

Some Constitutional Counsel

"But We Were Born Free," by Elmer Davis (Bobbs-Merrill. 229 pp. \$2.75), is a collection of essays, mostly on man and intellectual freedom, by the distinguished news broadcaster.

By Gilbert Seldes

THERE is a thrilling moment in the adolescence of everyone who is destined to become an intellectual—the moment when self-consciously or subconsciously, and often fatuously, he understands that he is dealing with general ideas. He is no longer saying two plus two is four, he is dealing with x and y and z; and fifty years later the thrill of general ideas is still an excitement.

The moment I remember (and I don't dare to look up the date of publication) was when I read an essay by the Italian historian Ferrero, on that period in Roman history which is so full of scandal that most reports of it, including Gibbon's, are cloaked in the obscurity of a learned tongue. Ferrero noted the number of people who were protesting against the morals of the time and then proceeded to his generalization: a time isn't all corrupt when people are condemning it—the very presence and persistence of the critics proves that; the dreadful times are those in which corruption is so diffused that no one even protests.

I live in the same cold and comfortless world as Elmer Davis, but I console myself with the knowledge that it cannot be as bad as I fear, because Davis can still do battle—he is outnumbered, but he isn't silenced. The



particular world we inhabit is one in which the right of man to use his intelligence freely is jeopardized, in which year after year millions of people who destroyed one tyranny and are fighting another feel themselves less and less free to express their thoughts, in which the secrecy of the voting booth is their last refuge, in which the guarantees of the Bill of Rights are so precarious that men who have sworn to defend the Constitution are proposing laws to nullify them in the name of national security—as if the only security we ever had was grounded in anything but freedom.

It happens that Mr. Davis's treatment of the undermining of the amendment that deals with self-incrimination is one of the sketchier portions of his brilliant survey of the "perilous night" (to use his chapter heading) in which we live. I find it sketchy because it doesn't entirely resolve my own misgivings, but I find it encouraging because it reinforces a principle that runs all through his book, the principle that you do not abandon principle for immediate success—coupled with contempt for those who do this and pretend at the same time to be the only preservers of principle.

As I began this review with a reminiscence, I shall add another, even more relevant to our time and, by its nature, "exclusive." In Santayana's last half-year at Harvard I took Philosophy 10, his course in esthetics. One of the books assigned for report was Tolstoy's "What Is Art?" I wrote a long essay on it and would now be happy to forget it, except that I do not want to forget the remarks, in Santayana's crabbed clear hand, on my summation. I wrote (Heaven forgive me, but I thought it was smart to be reactionary then): "It is a pity that the custom of burning books has disappeared, because this one would be my first choice to go on the pyre . . ." And Santayana replied: "It is interesting to discover that there are young men in America who are enthusiasts for Paganism and who would restore the Inquisition in order to destroy the Gospel." (No mean stylist himself, Mr. Davis will appreciate the turn of phrase.)

We are in an age bent on restoring the Inquisition in order to destroy the gospel of American freedom, and El-



THE AUTHOR: Probably no one, no one at all, among radio news commentators has won as many accolades as Elmer Davis, who has been broadcasting lean, incisive, unintimidated copy ever since he was asked to fill in as a pinch-hitter one day back in 1939. Just the other evening he received his latest, the Lauterbach Award for 1953, for "a substantial contribution in the field of civil liberties." His long career hasn't been exclusively microphonic, however. Davis spent ten years on the *Times*, until 1924, when he left to free lance; has written novels; has contributed to magazines, the *SR* included (he first wrote for the *SR* in 1924, the year it was founded, and was on its editorial board in the early Forties); and was chief of the OWI during World War II. His novel-writing (it began in the Twenties) ran for over a decade, with stories serialized in *Collier's* and elsewhere. When he wasn't dreaming up plots he'd read and reread the Latin poets, Horace and Catullus in particular. Like any self-respecting scholar, he reads them in the original. This grounding in the classics shows up in much of his work: he is fond of finding examples in the past to heighten a point he is making about the present.

In Washington the other day Davis, who has never been afraid to call a rabble-rouser a rabble-rouser, had a couple of things to say on a couple of subjects. About his own work: "I am still reporting and commenting on what happens in Washington; but on Sundays only, not every night. This due to an attack of high blood pressure last summer, and not to the success of any of the numerous endeavors to get me off the air." And about the state of the union: "It obviously contains more people than I believed three years ago who are indifferent to facts, and willing to believe anything: if it is only scandalous enough. I am not yet persuaded, however, that these people are a majority. If they should turn out to be, this country will become something such as we have never known, and it will not be much fun to live in it."

—BERNARD KALB.

mer Davis is one of the few men not themselves attacked who have challenged the new obscurantists. His immunity gives a kind of purity to his motives; he seems to care not for himself but only for those vague abstractions—justice, freedom, fair play, decency—and yet as he writes and as he talks he deals with actualities, with James Wechsler and Senator McCarthy, with John Dos Passos and Toynbee, with what these men say and do, with the effect they have on how we live from day to day, with their effect on today's newspaper and tomorrow's grand-jury proceedings.

This purity of motive makes Davis appear as our public defender, the defender of our rights as members of the public, whether we are aware of the danger to our rights or no. The first half of "But We Were Born Free" is the most concise, witty, informed, and impersonal account of recent attacks on the freedom of the mind I have yet read. If the reader imagines he knows all about this he will still find this survey impressive. To have so much passion and never become turgid, to be so clear and never lose the warmth of one's own vernacular, are prime qualifications for anyone who writes to persuade.

THE rest of the book hasn't quite the urgency of the first part, but it tells us what kind of man this is who is so handsomely leading us in the fight for freedom. "It might seem," Davis says in a brief prologue, "that I live in a state of permanent annoyance." This is the impression H. L. Mencken used to give in his happiest days and, like Mencken, Davis relishes the spectacle of human folly; if he is permanently annoyed it is by woolly thinking, by the pompous, and by the collapse of some people who ought to know better in front of popular idols. His attack on the ex-Communists who are now accepted as spiritual leaders (and who seem fatally incapable of leading us to anything but an opposite tyranny) is devastating. (Readers of *The Saturday Review* remember it as "History in Doublethink"—SR June 28, 1952.) The essay on "Grandeurs and Miseries of Old Age" is in a warmer vein, but Davis is not a split personality and his meditations on being sixty-four years old end with his major theme: "We have got to defeat this attack on the freedom of the mind," he says, connecting age with another freedom—from the fear of living a long life as a coward or a pariah; if one is old and in the expectation of death, Davis says, it doesn't take so much courage to stand up against tyranny.

I pass over an analysis of the Bricker amendment to note two spe-

cial points. In his reaction to the later Toynbee, Davis has stated the case for undogmatic rational faith and has done it with wit and grace, qualities rarely associated with religious discourse. (Here, as in his "Doublethink" essay, he has much of importance to say about the intellectual and his relation to his society.) And in "News and the Whole Truth" he comes closer than anyone else, I think, to analyzing the situation that makes his own kind of news-broadcasts indispensable. The old ideal of "straight news—no editorializing" has led us, he points out, to a dangerous place: a man in high position utters an accusation or tells a lie; the fact that he said it is news, but what he said is *not* fact. The news must be printed, but it is "one-dimensional . . . [and] other dimensions . . . will make it approximate the truth." But these dimensions must come from the evidence, not from the opinions or prejudices of the reporter or of his publisher. Davis knows that "the good news broadcaster must walk a tightrope between . . . false objectivity . . . and 'interpretive' reporting which fails to draw a line between . . . a reasonably well-established fact and what the reporter or editor wishes were the fact." He knows because he has not merely walked that tightrope for many distinguished years, he has positively and gracefully danced on it, to our infinite delight.

Some months ago, just before Elmer Davis retired from broadcasting, I reviewed his career in these pages. Now that he has returned, for a weekly stint at least, I would like to repeat the last words of my review (and feel justified in doing so because they are—in a forged handwriting—on the jacket of "But We Were Born Free"). I said: "If the independent thinking man survives in America we will all owe Elmer Davis an incalculable debt." Stet!



Camus—"L'homme révolté."

Man the Undoer

"The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt," by Albert Camus (translated by Anthony Bower. Alfred A. Knopf. 273 pp. \$4), defines the problem of twentieth-century man as living without grace and without justice. Professor Hans Kohn of the City College of New York, who reviews it below, will shortly publish a new study, "German History: New German Views."

By Hans Kohn

FRENCH literary life after World War II suffers from a remarkable poverty compared with the situation at the end of the First World War, when Proust and Gide, Valéry and Claudel were still in the fulness of their creative strength and a galaxy of younger talents came to the fore. There are only two outstanding figures in France today, Jean-Paul Sartre, who will soon be forty-nine, and Albert Camus, eight years younger. Both have much in common: they are philosophers by training, they have written successful plays and novels besides their theoretical works, they fought together in the Resistance, they emerged from it as spokesmen of the Left. Their open break two years ago created a sensation in France. Camus published in 1951 his "L'homme révolté," a profession of faith of an active humanism which rejected equally the extremism of the Left and of the Right and the complacency ascribed in France to the bourgeois. A friend of Sartre, and then Sartre himself, subjected the book in *Les Temps Modernes*, Sartre's periodical, to a pitiless criticism from the Marxist-Leninist point of view. Camus' replies to this and other criticism have just been republished in France in a volume, "Actuelles II: Chroniques 1948-1953," which serves as an elucidation of "L'homme révolté."

Camus' book is now available in English under the title "The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt." Unfortunately, some of the most provocative pages, on Stirner, Lautréamont, and the Surrealists, have been omitted. Nevertheless, for those who do not read French "The Rebel" will be a noteworthy experience. They will find there by far the best discussion of the origins and implications of totalitarianism and at the same time meet in Camus a personality of unusual attractiveness and sincerity. He has been introduced to American readers so far by two novels, "The Stranger," a mirror of the absurdity and nihilism