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Service Club Libraries Teeming With Fiction, Non-Fiction Works

By T-S KLAUS MANN.

While the Nazi hordes are in the habit of burning the masterworks of world literature, we prefer to read them. I daresay that the average American soldier is apt to read at least as much as the average American civilian, if not more. Camp Crowder is a good example. The libraries of our Service Clubs are always well-attended during the evening hours.

Of course, soldiers have a natural preference for literature dealing with subjects that have to do with their respective military-technical training. That is why there is a strong demand in our libraries for books about such things as radio, electricity, mathematics, pigeon-training, and foreign languages.

Apart from these specific interests, however, the literary tastes of Crowder men seem to be about the same as those of any other American community. Non-fiction, the librarians tell me, is more popular than fiction, here as everywhere. Almost 75 percent of all books going out are of the non-fiction type.

But good novels have their audience, in Army camps as in civilian life. The national bestsellers, with a few exceptions, are also the favorites in our Service Club libraries. Books like "The Rehe" by Lloyd C. Douglas, "Wide Is the Gate," by Upton Sinclair, Saroyan's "The Human Comedy," and Franz Werfel's religious novel, "The Song of Bernadette," seem to appeal to the readers in khaki uniforms as they do to the public at large.

There are, however, a few new publications, all available in our libraries, which should be no less attractive than the literary hits just mentioned.

Walter Lippman's book on "U. S. Foreign Policy" is absorbingly interesting—a lucid analysis of America's function and situation among the other great world powers in the past, now, and in the future. The distinguished political commentator and columnist is at his best in his concise and penetrating resume of American foreign policy during the past 100 years, from George Washington to Franklin D. Roosevelt. As for the future, Lippman recommends, or deems necessary, a "nuclear alliance" of the great powers now fighting the Axis together.

"Combined action by America, Britain and Russia," he says, "is the irreducible minimum guarantee of the security of each of them, and the only condition under which it is possible even to begin to establish any wider order of security."

Similar questions—the potentialities and problems of the post-war world—are discussed, from various angles, in a highly instructive volume, "Preface to Peace," which presents the views and suggestions of such prominent men as Wendell L. Willkie, Herbert Hoover, Henry A. Wallace, and Sumner Welles. It is stimulating and informative to notice both the analogies and the disagreements among these manifold messages—all of them so ardently concerned with the shape and purport of things to come; all of them sincere and serious—Willkie in his enthusiastic, colorful report of what he has seen traveling around "One World," Wallace in his bold and generous vision of "The Century of the Common Man," Hoover and Hugh Gibson in their conservatively realistic patriotism; Welles, the experienced statesman and diplomat, in his shrewd and well-balanced "Blueprint for Peace."

But we are still at war. While the political thinkers and leaders are engaged in the vital task of planning the world of tomorrow, others are confronted with the grim realities of the world of today. Outstanding among recent war books is "Combined Operations," by Hilary A. St. George Saunders. The author—an English government official—gives us the detailed story of the British commando raids, beginning with the kidnapping of a German lighthouse keeper on an island off the coast, and working up to the Dieppe raid and the preliminaries of our invasion of North Africa. The book—remarkably free of any boastful or sensational clichés—is couched in so sober and factual a style that one critic called it "a miracle of understatement." But despite (or, perhaps, just because of) this unassuming, matter-of-fact presentation, the account is stirringly dramatic—full of suspense and action; an epic document of human fortitude and ingenuity.

The epithet "epic" seems apt to characterize also the posthumous work of Stephen Vincent Benet—"Western Star," a great narrative poem, the opening parts of which have recently been published. Benet's vast subject is—America; the American dream and the American reality as conceived and actually experienced by the pioneers and founding fathers. Unfortunately, Benet was not destined to bring to a conclusion his last and most ambitious poetic venture. Since Pearl Harbor, he devoted most of his time to writing for the government in the war effort. "The Infantry Journal" paid this homage to the late poet and patriot, in an editorial of May, 1943: "When Stephen Vincent Benet died suddenly in mid-March, the United States and the United Nations lost a soldier who was giving his utmost in their cause and who has now given his life."

As for the younger literary generation—the American vanguard—I was particularly struck by Frederick Prokosch's recent novel, "The Conspirators." Prokosch, who established his reputation with such fascinating books as "The Asiatics" and "The Skies of Europe," takes us this time into the gaudy, dangerous maze of Lisbon—once a placid, provincial city, now the feverish center of international intrigues, teeming with spies and refugees, martyrs and imposters, beautiful women and uprooted men. Prokosch excels in describing equivocal characters and eccentric milieus; he is capable of giving a touch of sensual sweetness to his pictures of murder and misery, whereas his love scenes are cruel and violent. There is a great deal of romance and a lot of crime and mystery in this extraordinary tale from war-torn Europe.

Apropos "spies" and "criminals," there is another thriller—although on an incomparably lower level, in every respect, than Prokosch's romantic vision—which may give you the jitters and, moreover, plenty of food for thought. The book I mean—"Passport to Treason," by

Allan Hynd—is the first complete inside story of Nazi spies and saboteurs in this country—presenting the whole sinister array of well-trained Fifth-Columnists and also some of the methods used by the FBI against them. It's a breathtaking yarn, and the most amazing, most alarming thing about it is that it's all true. All these ghastly things have actually taken place, and there is no guarantee that they won't happen again, on an even larger, even more frightening scale.

Beware of our enemies, wherever you find or suspect them. They are cunning and reckless; they hate us, they loathe our way of life. We have to fight them with all our energies, with all available weapons. And we have learned to realize that ideas and books, too, are weapons in this vital, decisive struggle.

Message
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