

**Fiction.** *The three novels reviewed this week should come as a welcome relief from the discontent with war and America's postwar social sins that so many of our young writers have taken for their themes. The settings of all three are as geographically far apart as Holland, Mexico and Africa; the authors are trained and skilled craftsmen. If you are looking only for escape from present woes, there is in them more than meets the eye. "The Sky and the Forest" by C. S. Forester, creator of the imperishable Captain Hornblower, is more than an African adventure tale since it is concerned with the discovery by a black chieftain of his soul. A. Van Doolard's "Roll Back the Sea" reveals in an heroic story the Dutchman's age-old passion for the conquest of land; Dorothy Baker's exciting mystery "Our Gifted Son" shows the Latin artist at odds with his own people and American materialism.*

## Hydrocephalic Nation

**ROLL BACK THE SEA.** By A. Den Doolard. Translated from the Dutch by Barrows Mussey. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1948. 437 pp. \$2.95.

Reviewed by JOHN WOODBURN

**T**HE Dutch are a wonderful, egregious, paradoxical and, one might say, hydrocephalic nation: cherishing peace, they are consumed by a passion for conquest; a law-abiding people, they have lived for centuries on land which they have acquired by means of the most patient, open and brilliant thievery; and they have water on the mind.

On page 7 of A. Den Doolard's "Roll Back the Sea," in my opinion the first major work and certainly the finest to come out of the Netherlands since the novels of Couperous, are two heroic paragraphs which illumine the Dutch character.

A period arrives in the history of almost every nation when the people are seized with the great passion of land hunger. Then its armies go out to do battle with real or supposed enemies, and advance its frontiers far into the territory which once belonged to others. Even little nations that now pass for peaceable and utterly innocent have suffered these fits of madness. Posterity, however, cannot imagine what drove their forebears to such fierce onslaughts; the great wave of passion has splattered into froth, and the wind of the age has blown itself out.

In Holland alone a passion for conquest still smolders and grows with the centuries: to create land out of water—not only to defend, but to assault and push back; to paint green, bit by bit, what is blue on the map. To grow grain where fish have swum; to ride horses where the monotonous waves have marched; in most Hollanders this passion remains unconscious.

Thus, living with the indignant



**"Forty thousand everyday people clung with square Dutch stubbornness. . . ."**

waters all around them, on land which a storm at any time make forfeit, the people of Holland have long been students of the sea. They have a great, precise knowledge of the ways of wind and water; they have developed and compiled tactics and stratagems of offense and defense as exhaustive and daring as those of Von Clausewitz, and when their young men dream of becoming warriors, they do not think of the battlefields, but of the war with the water, fought by the great hydraulic engineers. These are the men of the Waterstaat, in The Hague, a body of men adept and esoteric in their profession to the point of wizardry, who work for the State. Aloof, august, and honored field marshals who have never known an armistice, they live surrounded by blueprints and tide-tables, with a wetted finger held to the wind, as it were, and their ears cocked to the sound of the sea. There are no greater

heroes in Holland, and rightly, for it is their wisdom and vigilance which stands steadily between the Dutch people and the tireless, cunning water.

In 1944, when the Nazis still occupied The Netherlands, the British, grimly weighing expendables, joined forces with Holland's other, older enemy; they dropped bombs on the great dikes encircling the Island of Walcheren, admitting the sea. Except for a few isolated villages, most of Walcheren lies below water-level. Each day at high tide the North Sea came strutting down the streets. It drowned the neat parks and the gardens, and when it came pushing into the houses of Walcheren it was so tall that a man could wash his hands in it from a second-story window. Nevertheless, 40,000 everyday people clung with square Dutch stubbornness to their island, while more and more of the evacuated 30,000 came back. And each day, at ebb tide, the people went plashing through the salty streets about their workaday business, and hurrying back, maybe cutting it a little fine, to get home, and upstairs, before the return of the invader. While this was happening in Walcheren, you may remember, there was considerable unrest in our good, dry land because of the tiresome difficulty in obtaining sufficient gasoline for pleasure cars.

"Roll Back the Sea" is the story of the people of Walcheren at this time. Essentially, however, it is a story with only two principals: man and the sea, old and familiar antagonists, meeting in battle. When the North Sea poured through the towns, André van Hummel came up from The Hague to command the counter-attack. A dry, sharp-tongued, inconspicuous little hydraulic engineer, one of the famous water-wizards of his generation, he began operations with, as he said, "two wrenches and a leaky rowboat." With him came Berend Bonkelaar, the contractor, a great, storming, jovial, tireless giant who loved money and food, respected swift salt water and rejoiced in dominating it. In fifteen months these two, with the bargemen, dredgers, cranesmen, and the brushwood fascine workers, by begging, borrowing, and "liberating" their material, by sleeplessness, wizardry, and heroic, punishing ef-

### LITERARY I.Q. ANSWERS

1. Blake. 2. Browning. 3. Burns. 4. Byron. 5. Carey. 6. Coleridge. 7. Henry. 8. Housman. 9. Keats. 10. Kilmer. 11. Landor. 12. Lovelace. 13. Marlowe. 14. Rossetti. 15. Scott. 16. Shakespeare. 17. Shelley. 18. Tennyson. 19. Waller. 20. Wordsworth.

fort, mended the shattered dikes and brought Walcheren out of the sea. That, I suppose, is all, but it is also one of the great things of our time.

There is a great warmth and surge to this book, and the people in it rise up and shake off the pages in the way that they shake the salt water from themselves: they are brave, very Dutch, and very human, from little Anton Hynssen, the mouselike insurance agent whose life gains self-importance by a chance encounter with the water-wizard, to Beren Bonkelaar, whose big voice roars like the surf throughout the book, and solemn Klaas Otterkop, the brushwood foreman, whose father and grandfather and great-grandfather seemed to stand at his side as he

awaits the exact half-minute when the turning tide will be right to sink the great brushwood mattress which will hold the sand and clay against the battering water. This is a very good book, in fact, a noble book, spacious, and at times exalted, and full of the sound of life; a war book about a battle in a very old and never-ending war. The Dutch had contempt for the Nazis in 1944, but they came out exulting to meet the onslaught of the respected sea.

A final, admiring bow to the publishers of this good book, who have bound it handsomely, priced it mercifully, arranged a sensitive translation by Mr. Barrows Mussey, and frequently lighted its pages with beautiful line-drawings by Kees Bantzing.

## Storm From a Clear Sky

OUR GIFTED SON. By Dorothy Baker. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1948. 234 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by HARRISON SMITH

AFTER so many modern novels fresh from the burdened minds of young writers to whom these days of peace seem to be merely an interlude more disturbing than war itself, or others that recite the saga of a family pursued exhaustively through the generations, Dorothy Baker's "Our Gifted Son," may seem at first to be an inspired translation from a Latin tongue. It is written with such a sensitivity for moods, for the sound of the correct word, and for the revealing gesture, that it shows the artist and the stylist beneath the dramatist. It is like a musical composition which begins by embroidering languidly a few simple Mexican and American motifs, enchantingly tropical in its harmonious setting, and then before the listener is aware of the alteration in tempo and depth, it sweeps into violence and ends in the thunderous chords of death and disaster. It is as if Miss Baker had withheld from her readers the significance of what they were reading, from one deliberate sentence to the next, until she had placed them, when her book is almost over, straight in the path of unalterable tragedy.

One quarter of the entire novel is devoted to the arrival at a luxurious seaside hotel in Mexico of two young men from Harvard. José Richter, the gifted son of a fabulously wealthy German-Mexican landowner, is destined to become a pianist and composer; his American friend and classmate is a matter-of-fact, but understanding, engineer. For nearly sixty pages there is the slow sequence of

ordinary events; they arrive in a plane; they are met by an American woman, still young, who used to be José's governess; they drive through the walled streets and squares of Las Palmas; they dine at a café on the cathedral square, and they enter the great hotel that the young man's father has built, and there they find Señor Richter waiting. Literally nothing happens that is out of the ordinary, and yet through deliberate and apparently inconsequential conversation the reader is held, avidly waiting for the sound of an alarm, for the blow, for the explosion that finally occurs.

In the process the young men are revealed, one the born musician, proud of his country, longing for his home and a sight of his powerful, precise father, and the cheerful American who will never understand the nature of Mexico or why his friend has not told him that his mother has recently died and that his arrival has interrupted a time of mourning. A curious intimacy is shown between the unwithered governess and the pupil in whose genius she has deeply believed. A sentence or two about the Mexican chauffeur, who drives to town at an appalling speed and who refuses to let his young master take the wheel, deftly portrays the father's dominating, perhaps tyrannical nature. At the café the waiter's brief words of condolence at his mother's death produces this simple reaction in José:

He stayed silent and lost, unable to speak, and then very suddenly and with violence he stuck his hand out and snapped his fingers, not at all a gesture of grief, but more like the retarded, despairing finger-snapping of a man who sees the last car of his train too far down the tracks.



## My Current Reading

Eva Le Gallienne, founder and director of The Civic Repertory Theatre of New York and later co-founder of The American Repertory Theatre, is also an accomplished actress, and has published an autobiography, "At 33."

THE MEDIEVAL MIND, by Henry Osborn Taylor (Macmillan).

THE COMMON READER, by Virginia Woolf (Harcourt, Brace).

A STUDY OF HISTORY, by Arnold J. Toynbee (Oxford).

OUR PLUNDERED PLANET, by Fairfield Osborn (Little, Brown).

HISTOIRE DU THÉÂTRE, by Lucien Dubock.

THE GATHERING STORM, by Winston Churchill (Houghton Mifflin).

THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY, by Aldous Huxley (Harper).

CLARENCE DARROW FOR THE DEFENSE, by Irving Stone (Doubleday).

THE GREAT REHEARSAL, by Carl Van Doren (Viking).

The reader does not need words to tell him that her death means more than bereavement to her son, and that in it there may lie the crux of a mysteriously unfolding drama.

For many more pages there is no definite clue. Señor Richter, a short precise man, receives his American guest coldly in his hotel rather than in his huge home, and then unexpectedly, and against reason, takes him to his hacienda, offers him a glittering position as manager of his estate, and permits him to see enough of his beautiful daughter in Mexico City so that he falls in love with her. He refuses to discuss José's mother with his son who has been burning to question him. The governess tells the young man that for his own sake he must disobey his father and return to America.

Side by side with the unfolding mystery there are aspects of racial and temperamental problems. The father is acquisitive, a man of action, deeply possessive, and on the surface beneficent. But his son wonders if his interest in the health and contentment