

What News Is Fit to Print?

AN EDGE OF LIGHT. By Frank K. Kelly. Boston: Little Brown & Co. 1949. 308 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by ROBERT HALSBAND

A SIGNIFICANT theme and a missionary motive are fine attributes of a novel, but they are not enough. Mr. Kelly's novel has these: the gigantic theme of "one world" which must remain at peace or perish, and the compulsive belief of his protagonist, James Hammill, that another world war must be avoided. Most of the action is laid in the newsgathering agency where Hammill works, but the specific historical event which climaxes the story is the meeting of the Security Council of the United Nations, at Hunter College in 1946, when the Iranian Government charged that Soviet troops had not been evacuated from Iran. The last section of the novel, in almost straight news reporting, relates the dramatic exit by Andrei Gromyko from the Council meeting. In general the reportage is excellently vivid. Unfortunately the fictional characters never come alive. Their emotional and amatory vicissitudes, their hardboiled sentimentalities, are dull and banal, and excite in the reader neither sympathy, revulsion, nor even interest. The compensating virtue of the book lies in its expert picture of the newspaper world and in its exploration of some of the effects that world has on our culture.

Hammill works for the Consolidated Press. (Its location in Radio City easily identifies its prototype.) On his desk converge news reports from correspondents all over the world, and he in turn relays them to the American newspapers which are members of the Press. What is the responsibility of the newspapers and their press syndicates? One of the allegations here is that in their attempt to sell more papers, they manipulate the news to tease or to stun their readers. In the case of the UN, by playing up the antagonisms and defeats of the meetings, they are destroying it, and they are breeding a destructive cynicism in their readers. That is the view of Gerald Finley, an old British diplomat, whose optimism for world peace is unquenchable. He believes that the fate of the UN and of world peace rests squarely on the agencies that disseminate news. Against his messianic attitude is contrasted that of Brenden, boss of the Consolidated: "We're peddling news, the kind of news people are interested in buying." The result of the



latter point of view, the one which prevails, is described by Hammill: "It's a dirty business. Telling about how people look when they're cooked in a plane, and taking pictures of them. Going to see some miners' wives, to see how they take it when the bodies come home from the mine. And scaring people with hot stuff about another war." It is the old problem, then, of whether newspapers reflect or recreate public opinion, of who decides what news is fit to print. It is not settled in this novel, of course, but it is illuminated through Mr. Kelly's knowledge, zeal, and expert description.

It is regrettable that a novel which

succeeds so well in depicting its background and in generating lively ideas should fail to create a human story. Hammill is characterized as a man aged before his time, tortured by doubts, embittered and cynical. Yet his moods are capricious, vibrating between hope and despair for reasons that are not clear. Hence the reader can only observe his moods without being able to share them. Another reason the story fails is that while the political background has a design and development that are comprehensible, the foreground characters quarrel and love, misunderstand and make up, in an erratic and fortuitous sequence. The credo that they seek, and to some extent find, does not seem to affect them, and unless their private lives and their public concerns have some kind of coherence, the novel splits into two discrete parts.

Its "message" is stated quite explicitly on the last page:

If the world lasted, the men who survived . . . would not be able to live in the caves of that mountain of the dead. They would see the edge of light, and they would make peace.

This is an admirable sentiment, but the novel that contains it fails to span the distance that lies between editorial and creative thinking.

Colonial Career Men

THE WALLED CITY. By Elspeth Huxley. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co. 1949. 350 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by JOHN BARKHAM

THEY say the sun is at last setting on the British Empire. Maybe, but my guess is that the Empire will be as long a-dying as it was a-borning. If and when it ever goes, with it will depart a remarkable and meticulously-evolved sub-species of the human race: the British colonial administrator.

No one who has come to know this distinctive breed in his habitat can ever forget him. He looks like, and speaks with, the accents of the British upper middle-class from which he sprang. But generations of careful training and thinking have shaped his outlook and actions to the central fact of the white man's burden, which he has carried, very advantageously, for the past couple of centuries.

He is generally able, earnest, and conscientious. His conversation is about sisal in Uganda, school privies in Tobago, hut tax in Swaziland, the licensing of brothels in Hong-Kong,

and such like. His mind is a filing cabinet stored with statistics, regulations, and by-laws. His utterances are cautious, his decisions conservative, and his actions tempered to the necessary approval of his superiors. A change of post (which may entail a different hemisphere) is for him merely a change in climate. His one besetting fear, which will haunt him till he retires on pension, is that a question may be asked about him or about his work in the House of Commons.

This is the standard pattern of British colonial officer. In recent years there has evolved a variation from this type, which advocates such things as some transfer of responsibility to the natives, greater economic development of colonial areas, and a general unshackling of absentee control. The two types have clashed, and are still clashing on the future direction of British colonial policy.

It is this clash which is the central theme of Mrs. Huxley's new novel, by all odds the most mature and perceptive book she has yet written. Britain's fast-shrinking Empire is an outward sign of the policy argument that is be-

ing conducted behind the pillars of Whitehall. Mrs. Huxley has dramatized this conflict in the absorbing story of two men, Frederick Begg and Robert Gresham.

Both are solid colonial career men dedicated to the uplift of the benighted blacks in an African protectorate. Both try to do their duty according to their lights. But duty has a different meaning for each. Begg is the orthodox civil servant, ambitious, deferential to his higher-ups, looking on his native charges as ciphers in a game of government and administration. Gresham is an idealist, intolerant of red tape and protocol, who thinks the white man should act as trustee for the upraising of the black. The two men lock horns repeatedly. Because Begg is senior of the two, his conception ultimately prevails.

Mrs. Huxley's story not only has depth and understanding; it is also a skilful piece of architecture. Parallel with the two principal characters, she alternates two scenes—sultry, sullen Africa and cool, green England. Minor themes—such as the affair between Gresham's wife and a former suitor, or the ill-starred emancipation of black Benjamin—are neatly woven into the counterpoint.

Mrs. Huxley does not handle all these voices with equal facility. Her English scenes, for all her ironic insight into the Whitehall mind, do not match the authentic atmosphere of her tropical Africa. Her native village, "set like a scab on the hillside," and strongly resembling those of the Kenya she knows so well, is a much more real place than her English farm. Her barbs at British bureaucratic bumbling, sharp though they be, evoke less admiration than her acute understanding of Africa's unique problems.

For the basic moral of this book is essentially the same as that which Alan Paton pointed in his equally striking novel, "Cry, the Beloved Country." In a nutshell, it is this: the balance which the black has struck with nature over the centuries has been toppled by the white man, through a secular force that undermines from without and a spiritual force that bores from within. How can the white man best redress that balance now?

In "The Fallen City" Mrs. Huxley gives what is to my mind the only intelligent answer to that question. Every reader who is interested in the problems of his fellow-men should ponder her answer. The past year has yielded some notable books on Africa. This novel, for its compassion, its expert narrative, and its genuine authority, can take its place with the best of them.

Boers and Britishers



—Jacket design from "Southern Cross."

SOUTHERN CROSS. By Brigid Knight. New York: Doubleday & Co. 1949. 305 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by NANCY GROBERG CHAIKIN

AND yet another book set in South Africa—a simply written, well-intentioned little novel about three generations of Boers and Britishers, beginning during the Boer War, ending with the end of World War II.

This is Liesbet de Villier's story: a Dutch baby, orphaned shortly after birth, she is raised by an English family, then thrust under the stiff, dark wing of her Boer aunt and forced to face the Boer hatred of the British which shadows her entire life. There, I think, we have the core of the book—that narrow, fanatic facet of nationalism which figures so sharply in any nationalistic movement, and, in this case, clouds, complicates, and impels the life of a woman whose childhood experiences in an English home have made such intolerance intolerable to her. Liesbet, or Elizabeth, as she prefers it, represents that happy compromiser, anathema to unbending Boers like her mother-in-law, Gertruida, who cannot, as she does, see a peaceful South Africa while Dutch and British must live in it together. The climax and sharp underlining of this hatred is drawn, finally, during the period of the Second World War, when the most unforgiving of the Boers find their purposes and their destinies closely linked with those of the Nazis. The book is written from a strongly British point of view, and I

do not propose to discuss here the various sides of the question of South African independence. It is certainly clear, in any case, that Elizabeth had the courage of noble convictions when she fought against the neurotic, grudging, unswerving racism of Boer relations and in-laws.

I should like to be even as optimistic as Brigid Knight, whose various characters undergo gradual reformations and arrive, at last, at what could be at best a temporary kind of inner and outer harmony—even that mother-in-law, who walks forward, finally, in symbolic sunlight to greet an English grandson-in-law. But we are bred by the ways of the world, alas, to a strong distrust of simplicity, and the simple way in which our author bases her case, finally, on the strength of love and beautiful inevitables does not quite establish it. There is examination lacking here which might put dimension into her characters and lend reality to her story. In her personal and her political history, everything is too neat.

Thus, though Elizabeth is a strong, vital figure, and though Gertruida crystalizes the dangerous, unstable character of fanatic nationalism and racism, the over-easy handling of character and plotty situations produces a novel which seems contrived. Confronting us, as it does, with some platitudes, some clichés, the writing is often too sweet. Still, this carefully constructed novel is occasionally lovely, and I wish that penetrating, profound thinking were as prominent in it as its faith.