

Highway to the Old West

THE MISSOURI. By Stanley Vestal. Illustrated by Getlar Smith. (*Rivers of America Series.*) New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1945. 367 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ALLAN NEVINS

TERRITORIALY, Mr. Vestal has the largest assignment given to any author of the Rivers of America Series, now under the editorship of Hervey Allen. The Mississippi having been divided between two writers, his 2500-mile stream, important even before it flows east out of Montana, and draining with its tributaries ten or eleven states, sprawls over a greater domain than any other in the list—even the St. Lawrence. Historically, too, he has a theme of tremendous scope. The Missouri was the river of Lewis and Clark, of Manuel Lisa, General Ashley, and other organizers of the fur trade, of such noted travelers as George Catlin, Henry R. Schoolcraft, and Prince Maximilian, of a host of adventurous steamboat captains, of explorers like Jedediah Smith, Kit Carson, and Frémont, of doughty hunters and trappers like Hugh Glass, Jim Bridger, and John Colter; its waters were stained red by the warfare of freesoilers and border ruffians in the days of John Brown, and of Sioux and regulars in the time of Sitting Bull and Custer. The miners and vigilantes, the cattle-ranchers (including Theodore Roosevelt) and the rustlers, the buffalo-hunters and the *bois brûlés*, gave its upper reaches an abundance of adventurous episodes.

Nearly all the river books are romantic in spirit and impressionistic in method. Mr. Vestal's, no exception to the general rule, is at times pleasantly reminiscent of an old-fashioned diorama. We are moved slowly up-stream, the narrator halting at appropriate points to deliver his rapid lecture on the scenery, people, and history of the district—at Lexington and Sibley in central Missouri for a discourse on old steamboat days, and such disasters as the explosion which blew the *Saluda* and a hundred passengers to flinders; at Leavenworth for an account of the Mormon crossing; at Council Bluffs for a description of Lincoln's meeting with Granville M. Dodge, projector of the Union Pacific; just above Sioux City for a chapter on Sergeant Floyd, the only soldier under Lewis and Clark to die; and farther up, between Yankton and Fort Sully, for a description of the perils encountered by the old fur-traders from famine, smallpox, winter storms, and Indian ambushes. Thus the gossipy compound of scene-painting, folklore, narrow escapes by field and flood, and informal history

is continued until, far to the northwest, we reach Fort Benton, near where Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce fought their last heroic battle, and Helena, where the gulches were so rich in gold that a single shipment by wagon was valued at more than two million dollars. Mr. Vestal is wilfully vagrant in his wanderings through the West and through the nineteenth century; but by and large he does follow the muddy river from mouth to sources, and since settlement and history also proceeded upstream, he also follows a rough chronological course.

Though a 300-page volume on so important a river is necessarily superficial at many points, Mr. Vestal's sketch contains more new material—the fruit for the most part not of research in books and archives, but of

talks with old-timers and experts—than the casual reader might suppose. Some parts of the book are much too hastily done to be satisfactory. More precision and fuller detail would have improved the pages on steamboats, Mormons, exploration, and John Brown. The chapters on the Indians, however, have the author's familiar gusto and expertness on that topic, and the battle of Sitting Bull and General Sully at Kildeer Mountain inspires Mr. Vestal to a creditable burst of balladry. One fault of nearly all the river books (and indeed, of nearly all books of local or regional history) is that they leave the last fifty years untouched. Mr. Vestal is to be credited with an illuminating account of the sixty-million-dollar Fort Peck Dam, which the Missouri River States would like to make simply the opening project in a huge river-development scheme benefitting the huge area from Wyoming to Missouri and Iowa.

People Under the Occupation

STRANGERS SHOULD NOT WHISPER. By Jan-Albert Goris. New York: L. B. Fischer. 1945. 260 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by ROBERT PICK

AFTER "Belgium in Bondage" this new book by the Belgian Commissioner of Information in this country is rather disappointing. It is a collection of articles and editorials first published in *News from Belgium*, and some of them may have been both informative and effective as such. Put between covers, they make for not too satisfying a book.

Underground and resistance literature written outside occupied territory is bound to appear dated the very morning following liberation. However good the channels at an exile's disposal may be, and however competent a writer he may be himself, his stories can never hope to compete with reports of people who were on the spot. In the case of Belgium—and not in her case alone—there is an additional cause which deprives occupation stories of most of their value: the picture of a closely united populace under the impact of common misery burying all internal social dissensions, old and new, is unable to stand the test of recent news. And thus the reader soon comes to wonder how much of that discrepancy is due to lack of complete pre-liberation information, how much to the sincere patriotic policy of a propaganda official, and how much to wishful thinking.

All of which doesn't mean that some of M. Goris's resistance stories are not very readable. "Eleven Hundred Hon-

est Men," for instance, is as fine a piece of this kind of writing as ever has warmed the cockles of our hearts. It is the story of the Belgian notaries' guild (an age-old body of life-appointed dignitaries) which to the last man resisted the demand of the Germans to make "legal" their wholesale robbing of Jews, "enemy" aliens, and Belgian citizens beyond their reach.

This volume also contains a number of sketches of famous Belgians, apparently intended to form a, so to speak, spiritual portrayal of the country, but clearly suffering from over-popularization. Only the biography of Father Damien, the priest from Brabant who "laid down his life for his leper friends" on Molokai Island, stands out.

The best part of M. Goris's offering is furnished by his comments on American life and his thoughts on the exile's psychological situation in this country. His discovery of rural America (and its numerous similarities with Western European country and small-town life) has been shared by many an open-eyed newcomer. M. Goris can be humorous, witty, critical, and even caustic on matters American. Yet he never disposes lightly or with ennui of American optimism—that "hardy perennial" which puzzles and at times cannot help irritating the European-born in the spiritual landscape of this country.

No doubt, M. Goffin, though not a scholar of Mr. Brogan's rank, could write a fine study on the intensified interrelations of American and Continental thinking—which, after all, is one of the very few promising by-products of our present world disaster.

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If this seems to you surprising material for a novel, we can only say that the community Mr. Karig describes is as fascinating as an ant-hill. The adventures of the hero of this book will hold you bewitched. In fact, the mere achievement of so much mediocrity in one lifetime is an amazing feat.

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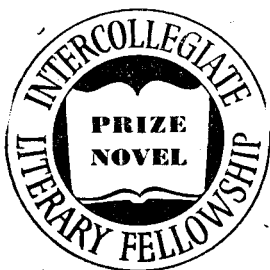
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DODD, MEAD & COMPANY
New York

The Fighting French in Africa

HALF PAST WHEN. By Hassoldt Davis. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co. 1944. 283 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by JOHN LATOUCHE

A REMARKABLE service is performed by Hassoldt Davis's latest book. Although its picturesque quality may at times disguise its pertinence, the story it tells has a direct bearing on present developments of the French attitude. Brazzaville seems far removed from the political convolutions of Paris at the moment, but in Africa were established many emotional currents now merging into the sometimes ambiguous policies of the De Gaulle government.

Mr. Davis has depicted the flowering of these emotions with a vivid candor that simplifies for the American reader a complex phase of the war. His account is authentic, because it is written from the inside. Originally, his intention had been to report on the French military activities, but he remained with their forces as an officer engaged in active duty.

The role of the Fighting French in the African campaign has not been given its proper interpretation by the harassed correspondents who have tried to assess the shifting values of that turbulent period: in "Half Past When" the balance is restored. Here is an informal history, unfolded with humanity and passion. The strange assortments of races, classes, and professions who rallied to the aid of France in her zero hour live in these pages with the ardor and humility which I have noticed among them during my stay in Equatorial Africa.

Mr. Davis manages to recreate setting as well as characters, which is no small task. The heat, the dust, the constant strains on the nervous system, the ever-present dangers of disease and violence, the primitive conditions—these form an atmosphere that is hard to communicate, but it comes through with all its sordid glory intact.

Portraits of the Army personnel are drawn with fidelity and a certain robust charm. They range from such well-known figures as Generals Le Clerc and Legentilhomme, Dick de Sales, and Commandant de Kersauson, to the tender sketches of Marianne Terre, of French Legionnaires, of the blind dog named Bill, of anonymous soldiers with white, black, brown, and yellow skins, who are united by a common instinct for liberty.

Living symbols emerge from the mass pattern. Especially moving are the paragraphs about the natives that arrived in Sierra Leone with the Lor-

raine Cross cut into the skin over their hearts. One of them was captured by Vichy soldiers, who mockingly cut the cross into the soles of his feet, so that he would be forced to trample on the emblem of his belief. And tramp he did, stumbling over jungle trails until he rejoined the fighting forces at Fort Lamy. This is only a small detail from the gallery of gallant men and women, but it remains with me, and is typical of the longer sections as well.

The book is at its weakest when Mr. Davis's athletic prose breaks training, and sidetracks into paeans about bottles of Scotch, celebrating the literary tough tradition that might be called the Hemingway of All Flesh; occasionally the tight-lipped, understated heroism becomes self-conscious, since many of the heroes I met there were extremely voluble and emotional about their adventures. But these are small objections in a work that says so much, with conviction and love. As a record of brave men who triumphed over appeasers at home, rebuffs from their Allies, and inadequate equipment, to reassert their national spirit, "Half Past When" is unique and fascinating.

Spirit of the Sea

MY LIFE TO THE DESTROYERS.
By Capt. L. A. Abercrombie and Fletcher Pratt. New York: Henry Holt. 1944. 157 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by ROGER SHAW

HERE is as good a little naval book as one is likely to find. The skipper-author sank the first Japanese submarine after Pearl Harbor, and has thrice won the Navy Cross for success and gallantry in action in the Pacific. His collaborator (if that word is still respectable) is the well-known naval expert and biography man, Fletcher Pratt, who catches the spirit of the sea and the war with a remarkable flair.

Destroyers are a "must" to any fleet. They are the best torpedo-fighters, the best anti-sub and anti-air defense, the ideal convoy ship, and the screening, scouting, speed "cavalry" of any major naval action. How they function and how they are built, the authors explain in great detail, from the laying down of the I-beam keel to a fight-victory at Tassafongra: "shipyard to graveyard," as somebody puts it. The navy story-teller is evidently a likable Yankee figure, Annapolis class of 1921; and, all in all, this brisk, colloquial compendium and adventure tale can be highly recommended.