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## Two Novels

THE PEOPLE FROM HEAVEN, by John Sanford. Harcourt Brace. \$2.50.

THE SIGNPOST, by E. Arnot Robertson. Macmillan. \$2.50.

"THE PEOPLE FROM HEAVEN" is pervaded by a single bitter emotion. One might call it wrath—the kind of wrath which the Puritan fanatic of the seventeenth century called forth from his Jehovah upon his enemies. But this wrath is here directed against the very heritage of fanaticism and bigotry in America. Sanford's people from heaven are the inheritors of all the evil ideas and forces in American life, and they are once more set, in their backward, isolated community, for a reign of persecution and intolerance.

The novel carries its ominous note of warning at the same time that it provides nothing but arrogant scorn and mordant laughter at the evil it so fantastically pursues. Those who would fight it, the characters who detest the fascist indecencies and provocations of the village bravos, seem baffled, sunk into the slime of this community, and the one for whom they fight, the Negro woman America Smith, is an allegorical figure. Yet her presence allows Sanford, quite transparently, to transcend the hard naturalism with which he writes about this village, for her almost mystical sublimity provides a startling contrast between the symbolic portent of the suffering of her race and the base passions that her appearance arouses.

But if one wishes to savor Sanford's emotion, he will find it consistently present in the strange literary anatomy the novelist has constructed. Rarely has such an essentially naturalistic approach to familiar literary matter appeared in such rich and conventionally antipodal vestments. What we take at first glance as poetry reads like prose, but what ostensibly is prose is studded with precious refinements of notation, clearly drawn from the verbal devices of modern poetry. I can remember some astounding sentences and forget entire episodes. Yet I will not forget soon Sanford's burlesque of Jonathan Edward's God (here in the hands of an Angry Sinner) and I venture the opinion that it is an authentic addition to the store of American humor. But this specialized brilliance of writing becomes a disharmony when we cannot accept it as a just variation on the central theme.

Briefly, this is a particularly unlovely account of the ugly trail scarred by race hatred through a backward community of upstate New York. Such a cursed, unhappy lot of people you read about only in American regional fiction: The natives of Faulkner and Caldwell find a little time at least for something besides hating, but not the folk of this upstate Sodom. They kill each other daily with their eyes, and if you think they don't mean it, you can find a

whole arsenal of weapons in their kitchens. Even the local man of God marvels that he cannot bring himself up to the standard of violence which the town has set. Such a superfluity of malignance leaves one numb. Since the common heritage of this community is a crazed individualism—with long-standing hatreds and instinctive aversions to the traditional commodities of social life—it is not surprising that every character in the book seems warped to some degree. For this reason, it is futile to examine the lines that are drawn among the townsmen over the specific racial situation that arises in the story, at least, if you are looking for some revealing comment on forces today in opposition in American life. These people are rotted with hatred, and just as instinctive and natural to them is the violence with which it must go hand in hand.

I wonder whether Sanford feels that all this adds up satisfactorily. I, for one, lost interest in what the total was supposed to be long before the end of the book. I was distracted by Sanford's literary embroidery, I was fascinated by his fluent use of unusual idioms of speech, I was curious about his bedevilment of the ministry, and I became fatigued with his relentless pursuit of biting ironies and contrasts.

"THE SIGNPOST" is the story of the brief disengagement of two people from the tensions of war at a time when the great air battles were being fought over England. The situation of these two people is one that only this war could evoke: the war brings them together, the war makes their response to each other a miracle of spontaneous understanding. But in reading about Tom Fairburn and Denyse Messagere one is never reminded of how trite, how inexplicable, their emotions may seem, as a commonplace of the many meetings and *affaires* for which the war seems to assume an automatic responsibility. E. Arnot Robertson has presented them, wisely, effectively, with the sharpened insight of a writer who never needs to rely on explanation exterior to character, through her complete awareness of the impact already planted in them by the war. Thus, though the war's great forces and issues are only obliquely registered in their outward experience, the war is implicit in every event, the knowledge of it undisclosed, but subtly present, in every moment of the novel. Since there is no background in the story Miss Robertson's point of concentration is the meaning of the experience to the characters, and here her control of fiction is unmistakable. These are people, she has made clear, who must recover a sense of rightness with themselves before they can face the objective pressure of living and working in wartime; therefore, the inner necessity to love is an imperative prerequisite to the wartime necessity to hate. But this restriction on the

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interest of character in no sense qualifies its validity as nourishment for a battered morale.

It is a part of this novelist's remarkable ability that her characters emerge slowly, and only through the process of their revelation to others. Though the felicity and charm of this may be perceived at the first meeting of Tom and Denyse, it is not until the two are settled for their short holiday at Kildooey that they come close to each other through their association with the Irish folk of this neighborhood. What Tom Fairburn could have never managed successfully by himself—the self-forgetting for self-preservation which his war-frayed nerves seem to demand, through an escape into the quiet unchanged life of an Irish fishing village—he discovers is possible with Denyse. Together they escape the danger of a quick shallow retreat through unending self-confession by becoming a part of the village.

And here the sad immutability of Irish village life enters, as a curtain rises on a play within a play: a brief tragedy acted out by other players tormented by passions and perplexities which offer the onlookers either solution, relief, or a mocking commentary to their own dilemmas. The encircling stage is forgotten—the clouded impersonal world tragedy, which, if unperceived through self-occlusion of sight, brings distraction. In their absorption in this small sector of humanity, Tom and Denyse deepen their own knowledge of each other and regain the perspective that they must have to act at all in the "real" play. This happens, convincingly, without mystery, only with the complexity any dialectic contrast has for anyone who has become hypersensitive through the sustained shock of wartime experience.

The profound irony of the novel, which in no way alters the psychological verity of Kildooey's effect on Tom and Denyse, is that their restoration of hope comes out of the intense despair of Kildooey. Perhaps that may be fathomed as the revivifying power of a "pastoral illusion" which people as sophisticated as Tom and Denyse may respond to. It is true that they take from Kildooey more than they give, though Bridie and her Aunt Mary Sullivan would candidly deny that. But for all of their freshening their senses from these remarkable people, they are brought too close to the private springs of the misery of the young in Kildooey not to understand how much the present, of which they are the symbol, must mark change through some tragedy. And when that tragedy occurs, really through the slightest disturbance in the lives of two young people, the weight of its remorse can be judged by what Tom says to Denyse: "It isn't much to have bought at such an awful price." And what he has learned comes quite simply to this: "There's a sort of perspective gets lost when one's worried in a personal way: the

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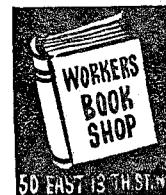
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## BACK THE ATTACK

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sort that makes it possible to believe someone else's death might really be as tragic as one's own." But then he has withdrawn from the play, and the altered perspective, one sees at once, is the one thing required on the larger span of the stage.

ALL the praise one might bestow on the expertness of this writing may be comprised in a recognition of firm control of subject: particularly the remarkable juxtaposition of Tom and Denyse against the village folk of Kildooey and the resourceful way in which characters are developed against each other. Of Ireland, the unhappy "land of the old," this is a sad and foreboding picture, unreclaimed by any "poetry" one may find in the people, but of great human interest for the contradictions that are revealed. Miss Robertson's study of the priest, Father Keith, deserves more attention, for what is manifest in his contradictions is spoken with exquisite clarity, yet the justice of her treatment in no way compromises one's judgment. And though she may lose her friends in Eire as she anticipates, I cannot believe that she has done them any disservice in her novel.

I should like to say finally that the novel, as war literature, has a tonic quality, though it may prove disagreeable to those who scoff at anything discovered through a fundamental respect for humanity grounded in emotions as naive as love or wonder, and living discovered in joy in building and talking with simple folk. The prophets of confusion and retreat, who have scraped the black pit of their own brains and found their spines an uncomfortable appendage thereto, shout loudly to each other in a void of their own making. Out of their narrow class appeal they can establish no connections with the people meaningfully involved in this war. But even within the limitations of a love story, there can be a depth of understanding, a realization of the fruitfulness of a simple experience for extending and fortifying the will to live and to strengthen the desire to take part in the exhausting but imperative tasks of this war. That kind of fiction, I believe, Miss Robertson has given us here.

ALAN BENOIT.

## Looking at Science

(Continued from page 15)

the Grumman *Hellcat* with its leak-proof gas tanks. The remarkable new jet-propelled plane, super-aircraft carriers of 45,000 tons, an eight-ton Navy torpedo plane *Seawolf*, new wind tunnels, transportable hangars and robot planes which have already entered into maneuvers with ground forces.

Prospecting madly for the world's supplies can well be understood in an emergency year. The Russians have organized numerous surveys. American opinion has it that petroleum will be produced in the

region around the North Pole. Nature itself obliged us with the spectacle of the birth of a new volcano, Paricutin, about 200 miles west of Mexico City. Earthquakes are still Japan-hostile. Precious deposits have been found of immediate use in war, as quartz for radar, vanadium for steel, and tantalum for surgical and electrical equipment.

Technologies are being revolutionized. Gas turbines can now operate at 1,500° Fahrenheit because of remarkable heat resistant alloys. There are excellent tubeless tires under development. Some are filled with anti-freeze. Electroplating with tin and silver has been made extremely fast and economical. Plastics cannot be discussed here in detail only because of the magnitude of the development. We shall have non-skid plastics, optical glasses made without sand, water paints for cement, plastic lithographic plates, better photographic development, better welding both of metal and wood, marvelous gas masks which re-use precious air at high altitudes, air-conditioning for the average home, and gadgets by the thousands.

THE elusive mind is being rendered more and more materialistic by the exigencies of war. Even psychoanalysis is turning materialistic. The psychiatrists will have their "Guadalcanal neurosis" and the "Brooklyn syndrome" (a chip-on-the-shoulder defensiveness), but they have to come down to serious physiological effects in the consideration of "boiler-makers' deafness" which depends on easy hearing fatigue, so subject to abuse in cannonading. Efforts are being made to measure fatigue objectively, e.g., by response to vibrations of a tuning fork.

Practical steps have had to be taken in establishing rumor clinics, which number about forty. There has been learned talk about morale. They say it has twelve components. At any rate, it seems that headlines which emphasize bad news affect it much more favorably than the pollyanna headlines. And, think of it, they have produced a questionnaire to eliminate unnecessary questionnaires! And so on and so on. And all the way down the line we have the learned sociologists who at last seem to have discovered anti-Semitism. But they ain't explaining yet.

## New Soviet Changes

(Continued from page 4)

finance, trade, justice, public health and state control. But above all these, the Union Republics have the right to secede—a right which represents the highest measure of autonomy and a right which Stalin defended against those who opposed it.

There are more Lerner violations of fact but one in particular stands out—an assertion that the USSR is engaging in power politics by adding sixteen votes to its bar-

gaining position. What, he asks, would happen if we adopted the same practice and our own forty-eight states appointed their own ambassadors and signed separate treaties? The comparison between the sixteen Union Republics and the forty-eight states has absolutely no foundation in fact, history, ethnography, or anything else. The sixteen republics represent *sixteen different nations*, each with its own language, customs, traditions, literature, culture, and psychological makeup, all of them historically evolved—not a phenomenon that took place over night. Some of these nations are as different from each other as India is from Canada. Mr. Lerner would have us believe the British Commonwealth is a “historical fact” and, therefore, entitled to six votes for its dominions, the Soviet multi-national state, on the other hand, is “an overnight paper construction” and, therefore, not entitled to separate representations abroad. The fact is that many of the Soviet nations are as old as any on earth and older than some of the members of the Commonwealth. Their existence was not recognized by the czarist regimes but that makes them no less an “historical fact.”

Integral to Lerner’s power politics mania is that the Russians are interested in getting sixteen extra votes at some future world legislative assembly or peace conference. Out of such thinking, Lerner establishes a new bogey: instead of there being one Bolshevik “menace” there will now be sixteen. Such is the political sewer from which the noxious gases rise. Interestingly enough Hearst’s New York *Mirror* (February 3) gets the same idea across in a cartoon on that newspaper’s editorial page.

Walter Lippmann has replied to what he calls Lerner’s “amateurish objection.” This is a reply that comes not from the Reds but from a conservative publicist, and he says that it is impossible that decisions at a peace conference “will be taken by counting votes. Obviously, the only way the decisions can be taken is under the leadership of the great powers and by their consent, and in consultation and, so far as possible, in agreement with the other powers which are concerned with the decision. Voting cannot and will not be the method of deciding the great issues. . . .” The idea that a show of hands will determine the future may prevail in the world of college classrooms, but in the real world issues are decided by conciliation and conference.

Happily, Lerner’s hue and cry was not the dominant note in press reaction—at least not here in the East. Americans, heart and soul behind Teheran, can see quite beyond the tips of their noses. For it is clear, as Molotov put it, that the new Soviet decisions contribute to the moral and political defeat of fascism—fascism which exterminates nations and gives them the diplomatic autonomy of a self-perpetuating treaty with the graveyard.

JOHN STUART.

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# "SONG OF BERNADETTE"

Daniel Prentiss reviews the film version of Franz Werfel's novel. What is its meaning for us today? . . . Movie round-up.

IN SPITE of the fact that Miss Kate Cameron of the *New York Daily News* has proclaimed the *Song of Bernadette* "the greatest picture ever made," the film merits serious consideration. For Twentieth Century-Fox's retelling of the Franz Werfel novel is an elaborate masterpiece of a sort. Made with great care, employing a cast of expert players and a superb ensemble of technicians, *Bernadette* is a full-scale demonstration of the resources the industry has at its command. But even if this film had been a "quickie," let us say, it would still demand attention and analysis—if only for the circumstance that it promises to be but the first of an extensive series of similar subjects. For example, *The Robe*, from Lloyd Douglas' novel, and *Keys of the Kingdom* are going into production immediately.

What about the *Song of Bernadette*, then? What is its meaning for us today? The film tells us by wide inference and in strictly circumscribed symbols that revelation can come to the lowly of station—the son of the carpenter, to Bernadette Soubirous, whose father, an unemployed miller, has been reduced to carting away refuse for the price of a loaf of bread—as well as to the secure, the ordained, and mighty ones of the world. This, we submit, is an idea that can be accepted as inarguably valid—an idea that gives the film whatever appositeness to our lives it possesses. When *this* is the burden and content of *Bernadette* the film can affect your sympathies; a sensitiveness of treatment, a humanness makes itself evident.

All else in *Bernadette*, in my opinion, fails to make contact with today, fails to establish its significance. As perhaps the reader is aware, *Bernadette* is the story of the miracle of Lourdes—the appearance of the Immaculate Conception to child Bernadette of the Soubirous family. There can be no objection to cinematic treatment of the theme from any quarter whatsoever. But the film-goer, I believe, is justified in expecting that the theme in its development will touch him and his problems closely, and bring him light. But in the main, *Bernadette* is a withdrawing from life and a withholding of light. The miracle in *Bernadette* is strictly a miracle *in camera*. It is largely miracle for miracle's sake. And by far the primary concern of

the film is to insist on the genuineness of Soubirous' vision and to heap derision on those that differ. From this intent the film never departs. This reviewer has seen films on the miraculous before. I have in mind, particularly, Carl Dreyer's memorable *Joan of Arc*. The Maid of Orleans beheld visions, consorted with voices, but to the end that France liberate itself from the oppressor and regain statehood. Can there be any comparison between the pertinence of *Joan*, which bids us arm ourselves, and the retreats of *Bernadette*?

*Bernadette* runs approximately two hours and thirty-five minutes. By today's standards a running time of that length is not outside the pale of acceptance. Yet I have never observed more general writhing and shifting than in the gala premiere audience of *Bernadette* during the last hour of the run-through. It couldn't have been because the *theme* of the film—the miracle of Lourdes—was too slight to justify some fifteen reels of footage. Themes of themselves impose no length limitations. Lawrence Sterne takes chapters to get one of his characters down a

flight of steps. On the other hand, Karl Marx once answered a question on what constitutes the essence of life, with a single word—struggle. *Bernadette's* theme, then, is of itself not at fault. In my opinion, the audience's restlessness is the consequence exclusively of the film's *point of view*—which proves increasingly tangential, and finally stifling.

WHAT makes it even more difficult for this reviewer to reconcile himself to the picture under consideration is its marked intolerance. In this regard, we discover that the *New York Times'* reviewer, Mr. Bosley Crowther, received somewhat a similar impression. Writes Mr. Crowther: "The *Song of Bernadette* in our opinion, makes a rather dogmatic statement at the start which tags its contents for special pleading. 'For those who believe in God,' says the foreword, 'no explanation is necessary. For those who do not believe in God, no explanation is possible.' That is by way of putting its critics in a questionable light, which is something like handling them a ballot on which the



From "No Greater Love," new Soviet film opening at the Victoria soon.