

A PASSAGE TO PALESTINE

THIEVES IN THE NIGHT, by Arthur Koestler (Macmillan, 10/6).

Mr. Koestler's new novel will inevitably provoke comparison to its disadvantage, in both cases, with his own best novel, *Darkness at Noon*, a powerful work of art, and with Mr. E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, since it too presents us with a picture of conflicting cultures under British rule and resembles *A Passage to India* not only in theme but sometimes in treatment as well. Suffering from its brevity and sketchy method, and from an unconvincing hero for transmitter, it gives little satisfaction as 'art'; but then the author calls it a Chronicle and we must take it for what it offers to be. There is a classic example of each of the opposite ways of presenting the victims of persecution so as to arouse sympathy, one by way of the novelist's art and the other by assembling first-hand documents, and Mr. Koestler's method falls short of the success of either. In Franz Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*—surely one of the great novels of the world—we see how essential for this purpose bulk is, the slow building-up of sympathy with a nucleus of characters and of appreciation of the alien culture of which they are specimens. Werfel, a Viennese Jew, cannot have known the Armenian history from inside, but though we may suspect that the persecution of the Armenian race by the Young Turks nationalist movement and their resistance to annihilation was for him a symbol of the tragedy that was to take place in Europe (he wrote in 1932), yet that history is completely realized from within, and the beauty and value of that extraordinary ancient culture is conveyed by a wealth of convincing detail, duly subordinated it is true to the total artistic scheme. Mr. Koestler has sacrificed the advantages of a massive lay-out; he has moving passages and incidents but they are insufficiently prepared for. His purpose would have been advanced by a great deal more of such incidental pieces of cultural history as that of the Bokharian quarter of Jerusalem and the glimpses he gives of kabbalists and rabbis and of the history of Zionism. On the other hand, the title 'Chronicle' reminds us of the recent success of the objective method achieved by the anonymous author of *The Dark Side of the Moon*¹ in merely getting first-hand accounts of their experiences from Poles transported to the Soviet labour camps during the attempt to absorb Poland made by Russia after the Russo-German pact had been signed. These documents are linked together and placed in a total historical and geographical setting by the author with great skill, but the success of this overwhelming book depends on its not being art but raw fact that is offered us. Mr. Koestler has a good many fragments of unassimilated experiences of this kind in *Thieves in the Night*, but they don't, in that medium, tell as they

¹Faber, 12/6.

should—in contrast to the use of similar material in his last novel, *Arrival and Departure*.

In short, whereas *Darkness at Noon* has behind it, appropriately, the Conrad of *Nostramo* and *Under Western Eyes*, *Thieves in the Night* shows its author as not having completely absorbed Aldous Huxley, Dos Passos and E. M. Forster. He borrows the technique of *U.S.A.* to introduce a series of historical facts and documents into an otherwise stream-of-consciousness novel, but except for this useful trick, these novelists are not really at all *à propos*. Huxley is visible in some embarrassing gratuitous knowingness on the psycho-physical, but Koestler has first-hand experience of life, both varied and intense (for he has been peculiarly alive in the contemporary world) from which to evolve his theorizing and doesn't need Huxley's bookish smartness. Moreover, unlike Huxley and like Conrad, he respects life, and can sympathize with even very unsavoury people. In fact, he seems able to feel sympathy for almost everybody, even for the attitude of the old Arab who when reproached for not working the land like the hated settlers on the Dogs' Hill replies 'You speak like a fool. Is the hill here for me, or am I here for the hill?'—for everybody except Arab agitators and the English governing class.

This was perhaps his real link with Forster. For his presentment of the situation in Palestine had really nothing in common with the other writer's of the Indian problem, in spite of the external parallel between Jew-Arab-British Mandate rule and Hindu-Moslem-British Raj. The parallel has attracted some similar scenes. But there is an edge on the strain between the government representatives and the Hebrew settlers and between all three parties at the Arab peace-making ceremony which is absent from the bridge-party in *A Passage to India*, for Koestler writes from the under-dog's point of view while Forster is still one of the ruling caste, even though blushing for his compatriots' bad manners. Koestler lacks Forster's charm but he gains in seriousness. His comedy is grimmer and his criticism much keener—for instance, his criticism of Jewish characteristics goes much deeper than does Forster's of the English Public School type. And how much more memorable his court-scene, where the illegal immigrant, sentenced to imprisonment and routine deportation, acquires symbolic power with his deafness (due to a blow from a guard at Dachau) that makes the trial incomprehensible to him and with his haunting reiterated cry to the lawyer: 'Was ist los? Was hab' ich getan?'. Similarly the evasive mysticism that crops up in *A Passage to India* as that book's localisable weakness is replaced by Koestler's real advantage in having an objective, a traditional religious, mysticism for reference, emotionally impressive and rooted in the history of a race. The Social Democracy and Leninism of the young settlements is seen against a background of, sometimes pervaded by, the old religious forms and symbols. The book is held together by an inside account of life in a pioneer Commune, one of 'the hundred odd where individual property is completely

vested in the community, where all men are really equal, and where you can live and die without ever having touched money'. [We are told that all reference to this successful working of rural Communism is banned in the Russian press.] This fascinating subject leads the narrator to make notes on the drift of culture represented in Palestine which are not the least interesting parts of the book. For instance, whereas the parents, he says, were 'the most cosmopolitan race of the earth', the children, native Palestinians, are what he calls 'Hebrew Tarzans'; he finds the new generation and what they stand for 'frightening'. He traces this cultural regression to the language they speak:

'Their parents were notoriously polyglot—they have been brought up in one language which had been hibernating for twenty centuries before being brought artificially back to life . . . Our children are brought up in a language which has not developed since the beginnings of the Christian era . . . And so this young generation is brought up in a language which suffers from loss of memory . . . the humanistic hormones of the mind are absent . . . In other words, they have ceased to be Jews and become Hebrew peasants'.

Finally Joseph the narrator is driven out of his paradise, the Commune, into the extremists' party by the pressure of the political situation (the book covers the years 1937 to 1939) and we are shown that from the inside too. We are made aware of the force of the arguments by which the methods of terrorism come to seem justified and inevitable—what the author calls 'the logic of the political ice-age'.

To return to the comparison with *A Passage to India*. *Thieves in the Night* will not have the same success, at least in this country, though it may well have, and for the same reasons, in the United States (there is a sympathetic American journalist in the book designed express). Mr. Forster's satire was not unacceptable: he accused the Anglo-Indians (old style) of nothing worse than bad manners and lack of imagination. Of the darker side of British rule in India he made no mention. And the English reader had, to sustain his complacency, the consciousness of the undeniable benefits that British rule had conferred on India. Mr. Koestler is less tactful and he is not charming. I predict a hostile Press. *A Passage to India* came at just the right time (1924): an enlightened public here was ready to feel guilty about India and had nothing much to distract it. Koestler's effort is too late as journalism: the English are long past the stage where they might profitably have felt guilty about the history of British trusteeship of Palestine. And now the atom bomb and the two hundred Russian divisions in Europe have driven the Palestine and the Jewish questions out of any conceivable foreground; they are merely a nuisance. Moreover, there is no longer a public conscience to appeal to; what Mr. Koestler calls sometimes the political and sometimes the moral ice-age is upon us. And there is further what

he calls 'the law of universal indifference': 'for the conscience of mankind is a diffuse kind of vapour which only rarely condenses into working steam'. The value of this book will probably be what he calls it, that of a chronicle. Just as *The Dark Side of the Moon* records not only what Russia did [is doing] to Poles but what typical Soviet procedure is when the U.S.S.R. takes control of new territory. That is, a general as well as a particular contribution to social history.

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ELIOT'S HEIR

A MAP OF VERONA, by Henry Reed (*Cape*, 3/6).

THE GARDEN, by V. Sackville-West (*M. Joseph*, 8/6).

The exceptional unanimity of praise accorded to Mr. Reed's volume sends one back for a second look. The first had not recommended the quality of Mr. Reed's experience. Many of his poems seemed wordy failures, and several unambiguously bad. Yet Mr. Reed did not appear to be a very young man, a beginner, in whom errors of tone, emptiness of gesture, were to be ignored for the occasional successes of verbal talent, or the convincingness of a personal manner, no such signs having revealed themselves to me. I had decided that Mr. Reed's was merely another collection of verses published earlier in different periodicals. It was surprising therefore to find Mr. Reed generally acclaimed in terms suggested by the heading to this review. And now that second impressions have only confirmed the first, there is cause here for reflection on the kind of reading commonly given to Mr. Eliot's poetry, and the quality of that consensus which allows him the title 'great'. For the experience in Mr. Reed's book is of a paltry kind, and much of it innocently faked. The innocence is not only of this wheel-rumbling sort—

I have changed my mind: or my mind is changed in me
but of this (perhaps less innocent) in an apostrophe to the city
of Naples:

You were an early chapter, a practice in sorrow,
Your shadows fell, but were only a token of pain,
A sketch in tenderness, lust, and sudden parting,
And I shall not need to trouble with you again.

The same poem, 'A Map of Verona', concludes with the following wordplay:

And in what hour of beauty, and what good arms,
Shall I those regions and that city attain
From whence my dreams and slightest movements rise?
And what good Arms shall take them away again?

Several of the poems have a background of soldiering. Of these, the three poems in the group 'Lessons of the War' were an