

Old China Dies

"Swing Full Circle," by Chesley Wilson (Harcourt, Brace. 312 pp. \$3.50), is the story of a cashiered American sailor who heads a hopeless errand of mercy in a China being slowly strangled by moral paralysis.

By Robert Payne

IN THE summer of 1946 China was in the doldrums. The war was won, but there was no peace: that strange fever which we know now as "the cold war" had settled on the country and every man was every man's enemy. That summer the cold war was freezing. The terror was everywhere, for nothing was what it seemed to be, and in all China there seemed to be no one who understood the consequences of the most elementary actions. It was as though even the most remote peasants of the loess country were playing Russian roulette. The universities called for a government of the talents, but there was almost no talent left in any government then in power, whether north or south of the Yellow River. Relief supplies for starving provinces were rushed in from America; most of them rotted on the wharves or vanished in mysterious ways. Perhaps never in the world's history has there been such concentrated bribery and corruption, not all of it on the side of the Kuomintang. In those distant years when scholars will be able to write the history of the Far East with access to all the sources, including the bank accounts of the leading figures, it is likely that the devil's mark will be found on those who seemed to be the least corrupt of all.

Chesley Wilson has written in the guise of a novel the best account I know of those shuddering months when every Chinese saw the abyss opening at his feet and smelled the hot breath of corruption. In "Swing Full Circle" he tells the story of Tully Sheldon, lately cashiered from the United States Navy, who arrives in Shanghai to assume command of a surplus landing craft on behalf of World Relief, an organization which appears to be a thinly disguised version of UNRAA.

Sheldon's task is to transport flour to Hankow. First he has to assemble

a crew. There was Captain Savarsky, who resembled a Santa Claus who had spent the off-season digging in a Welsh coal mine. Then there was Gunboat Peligra, Chief Quartermaster, USN, Retired, with a chest like an ox, a cock-of-the-walk air, and more profanity to the square inch than any other man would consider credible. Sergei Kalantonkles was an ex-Legionnaire, handsome and lecherous, with a useful command of twelve Chinese dialects and six more assorted languages. Henry Talbot Huddleston, who became the ship's chief engineer, had a cataract and an oily stubble of beard, a palsied Englishman who had worn himself out in the service of the Shanghai bars. It is part of Wilson's accomplishment that this motley crew—there are eight or nine others—is completely credible, and all the affairs of the LST, as it noses its way upriver, are equally credible.

Everyone on the ship knows that the flour destined for the starving peasants of Hunan will be on sale in Nanking five days after being loaded onto the wharves of Hankow, and will be back again in Shanghai two days later. The LST is named *Wan Chuen*, which means "The Ten Thousand Perfections," but there is nothing perfect about the ship except the wild humanity of its crew, which includes the inevitable White Russian

girl, Alia, who is as clearly visualized as the rest. Alia, indeed, is a feather in Wilson's cap. She lives and breathes, weeps and rejoices, and more than anyone else she is aware of the inevitability of corruption in that Chinese summer.

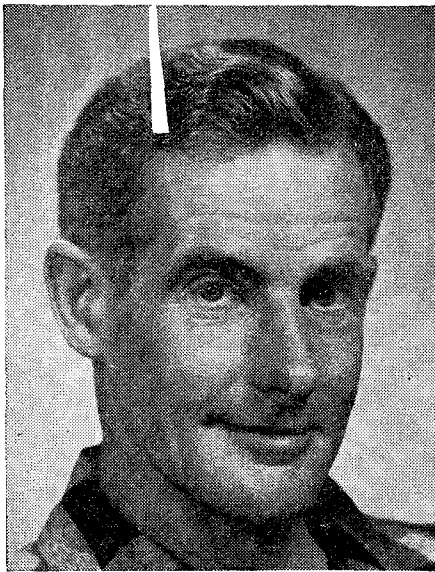
THERE is almost no story: only a series of clear-cut incidents. The *Wan Chuen* unloads at Hankow, and here Sheldon suffers his first failure of nerve. He decides to make money carrying passengers downriver: these "yellow fish" gather on the decks behind barbed wire, determined to reach Shanghai for the same reason that the lemmings make for the sea. Sheldon has tasted evil: their fares provide him with a small fortune. When he returns to Shanghai there are further temptations provided by the Chinese Communists who offer him another small fortune to take barrels of gasoline to an obscure landing-beach along the coast of Shantung. Too late he learns that the barrels contain machine-guns. He loses his ship and the beloved Alia. When we see him for the last time he is wandering in the dark on an unknown beach of China with the body of Alia in his arms, a Lear on the blasted heath, knowing only too well "the promised end or image of that horror."

A good book, but oddly written, for sometimes Mr. Wilson writes very well indeed, and at other times he writes as though he could hardly believe this preposterous story, though it was a commonplace once. At his best he has caught wonderfully the mood of that treacherous summer when murder and sabotage were every man's companion in a swiftly dissolving China.



—SR Drawing by Tack Shigaki.

"... every Chinese saw the abyss opening and smelled the hot breath of corruption."



—Juleen Studio.

Kenneth Dodson—"the way it was."

A Pregnant Craft

"Away All Boats," by Kenneth Dodson (Little, Brown, 508 pp. \$3.95), details the story of the attack transport *Belinda* as she carries 1,400 men across the Pacific during World War II. Here it is reviewed by Captain Walter Karig, USNR, author of *"Battle Report,"* a six-volume history of naval action in the last war.

By Walter Karig

I AM AFRAID that Kenneth Dodson's "Away All Boats" is too honest, too accurate a novel to be the popular success it should be. I have not read a better book on the war—not at sea, but on the shallow fringes of the ocean.

Basically, Mr. Dodson is telling the story of a ship, the attack transport *Belinda*, and like the story of any ship it is made up of the fractional stories—chapters and footnotes for allusion's sake—of her company and crew. *Belinda's* job is a dirty one: it is to carry troops near enough to enemy-held beaches for the amphibious craft to take them ashore. She carries fourteen hundred soldiers or marines across the Pacific until the Far Shore muddies the water under her keel, where she drops the landing craft with which she is forever pregnant, loads her unhappy passengers into them, and repeats *ad infinitum* while fighting off aerial and submarine attacks. It's no fun, and less romance.

Plot? The novel doesn't have a nickel's worth. "Away All Boats" is

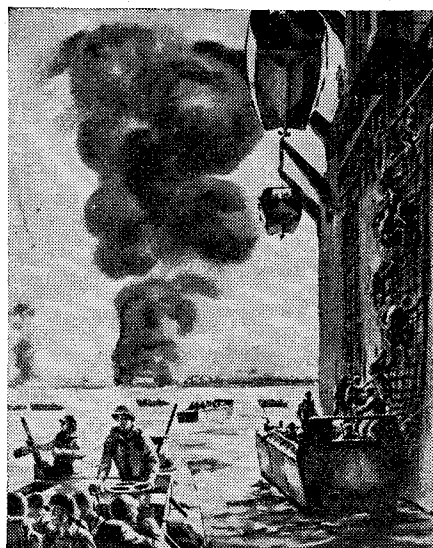
called a novel because it purports to be fiction. It is fiction because it is the composite story of scores of ships like *Belinda*. By the same token it is autobiography. By any token it is a brave piece of work, and especially because Dodson does not succumb to some of the literary dodges that have nudged other stories of the war at sea into a popularity that sea-faring men hold in doubt. There is no rape, no seduction, no sadism, no soul-shattering conflict between the Reserves and the Ring Bearers.

For all the enjoyment and the acquiescence won by Herman Wouk's "Caine Mutiny" or Monsarrat's "Cruel Sea," the intrusive romances in both added as much to their books of war at sea as a splinter in the forefinger expedites typing. One of the outstanding virtues of Dodson's book is that women are kept in their place during the narrative, just as they must and should be on a marine battlefield. This proportioning has the effect of making them seem more believable.

Perhaps a statement like that will cause some potential readers to shy away from the book. "What? No sex? Must be a pretty dam' dull book." And it would be hard, even by invoking the shades of Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad, then, to convince them that a story of the sea is more exciting without unfurling a brassiere or two.

It does a reviewer an unusual good to be able to quote a blurb with approbation. Whoever wrote the text for the dust jacket of "Away All Boats" summed up the meaning of this book when he said: "It will make thousands of veterans of the island-hopping campaign say, 'This is it. This is the way it was'."

I hope it will be "thousands"—and a few more who are not veterans.



—By Dwight Shepler, for "Away All Boats."

"... a brave piece of work."

Semper Amorous

"The Magnificent Bastards," by Lucy Herndon Crockett (Farrar, Straus & Young, 296 pp. \$3.50), tells of an American woman Red Cross worker and her adventures, mostly erotic, with the armed forces in the Pacific during World War II.

By Evelyn Eaton

LUCY HERNDON CROCKETT'S "The Magnificent Bastards" is a well-constructed, fast-paced, strongly written novel about lust in those old sexy islands of the Pacific, familiar to us all by now, featuring the marines, this time from the point of view of a woman, one of the handful of Red Cross workers who volunteered to go overseas, presumably to represent Sex, respectable, unattainable Sex—officially, that is—to thousands of sex-hungry men. "What ain't we got? We ain't got dames!"

Colin Black, colonel of the Raiders, is the principal bastard, ruthless, part Indian, tough, and physically magnificent. Lee Ashley, rich, refined, widowed, but ambiguously virgin, for reasons given early in the story, a tidbit thrown in to heighten the effect of the scream on page 177, is the—well, heroine. Lee is warned of life in general, "You will be the target every second of the most hopeless, helpless desire, of the foulest frustration-born obscenity." (Naturally, gals, she decides to go right ahead, on what she piously disguises to herself, if not to others, as a pilgrimage to Bloody Ridge, where her husband was killed.)

She is warned against Colin Black, and is given a firsthand demonstration of him engaged in The Preoccupation, so we know from the start what the Outcome will be. So do the subsidiary characters, who have The Preoccupation or are aware of it "every second" in others. Even the Roman Catholic chaplain, who prays once in a while, is depicted as a little saddened by what he sees around him, but gently tolerant, and therefore, of course, ineffectual, and (to anyone privileged to meet front-line chaplains of any denomination) shadowy and unreal. No one else demurs, much.

So convincing at first, even moving, the book cloyes after awhile, becoming a little dull in spite of what might be referred to as "excitement-packed pages of suspense"—when, where, how will he seduce her? All this causes the book to become one-

(Continued on page 33)