

**U.S.A.** To discover what our future is apt to be like, it is often profitable to turn to the recorders of the past. For example, the baker's dozen of books we review on this and the following pages deal largely with American history, yet a good many of them throw light on the road ahead. Up to now the United States has been, by and large, a huge success story; but Walter Prescott Webb, one of the most stimulating historians alive today, has a theory that this is so because its entire existence has been in a great boom period of history, the end of which is now in sight. You won't necessarily agree with the book in which he elaborates this idea, "The Great Frontier" (reviewed below), but the chances are that you will be wiser and soberer for having tussled with it. A great many liberals profess to be discouraged by the results of the recent Presidential election. They should find solace and a greater understanding of the real nature of American liberalism in a book like Eric F. Goldman's "Rendezvous with Destiny" (page 11). And Matthew Josephson's biography "Sidney Hillman" (page 12) is excellent.

## America's Lost Promise

**THE GREAT FRONTIER.** By Walter Prescott Webb. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 434 pp. \$5.

By JOHN D. HICKS

**P**ROFESSOR WEBB has a way of writing books around a challenging thesis. Such a book was "The Great Plains," published in 1931, in which he argued that the frontier of the treeless, semi-arid territory west of the ninety-eighth meridian required and produced a new type of American pioneering, with results quite at variance from those achieved in the eastern half of the continent. Another such book was "Divided We Stand," published in 1937. Here he emphasized the differences that marked off the United States into three sections, the North, the South, and the West, then went on to stress the fact that the South and the West, for lack of collateral, paid unceasing tribute to the East, which had it.

Now in "The Great Frontier" he presents a third hypothesis. Far from abandoning the much debated Turnerian concepts, he attempts to apply them on a global scale. Western Europe, which he chooses to call the Metropolis, takes the place of Turner's East, while the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, named collectively the Great Frontier, take the place of Turner's West. The

Great Frontier, as Webb sees it, has been the tail that wagged the dog through all modern history. Its discovery, beginning with Columbus, and its exploitation from then until the early twentieth century precipitated and perpetuated the greatest boom in history. All modern times, indeed, have been boom times. "It was the constant distribution on a nominal or free basis of the royal or public domain that kept the boom going, and that gave a peculiar dynamic quality to Western civilization for four centuries."

It is a bit of a shock to think of modern history in relation to what went on before and what will come

hereafter as roughly analogous to the 1920's in our own recent past. But Webb pursues his theme with relentless logic. The density of population in Western Europe, the Metropolis, he tells us, was in 1500 about 26.7 persons per square mile. To these closely-packed peoples the Great Frontier opened up "nearly 20,000,000 square miles of fabulously rich land practically devoid of population." Here lay the basis for the boom. Population flowed from the Metropolis to the Great Frontier, and both enjoyed a huge prosperity; "the abundance of the frontier was constantly being emptied into the Metropolis to increase its abundance." About the year 1930, however, the density of population for the whole great area "passed the point it registered in Europe prior to 1900." The boom was over, or as Dean Inge remarked in 1938, "The house is full."

The Industrial Revolution, which in the minds of many historians has been regarded as a principal cause of many modern developments, is relegated by Webb's hypothesis to the status of an effect. "Did it come, or flourish," Webb asks, "because men suddenly became ingenious and inventive, or because men had available so much new material that they could make their ingenuity a practical thing?" Without the "abundance of material furnished by the frontier," he doubts if it could have attained any great importance.

Webb is pretty thoroughly convinced that the Great Frontier is over, and that the world is now in for a series of changes comparable to those that overtook the United States when



—Culver.

"The Beginning"—"constant distribution of the royal or public domain."

John D. Hicks, professor of history at the University of California, is the author of "The Populist Revolt" and co-author of "Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900-1939," both of which dealt with the effects of the frontier on our history.

the American frontier wore out, only far more serious. The easy-going, uninhibited democracy that stemmed from frontier abundance will find it hard, he thinks, to survive in the new age. Individualism is already giving way to corporateness; what the individual once was supposed to be in modern life the corporation is becoming today, whether in business, or in labor, or in religion, or in education, or in almost any other aspect of human endeavor. "Capitalism of the nineteenth-century type" is likewise destined to "decline with the passing of the boom on which it was based." New institutions better suited to the new conditions are on the way in, with tendencies toward Socialism in the democracies and toward absolutism in the totalitarian states already plainly indicated. For there is little hope of new frontiers to conquer. Perhaps the Mediterranean Sea, freed from salt, can be turned into the Sahara Desert to make it blossom as the rose, or some gigantic "Point Four" program can exploit the valley of the Amazon. But these would be only small pickings. The Great Frontier is gone.

Webb knows that his thesis will be attacked. He has been through that before with "The Great Plains." Some of the criticisms he will have to face can be predicted; others will come thick and fast as the various assorted corns he has stepped on begin to ache. Webb has deliberately chosen to omit Asia and most of Africa from his calculations; it will be easy, therefore, to assert that he is operating on a semi-global rather than a global basis at a time when every part of the world is becoming extremely important to every other. Why in particular should he overlook Siberia, which shows more similarities with the American frontier than with any other area? Medievalists will assuredly point out that a Europe which could burst its bonds and surge overseas must have had something dynamic within it that the Great Frontier had not provoked or created. Modernists may perhaps contend that even if Columbus had found what he sought because there was no America in the way, there still might have been a Protestant Reformation with its emphasis on individualism, an Industrial Revolution with its consequent capitalism, and even a considerable measure of democracy. But, at any rate, all historians who enjoy the rough-house of debate assuredly owe Professor Webb a vote of thanks, for he has given them an opportunity to exert their talents to the full. Whatever one may think of his hypothesis, he must agree that only a brave man would have dared to put it in a book.

## Politics of the Land

*RENDEZVOUS WITH DESTINY.* By Eric F. Goldman. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 503 pp. \$5.

By SAMUEL LUBELL

SINCE the ides of last November many persons have been asking what of the future of liberalism in America. While waiting on events to shape the answer, those interested in the question would do well to spend a few hours with Eric F. Goldman's "Rendezvous with Destiny."

Mainly this is a readable, stimulating story of nearly a century of American reformers, beginning with Samuel Tilden, who could be the soul of patrician charity when approached by a ragamuffin with a drunken father, but who fired a clerk for daring to broach the question of a vacation, and ending with David Lilienthal, to whom TVA was a demonstration that "our choice need not be between extremes of 'right' and 'left,' between over-centralized big-government and a do-nothing policy, between 'private enterprise' and 'Socialism'."

A Princeton history professor, Mr. Goldman does a skilful job of weaving the many reformist agitations since the Civil War into a single continuity of evolving hope. He seems to feel that no one of the many characters he writes about labored entirely in vain. All struggled with the common problem of what was the government's proper role in a society rapidly becoming industrialized, and although none ever found a definitive answer, each contributed something on which the future built.

Professor Goldman's story becomes almost an epic of intellectual reincarnation. He shows how populism was reborn in Theodore Roosevelt's New Nationalism and Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom, how both of these latter movements, along with Robert LaFollette's Progressivism, found new life in the New Deal and Fair Deal.

Enlivening the narrative are countless human interest tidbits, like Thorsten Veblen's refusal to wake his children to get them to school in time, or Henry George's sending his father a copy of "Progress and Poverty" with the explanation that he had written the book to restore religious faith to the oppressed poor, or how a U.S. Senator, who was hard of hearing, started the applause that called attention to Wilson's promise to "make the world safe for democracy."

A book about so many do-gooders



—Fabian Bachrach.

E. F. Goldman—"evolving hope."

naturally will leave a different "message" with different readers. For this reviewer the most stimulating pages are those which trace the dilemma that liberals have got into as a result of their reliance on interpreting history as being motivated primarily by economics.

It began, one might say, with Charles Darwin. With the aid of Herbert Spencer (who was a kind of nineteenth-century Bruce Barton) the conservative thinkers seized upon Darwinism to enshrine the profit motive and the status quo as divinely ordained. Society was pictured as evolving through a competitive struggle by which the fittest survived, with those in power having proved their fitness to rule by the very act of rising to the top. Government intervention and social legislation were denounced as devilish interferences with the very laws of nature.

Against this philosophy of "conservative Darwinism," the reformers counterattacked with "reform Darwinism," arguing that since the heart of Darwin's theory was continuous evolution in relation to environment, why not legislate a better environment? To strip the status quo of moral sanctity, the reformers strove to besplatter the conservative system as little more than "brutal selfishness . . . as old as the Ice Age." Hence the importance of the economic interpretation of history as expounded by Charles A. Beard and others.

Through it the Constitution, so sa-

Samuel Lubell is the author of "The Future of American Politics."