Side Trackers of American Thought

MOLDERS OF AMERICAN THOUGHT (1933-1934), edited by William H. Cordell, Doubleday, Doran and Company. $3.50.

RECENTLY Mr. Harry Hansen reviewed the above-mentioned book and, after praising it up to the stratosphere, he reminded himself of a weak spot and wrote: "It is unfortunate that Mr. Cordell did not include one of the extreme radicals, in order to present both the terms on which the leftists hope to remake the American world and the character of its expression." Unfortunately is hardly the word. Unscrupulous would be a better one. Mr. Cordell was anxious to give space to Mr. C. Hartley Grattan and the latter's defence of those younger American intellectuals, who are unable to swallow Marx completely and regard the discipline of the Communist Party as a blow to their sacred, tissue-paper individualities. However, Mr. Cordell had no desire to reprint an article by Granville Hicks, Milton Howard, or best of all, Earl Browder, because such an inclusion might have been an antidote to the conservative-liberal poison, which Mr. Cordell has mixed.

Mr. C. Hartley Grattan is a profound humorist, who can assert that "Mr. Calverton is, of course, a convinced Communist and he and his followers have gone the whole way to the left." This practice of singling out the radical quacks, peddlers and quibblers characterizes the collection. The writers attempt to imitate Machiavelli, but fail far short of his cleverness. They contend that the Communist Party program in this country is dictated by "men in Moscow utterly ignorant of American social peculiarities," but the actual peculiarities, the anemic qualms, the bland opportunistics, the chauvinisms masquerading as American traits, are better known to opposite intellectuals both in America and Moscow than the Grattans and Calverters have any desire to admit.

The essay on verse, "Our Haughty Poets," by Mr. Newton Arvin, is nebulous. After confessing that American poets of the present "wish to express not so much of their own private experiences as the experiences and purposes of a whole class," and that many "desire to repudiate individualism in the interest of radical collectivism," Mr. Arvin arrives at no conclusion clearer than the assertion that they will be less and less contented with personal immersions and will acquire a sense of responsibility to the culture of which they are a part. This smooth method of pointing to gravities and social changes and then minimizing them, would seem to be the trade-mark of certain perturbed liberals in our own time. Mr. Arvin mentions many contemporary Left poets but forget to include Maxine Hong Kingston, H. H. Lewis, Kenneth Fearing, and Don West—poets with a relatively simple incivility, unadorned intensity, naturally—while Isidor Schneider is bracketed in the strange company of James Rorty and Horace Gregory.

The anthology opens with an extended, lugubrious essay by Theodore Dreiser, in his prose style—"The Myth of Individuality"—and Mr. Dreiser declares that we are all tied by common needs, but fail to offer any solution other than the would-be mystical poem—"I am the doubter and the doubt, and I the hymn the Braham sings"—which closes his performance. The time of leniency toward Dreisers and Sherwood Andersons has long since passed. It is no longer pertinent to challenge them to a definite voicing of beliefs after their antics in the notorious Spectator. Their names may still be on the committees of organizations defending the rights of political prisoners, but they smack more of absent-mindedness than of any lingering indecision. If, in the future, they decide to make occasional contributions to the Left, these should not be ignored but received, certainly, with an attitude of fundamental distrust.

Another essay in this doleful aggregation is "What Religion Means to Me," by Pearl S. Buck. This author states that she is not a Communist but that the spirit of religion "is working in Communism," that the Communists are "missionaries," revere their leaders as much as Christians revere the saints so-called, while the proletarian "heaven of revolt" is as remote as the angelled, Christian paradise. This form of attack is insidious because it confuses steadfast, realistic insight with fanatical vaporings and strives, cunningly to malign the former by identifying it with the latter, in the hope that workers and a disgruntled middle class will be less inclined to trade the old for the new, if they can be led to think that such an alteration would be only a trivial exchange. The fact that Communists have a mission—the militant liberation of the proletariat in every country—is linked to the more odious noun, "missionary," in the effort to bewilderve and make possible converts to Communism and inoculate them with a defeatism, in which they will consider the goal of a classless world to be as distant as any concocted Nirvana. The entire anthology bears an erroneous title. It should have been labelled "Side-Trackers of American Thought (1933-1934)", and, in parenthesis ("by no means completely successful").

MAXWELL BODENHEIM.

Brief Review


THIS is another exposé of the Catholic Church by a former priest too honest and too decent to remain within the fold. And he is undoubtedly correct in stating that the number of those following his example would be greatly augmented were it not for the sheer fear of making a sharp break with the past and starting a wholly new way of life, both in an economic and spiritual sense. Mr. Lehmann's best chapters are in the first half of the book, in which he gives interesting information about the training of priests, the hocus-pocus with which they befuddle the masses, and the corrupting attitude of Rome towards sex. The author's main object, however, is to save religion for mankind by getting rid of reactionary Catholicism; and he never shows the slightest awareness of the fact that all religion is something of a fraud and survives mainly because of backward social and economic conditions.

FIESTA IN MEXICO, by Erna Fergusson; illustrations by Valentin Vidaurreta. Alfred A. Knopf, 1934. $3.50.

Intended as an "objective" description of various Mexican fiestas, Fiesta in Mexico is actually a confessional for the comfort of melancholy bourgeois who every day have less reason to believe in paradise. Capitalists will warm to the news that there still exists a land where insulted and injured folk take pride in the principle, "If I show no resentment, I am greater than he who offends me"—and where children in church, agape before idols and tinsel, still turn in wonder and ask, "Mamá, is this heaven?"

Familiarity with Engels' "Origin of the Family" would have enabled Miss Fergusson to write a much better, because more understandable, book. She would have seen, to begin with, the fiestas and bullfights of Mexico as "breadless circuses," and all her descriptions would have gained by being related, even implicitly, to the hard facts of history, civilization, and social organization. However, constricted as it is within the narrow limits of uncoordinated visual detail and confused skepticism, it remains pretty much a gaudy Mexican-pink dulce to divert and hush the wails of fat, frightened capitalist babies.


Professor Winther offers a detailed analysis of O'Neill's plays from the repudiated Thirst to Days Without End. O'Neill is credited with illuminating a series of very important modern problems, such as The Pagan Way of Life, Determinism, Fatalism and Free Will and The Relativity of Good and Evil. Dr. Winther suggests that O'Neill's contribution as a philosopher is heightened because he doesn't fall for the "easy philosophy of Communism." The author says, "O'Neill is too soundly pessimistic to be beguiled by so facile a solution. To him there is something fundamentally tragic in life itself." After reading this volume it appears that it is still possible to seriously contend that art has nothing to do with propaganda, or vice versa.
THE Workers' Music League of New York has announced the formation of a Workers' Music School.

The economic crisis was not required to disclose the manifold weaknesses of bourgeois schools of music. Most of these schools have been founded as a result of the interest in music of some wealthy individuals, motivated by a desire to become "patrons" of the arts on the basis of large endowments. They have sought to lure students with the prestige that comes from studying with world famous artists, and with a pot of gold and a distinguished "career" as incentive for their efforts. These rich institutions were obviously not organized for profit, since their endowments underwrote any deficits. But this fact has not made them available to a wide enrollment of whatever economic or artistic status. The entrance requirements closed doors to all but those whose obvious qualifications promised quick development into a kind of musical brilliance which would reflect glory upon the institutions which nurtured them. They have granted scholarships and student aid in ever increasing proportions in order to attract students of talent. But a false pretension has always existed in this encouragement of embryonic musicians for professional careers. For years opportunities for musicians have been narrowing. With the exception of a handful of names, no concert artist has received any consistent remuneration—and in pedagogy the private instructor has found himself less and less able to compete with the heavily endowed schools.

Even the faculties of our leading schools have become reduced to more and more exclusive cliques, largely of imported musicians: Russian emigrés, English dandies, etc.—any and all except Americans—unless these were from the ranks of products of the leading teachers—graduate students hired as "secondary" instructors. Even in the music schools associated with universities, where the entrance requirements demand a certain number of academic credits, there has long existed an indiscriminate scramble after a degree—that "quid pro quo" of the teacher in all our accredited universities where music is taught. It never seems to be taken into consideration, either by endowed music schools or higher institutions of learning, that the field for which they are madly preparing artists and pedagogues is narrowing to the vanishing point. With the smaller conservatories, many of which have folded up during the crisis, the efforts to create professional musicians for non-existent careers, may truly be characterized as obtaining money under false pretenses.

The Workers' Music School aims to avoid all in bourgeois schools of music. Conducted by a group of musicians who are specialists in their respective fields, the curriculum will include: theory, music appreciation, choral singing, and instruction in piano, violin and other instruments. These classes have been planned with a view to practical work in the revolutionary movement. And there are to be special courses in music criticism from the Marxian viewpoint. Music history is to be studied with the historical economic and political background taken into consideration. A group of specifically trained teachers will conduct a special department for children.

The nominal fees make the courses available to those workers and their children who are seriously interested both in preserving authentic musical traditions and in building a new musical world which will survive the collapse of an outmoded social system. The development of professional virtuosi, completely separated from the realities of the present as well as from important new musical developments, is far removed from the aims of the Workers' Music School.

Details of organization and registration are available from the Workers' Music League, 799 Broadway, New York City.

Ashley Pettis.