

VI - 73 E - 4. Carlson, Evans Fordyce, "The Passionate Story of a
Courageous American Woman", book review of Battle Hymn of China,
by Agnes Smedley, New York Herald Tribune, September 5, 1943.

V-73E-4

NEW YORK

Herald  Tribune

WEEKLY BOOK REVIEW

SECTION VIII

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 1943

16 PAGES

She Lived the War With China's Red Fighters

The Passionate Story of a Courageous American Woman

BATTLE HYMN OF CHINA.
By Agnes Smedley. . . . 544 pp. . . .
New York: Alfred A. Knopf. . . .
\$3.50.

Reviewed by
EVANS FORDYCE CARLSON

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"Twin Stars of China"

WE AMERICANS rather like to regard ourselves as rugged realists, and yet so accustomed have we become to the habit of putting a good face on things that often we are shocked when presented with brutal, unvarnished truth. The practice of looking at the world through tinted glasses is both a national vice and a vicious weakness. In the months and years before Pearl Harbor we refused to admit that the selling of war materials to Japan was providing the means for destroying our own flesh and blood: yet the evidence of Japan's plans was there for all who would read.

Because of addiction to sugar-coated literature there will be many who will not like Agnes Smedley's "Battle Hymn of China," for Miss Smedley does not pull her punches, nor does she insult the spade by attempting to disguise it as a heart. In common with our soldiers at the front she has lived in close proximity to suffering and death, and like them she sees life in terms of black or white, good or bad. It is odd, extremely odd, what a power for good the presence of death can be. In its presence man returns to fundamental honesty and to truth.

The story of China which Miss Smedley presents is not the story one sees in the public press or in magazine articles or in propaganda literature. It is the story of the real China, the China composed of more than four hundred millions of human beings who hope some day to govern themselves, and who strive mightily to evolve a pattern of life which will improve their economic well-being. Simultaneously with the resistance against Japan, a great social revolution has been going on within China. One learns of such things only by living and moving with the people, sharing their hardships, their hopes, and their fears. This Agnes Smedley did for many years. Because it is necessary to know the character of the woman in order to properly evaluate the book I should like to share my impressions of her with the reader.

I first met Agnes Smedley at the headquarters of China's famous Eighth Route Army in the winter of 1937. She was there as a war correspondent, while I had arrived to observe guerrilla operations for our Navy Department. The meeting was not auspicious. Accustomed to being regarded as some kind of dangerous animal by her compatriots because of her uncompromising honesty, her defenses immediately went up, and I got a bleak reception. However, in the weeks that followed our common interest in the welfare of the Chinese people overcame her prejudice and gradually the veil of hostility disappeared, revealing the real Agnes Smedley. I perceived a woman compassionate, courageous, utterly selfless in her devotion to others and



Agnes Smedley

indefatigable in her efforts to relieve suffering and to banish ignorance. Nothing drove her to supreme heights of fury so much as the exploitation of human beings. She would fight with reckless courage for the principles she considered right, and yet so tender was her heart that she would work for days without sleep administering to the needs of the wounded and the diseased under conditions which would have revolted the

average American. Such courage, such unselfish devotion to personal conviction could not but evoke admiration and affection.

When I returned to Hankow in the spring of 1938 I found a new Agnes Smedley. Here under battle conditions her sterling qualities were thrown into relief, and those of the foreign colony who remained (foreign diplomats, correspondents



"For hours we talked across the candle light"
An illustration from "Battle Hymn of China"

and military attaches) recognized them. This knowledge moved her to throw aside the barriers she had erected to shield a sensitive soul. The air of belligerence disappeared, and she devoted herself without inhibition to the work of expanding China's medical relief agencies.

When I departed, shortly before the fall of Hankow in October, 1938, she was preparing to join the medical corps of the New Fourth Army, in the exposed areas along the lower Yangtze River. Nearly two years later a dispatch from Chungking announced her arrival in an emaciated condition. In the interim she had traveled with troops of the Chinese Communist and Kuomintang armies on both sides of the Yangtze, the only foreigner to witness operations in central China during the years 1938-'39-'40. The account of what she saw and did during this period forms a substantial part of "Battle Hymn of China."

The early chapters of the book are autobiographical, dealing with those stages of Agnes Smedley's life about which she wrote in greater detail in "Daughter of Earth," but they provide an important clew to the motivation of the author in devoting twelve years of her life to aiding the underprivileged of China. During those twelve years she was an intimate observer, indeed she was almost a part of the Chinese social revolution which began in 1928. She sets forth her observations with the same pugnacious courage she has manifested in her manner of living. Her honesty is frequently brutal, but Miss Smedley writes of life that is real, not fiction. There can be no gainsaying her sincerity.

She arrived in China in 1928, when two factions of the Kuomintang were engaged in bitter struggle. She hated the aloofness of the patricians who lived luxuriously in Peiping and the port cities; when they told her there were no classes in China she shouted at them to prove it by pulling their ricksha coolies home. She saw the terror in Shanghai; she shared, indeed, the lives of hunted men. She was herself subjected to harassing house arrest.

She wanted China to fight Japan when China's leaders were still hesitant. She talked too much for her own comfort. She met guerrillas and Red Army commanders, and their often melodramatic stories dot the pages of her book.

She was in Sian when Chiang Kai-shek was kidnaped; her room was looted and she herself was almost killed in the disturbance. There she had her first contact with the mass of the Red Army. She liked those impassioned ragged warriors; most of the next five years of her life was devoted to tending their sick, sharing their hunger, to living, as no other foreign woman did, their battling way of life.

This book constitutes an important contribution to the material on current Chinese history. In it the blood and sweat and tears of the author merge with those of the people of whom she writes. We who read are her debtors, and theirs, for from the realism and courage and invincible determination portrayed here mirrored the reader draws fresh hope for the future of civilization.