosophers, but critically. Philosophers, like columnists, can be sentimental, wrong, irrelevant, fanatic, pompous, arrogant and silly. Croce about Germany is the first of these three.

The class is dismissed, and Miss Thompson will please go to the foot of the class, beginning next meeting where she will remain the sovereign of the non-sequitur and the master of the irrelevant.

IRWIN EDMAN.

## The Live-and-Let-Lives

OUT ON A LIMBO. By Claire MacMurray. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co. 1944. 191 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by KATHARINE SIMONDS

"IT has always seemed to me that being a woman is lovely work if you can get it," says Claire MacMurray; and this slant, novel to the American housewife, gives warmth and wisdom and pleasantness to the collection of her random essays which have been appearing in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. She likes being a wife and the mother of three boys; she likes her friends and neighbors and the clerk in the corner store and the girl who curls her hair; but most of all she is contented with being a woman. For she recognizes that this status is not, as many think, the dreary condition at which females arrive when they can no longer pretend to be girls, but a positive and proud achievement.

Her book in consequence is filled



not with regret or coynesses but with a mature happiness enlivened by considerable humor and some wit. It deals with the live-and-let-lives of marriage, motherhood, friendship, and retail commerce; with what Frances Lester Warner calls "the unintentional charm of men," with the child's eye view of the world; even with the more venial sins of women, such as "moving heavy objects by proxy."

But what stirs Mrs. MacMurray most, and must stir all those of her readers who are similarly afflicted and blessed, is her feeling for the not quite small boy. She does not romanticize him; she shows him as rude, clumsy, contentious, of demonic energy, monstrous capacity, horrid ingenuity. There he is, in all his intransigence; and yet in the moments when he is not the devil in person he wrings her heart. For as she watches his furious concentration on learning how to live, the gallantry with which he applies a child's tools to a man's problems, she remembers to what uses are being put the application and gallantry of those who are very slightly his elders. It is hard not to be sentimental in wartime, even about twelve years olds!

Much nicer than its made-to-order title, Mrs. MacMurray's book is like a summer morning spent on the verandah in a small town, friendly, comfortable, and reassuring as one's favorite old clothes.