

# Land of Freedom?

LAST OF THE CONQUERORS. By William Gardner Smith. New York: Farrar, Straus & Co., Inc. 1948. 262 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by HARRISON SMITH

THERE have been so many novels in the last two years that have stressed racial injustice in this country that it is difficult to imagine any new or startling approach to this depressing subject. Yet an American Negro, now only twenty-one years old, has managed, in "The Last of the Conquerors," to produce a controversial book that is guaranteed to shock any reader who is at all apprehensive of the results of our continued discrimination against Negro citizens on ourselves and on public opinion throughout the world. The author, William Gardner Smith, is nevertheless an example of what a Negro youth can achieve in a few short years if he has been born north of the Mason and Dixon line. A Philadelphian, raised and educated in the colored segment of that city, he has been a reporter for the *Pittsburgh Courier* for five years, except for a brief interlude toward the end of the war when he was drafted and sent to Germany with a Negro force as a part of our Army of Occupation. After V-J Day he remained in Germany for eight months as an observer for his newspaper, and is now a student in Temple University in his home city. This chronology is significant since it explains the reportorial talent apparent in his novel. His youth excuses, if any excuses are necessary, the ardor with which he proclaims his discovery that the German people behaved toward Negroes as if they were their equals.

The detachment of dark-skinned American conquerors who sailed across the Atlantic for occupation duty in Germany came from both the Jim-Crow South and the Negro slums of Northern cities. Two of them were friends; Hayes Dawkins, who tells the story, and his friend Randy, called "the Professor" because he was older, highly literate, and had been, oddly enough, a reporter on the author's own newspaper. All of them, from what they had heard, would have preferred France. Actually, they did not know how lucky they were going to be. How could they have imagined that the Germans, trained for so many years in Hitler's Nazi creed of purity of blood and race, would treat them simply as pleasant human beings, would take them into their homes, would permit their daughters and sis-

ters to go about with them, to sleep with them, or to marry them? According to Mr. Smith, that is exactly what happened. For the first time in the lives of any of them, they could look white men in the eyes and could associate with them and their women. It is the effect on these men of this sudden freedom, this overwhelming knowledge that there was a place on the earth where there was no discrimination against them, that gives a startling meaning to "The Last of the Conquerors," as well as the obvious contrast with their certain future back home where Jim Crow, in one form or another, must rule their lives.

There is a disturbing parallel between the attitude of these soldiers—who when they were abroad felt the breath of the only kind of freedom

they long for—and the people behind the Iron Curtain in Europe and Russia who see in the West political and intellectual emancipation. The policy of the Army in segregating colored from white troops enabled them to pursue the utopian fantasy of an idyllic life in Germany to which they would return after they had been shipped back to the States. In Berlin this particular group was well-housed, in a mess hall that looked like the first-class restaurants they had never been allowed to enter. The German girls who acted as secretaries and stenographers were more than amiable, and several of the men had the disconcerting experience of knowing that a blonde and blue-eyed fraulein had fallen in love with them. Most of them "shacked-up" with the sympathetic young ladies who came to the club and who could be bought for cigarettes or candy. Hayes Dawkins's

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## Late as This!

"Old Man on Nebo! Late as this  
One Justice bleeds for thee!"

EMILY DICKINSON.

By Leonora Speyer

SAM, my friend on the corner  
Who sells me the evening paper  
(With its mortal headline, "Old Jerusalem Falls"—),  
Weeps.  
And I weep with him.

And he asks me, "How long?"  
And I answer, "Not two thousand years!"

And he smiles—the patient smile of that ancient people.  
We smile together,  
And in his eyes and in my heart  
Sound the measures of an ancient song:  
*If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,  
Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth . . .*

(And mine, the singer's tongue,  
Let it cleave to the roof of my mouth,  
Let me never sing again,  
If I forget thee, O Jerusalem!)

And we pray together,  
Sam the Jew and I the Christian,  
As we think of the two old Rabbis  
In that far-away Holy City,  
With their gray beards and their white flags of truce . . .

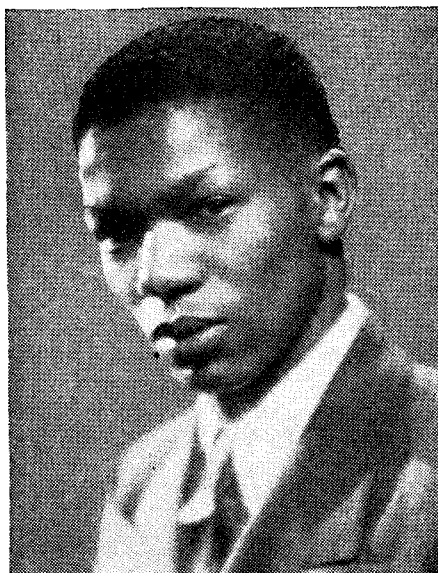
And Emily prays with us!  
We pray for that bleeding Justice,  
Each in his own way,  
And we remember, each in his own way,  
The old Man on Nebo,  
And those pentateuchal robes  
Which he will surely wear.

girl was beautiful, charming, and completely enraptured by the color of his skin, by the way his hair curled. In fact, it was her aunt who first said, "What beautiful hair he has." Since Army rules about staying out all night were rarely observed, the opportunities for this devoted couple to make love were almost unlimited. As Ilse remarked one night when she put her arms around his neck after her hostess brought them a hot-water bottle, "We have so much luck." This happy family life was interrupted when Hayes was dispatched with other colored troops to Bremberg, across Russian territory. But somehow Ilse made her way to him and, though he continued to tell her that he had a girl in America, he knew that she was true to him and that he too was in love.

Everyone in conquered Naziland smiled on the uniformed Negroes except an occasional officer, and the white troops who shouted when they saw them with German girls. One untutored colored soldier stated his feelings in plain language:

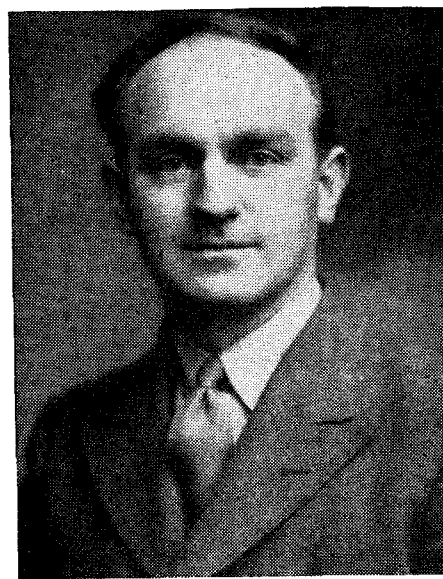
No, you can't understand. You ain't been away from all that s— as long as I have. You ain't got the feel of being free. I like this Goddamn country, you know that? I like the hell out of it. It's the first place I was ever treated like a Goddamn man. I know what it is to walk into any place, *any* place, without worrying about whether they serve colored. You know what I learned? That a nigger ain't no different from nobody else. I had to come over here and let the Nazis teach me that. They don't teach that stuff back in the land of the free.

It is the genuine emotion shown in the novel that gives it authenticity, though the reader may suspect that some of these loving German girls were not what the young author thought them to be. He forgets, perhaps, that security of any sort or enough food so that a girl's family could live through another week were the urgent necessities of that first year of Germany's occupation. That William Smith is reporting what he saw and what he heard, there can be little doubt. The quality of his indignation in the book rings true for many reasons, none of which would make sense in a country free from a large alien population. "The Last of the Conquerors" will be attacked with considerable venom. It may be entertaining to read what a few Southern critics have to say about it, since it violates certain principles held to be true and indivisible, that white and black are not equal, and so should not have the same opportunities either in life, or in love, or in hope for the future.



—Erich Hartmann.

"Some of these loving German girls" may not have been what William Smith thought them to be.



—Charles H. Halliday.

Michael McLaverty "avoids bright green prose" . . . his dialogue is straightforward and natural . . . frequently indigenous.

## Triangle of Antagonisms

*THE THREE BROTHERS.* By Michael McLaverty. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1948. 213 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by JOHN WOODBURN

FOR those who like their Irish straight, with a little branch-lyricism on the side, Michael McLaverty of Belfast has written an unpretentious, softly-pitched novel of middle-class family life in his home town and the neighboring village of Monabeg. Mr. McLaverty avoids the bright green prose affected by some Irish writers I could name and instead, through a simple, subordinated eloquence, gives dignity and meaning to the commonplace lives of his characters. The dialogue of "The Three Brothers" is straightforward and natural, made frequently indigenous by a sprig of vivid, unaffected idiom ("There's a draught comes under that door that would clean corn."), and the author wisely sees to it that it is kept busy furbishing his characterizations and advancing his quiet narrative.

The three Caffrey brothers, John, Robert, and the dissolute "D.J.," formed a triangle, as it were, of antagonisms. John had a modest draper's shop in Belfast. A simple, home-loving man, the whole of his ambition was centered on his four children and their lives, which were, God willing, to be better than his. Frank was studying at the university for his medical; Anna was a beginning teacher, already rebelling at the rigid, unimaginative educational system; young Brendan was a library assistant, and

Eileen, the elder daughter was some day, they all hoped, to be famous for her sweet voice.

Between John and his brother Robert there was more distance than the few Irish miles that separated Belfast from Monabeg. Bob Caffrey had a fine clothing shop in Monabeg, a money-maker, and closer to his heart than any Caffrey. A true miser, paranoiac and obsessed, Bob kept a counterfeit shilling nailed to the shop-counter as a warning to all rascalions and deprived their half-sister Nelly, who kept house for him, of all pleasures, no matter how simple, if they should entail spending a penny. The only music in Bob Caffrey's life was the sound of the bell over the shop door announcing a customer, and the sweet clink of the silver in the drawer of the till.

And there was "D.J." to plague them both. "D.J." had a beautiful voice and a talent for companionability, but he loved liquor and would steal to get it, and he had a continuing interest in the relative speed of horses. He had long ago disgraced the family by stealing from the bank where he had worked, and since then had lived a ragged, hedge-row life as a tout and cadger. If John would not give him the loan he sought, "D.J." was not above standing before John's neat shop, dirty cap in hand, singing for pennies to annoy him. John despised his rakehell brother because of the shame he had brought to the name of Caffrey, but Bob hated him with a miser's sick hatred because "D.J."

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