

Fiction. *In the West Indian Republic of Haiti painting and literature flourish. Two brothers, Pierre and Philippe Thoby-Marcelin, heirs of an old and distinguished name, have written "The Pencil of God," to follow their 1943 prize-winner, a vivid story of conflict between voodoo and Catholicism. Keith Wheeler's "The Reef" is centered in a captain of Marines whose cowardice during a bloody landing in the Pacific cracked up his civilian life. The remaining novels are on the lighter side. Don M. Mankiewicz's "See How They Run" is about what makes racing thoroughbreds go round and round. Vaughan Wilkins contributes a deft story of pirates and treasure that belongs beside "Treasure Island." Hildegard Dolson in "The Form Divine" has written a lively satire on the ladies who try to recover their lost lovers through that torture chamber known as "Beautiful You Salon." It is grimly entertaining to both sexes.*

A Man at War with His Ghost

THE REEF. By Keith Wheeler. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 319 pp. \$3.

By JOHN BARKHAM

THE second wave of war novels is now battering at the beachheads. The first, long since spent, left a few survivors—"The Naked and the Dead," "The Gallery," and one or two more. But generally speaking it was a spontaneous rather than an artistic evocation. By and large the war novels now appearing are distillates of personal experience that have been more deeply pondered and refined. The burning anger has given way to resignation or cool appraisal. It is no longer "This is What Happened" but rather "It Was (or Wasn't) Worth It."

Such a considered assessment is Mr. Wheeler's deeply felt and often moving first novel, "The Reef." It is less a picture of a man at war than a picture of what was once such a man, set before the reader with obvious understanding of the delicate mental balances that keep man a sane animal.

First laurel goes to Mr. Wheeler for his skilful exposition. The story opens with a picture of Nick Cotten on the skids—fired from his job, deserted by his wife and son, avoided by his friends, on the point of losing even his mistress, a confirmed alcoholic ready to cash in his chips after a succession of lost week ends. In a last effort to salvage something from the wreck Cotten flies out to the Pacific to investigate a commercial project for his firm, which is giving him one more chance. The plane is forced down at Tarawa, and Cotten finds himself back at the scene of his war-time crack-up.

Cotten had been there as a marine

captain landing his company in the bloody assault on the island. This book might, indeed, have been called "Crack-up," for it was when his landing craft stuck on a coral reef that Cotten faced his great test and failed. Other craft stuck, too, but the men jumped out and waded through a thousand yards of water into the fiery hell of Japanese fire. Cotten backed off instead.

Here we have the reason for his gigantic guilt complex—its acrid memory searing all of his subsequent life. Can a man live with such a specter? Mr. Wheeler says "No" and sends his hero in vain to the classic sedatives of women and drink.

All this we discover in the long middle section of the book, a thoughtful and at times brilliant study of a man

who cracked in a crisis. On Tarawa Cotten meets the post commander, a sage old fellow whose function, we soon learn, is to play the psychiatrist to Cotten. In a somewhat slick final section the old man is able to exorcise the ghost and restore Cotten's lost faith in himself.

This is perhaps the only weak part in the book, and weak because it diverts Cotten from his predestined end. It is only because his creator has endowed him with such drive and direction that the happy ending rings hollow. Cotten should have been allowed to drown his sorrows in the waters of Tarawa.

This reviewer also has his reservations about the commander, that "old philosopher living in a graveyard," whose wisdom seems too simple a solvent for a heel so long consumed with self-hatred. But these are minor blemishes that detract little from the promise and intensity of Mr. Wheeler's over-all achievement. His story is mature in conception, assured in technical performance, and instinct with meaning.

This was war as it really was on those beaches, a place that was all death. Mr. Wheeler's best pages prickle with battle, with the reek and crump and crawling fear. His words work for him: "the red-balled Zeros, deadly pinwheels of flame in the dark." And Cotten himself would be a challenge to any novelist; yet Mr. Wheeler has made him real, a man "lugging a load of conscience." It would be a pity if this powerful story were lost in the rush of spring books.

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Pacific beachhead—"the reek and crump and crawling fear."

Long John of 1951

THE CITY OF FROZEN FIRE. By Vaughan Wilkins. New York: The Macmillan Co. 250 pp. \$3.

By NATHAN L. ROTHMAN

THERE is unhappily a limit to the number of times we can read "Treasure Island." After that we consign it to the schoolboys, hoping (against conviction) that they will really appreciate it and feeling (with Shaw) what a pity it is to waste this consummate experience upon the young. And we wonder why nobody else has ever written for us another book like that. All of which is preamble to the pretty wonderful news that somebody has tried—and with signal success. It is easy enough to say that Vaughan Wilkins is not Stevenson; that kind of observation can only be meaningless and unjust. Mr. Wilkins has made profound obeisance to Stevenson in the form and spirit of his tale. At the same time he has infused it with charm and dash and wit and romantic inventiveness, entirely fresh and spontaneous. He has come as close as it is possible, I think, to producing the book to place next to "Treasure Island" upon the shelf—and that is meant to be high praise.

Consider the lad Kit Standish, living in his fine house somewhere upon the blooming English countryside in about the year 1826. Consider that one morning as he is fishing in his pool he observes a strange young man in antique costume, black-haired and pale of face, with one mutilated stump of forearm bound in a bloody rag and the other arm holding a prince's diadem of gold and rubies, who carries upon his person an ancient coin with edge unmilled upon which is stamped his own likeness—Madoc, Prince of Cuivera—who speaks in a forgotten Welsh tongue, who mumbles of "shouting and swords and blood and frozen fire" as he faints upon the threshold of the Standish house.

Have we begun? Ah, but he comes from a lost and forgotten island where his people still live in a culture frozen in its ancient forms and beauties. He has brought with him a portion of their treasure, in search of aid; for the secret land of Cuivera is beleaguered by pirates who have scented it out and now lay siege to its bastion cliffs. The Prince has been pursued and injured by the infamous Captain Darkness and his cutthroat band. Darkness is the venomous Pew come to life again, a Pew with two bright, seeing eyes and a marvelous power of evil. Darkness and his gang set upon the house of Standish, kill a groom, and steal the



—Howard Coster.

Vaughan Wilkins—"of swords and blood."



—Gabor Eder.

Hildegard Dolson—"not via falsies."

diadem as well as the chart which leads the way to Cuivera.

This is the challenge no Standish can endure—and so Sir Christopher and his good friend Sir Richard Gayer charter the brig *Volcano* and set off for the land of Prince Madoc in pursuit. Aboard also are Kit and his formidable Aunt Tupenny and Captain Cottrell and Wang Tom, the bosun—and among the crew is Mr. Yemm, the fine, open-hearted, bold, grinning, treacherous John Silver of 1951—Captain Darkness's right-hand man!

And so we are off to the adventure of treasure and a remote island, piracy and noble courage, antiquity and charm—one more taste of that rare concoction we thought might never be brewed again. To all who ever said an unwilling farewell to Jim Hawkins and Long John and the *Hispaniola*, good cheer. This book is for you.

Beautiful You

THE FORM DIVINE. By Hildegard Dolson. New York: Random House. 310 pp. \$3.

By PHYLLIS MCGINLEY

I HAVE a word of advice for Hildegard Dolson. The goblins (perhaps even the Committee on Un-American Activities) will get her if she—don't—watch—out! For this book of hers is patently subversive. It strikes at the Very Heart of American Culture. It is an attack on American Womanhood and on the creed by which Womanhood lives. In it the noblest institutions of feminine society are held up to ridicule. Better skip the country, Miss Dolson, before the Charm Schools, the Success Courses, the Beauty Salons of the nation track you down.

For "The Form Divine" is as iconoclastic as "Darkness at Noon" and probably more dangerous. It dares to suggest—and with what sneering merriment!—that woman has a higher duty to her household and to the world than keeping her figger; that the way to marital happiness is not via exercise and falsies. Now you know and I know what a slander that is! Advertisements assure us, magazine fiction has taught us beautilculture is the panacea for any feminine woe. Save the surface and you save all. Does your spouse grow cold to you? Get a new hair-do, and the second honeymoon will shine. Are you a lonely spinster? Restyle your lipstick, and a man is in your grasp. Do you lack confidence, are your friends falling away, is there Another Woman? Lose twenty pounds, get some advice about clothes. Life begins anew. It's the faith in which we have been brought up.

And now Miss Dolson has the impudence to deny that faith. She gives us Lucilla Webb, thirty-seven, a nice little wife and mother of one. She gives Lucilla a problem. Then she sets her down as an eager pupil at the Beautiful You Salon (six weeks, \$260) along with several other eager pupils. Most of them are perfectly representational of ladies who in the proper kind of story need only Beautiful You and a few coincidences to emerge with romance clutched in both fists. Only Paris Green, the show girl, eludes the pattern, and she turns out to be one of the pleasantest nitwits since "Born Yesterday." But are those problems carefully ironed out? Heavens, no! They increase like guinea pigs.

For these prisoners of gullibility are as doomed as Arthur Koestler's old revolutionaries. Their indoctrination is as complete, their sufferings as hor-