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Battle Hymn of China by Agnes Smedley - German American
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Buchbesprechungen:

Battle Hymn of China

By AGNES SMEDLEY
Alfred Knopf, New York

If you want to learn how far an insatiable hunger for knowledge and truth, for independence and justice can carry an individual as well as a whole people, then you must read about Agnes Smedley and the Chinese people in Agnes Smedley's new book, "Battle Hymn of China." The book is dedicated "To the soldiers of China, poor glorious pioneers in the world struggle against world fascism." And after you have read the stories of the valiant guerilla fighters, of the brave women, and of the "little devils"; after you have absorbed her discussions with China's great revolutionary leaders like Mao Zze Tung and Chu Teh and read the glorious and tragic tales about Lu Hsun, the Voltaire of China; Mother Tsai or Dr. Lim of the Chinese Medical Cross, — well, after you have finished this passionate record of the current history of China as Agnes Smedley saw it, you will, I am sure, feel a little bit ashamed. You will realize how much we owe the Chinese people, how little we did to help them. Certainly, some people will not like Miss Smedley's ardent report. She is honest and does not conceal from you the lurid contrasts that exist in China. There are still relics of feudalism in China; there are greedy warlords, cruel landlords and merchants, corrupt officials and with them exploitation, poverty and injustice. She throws a whole barrage of brutal facts at you, but after you have swallowed them, what remains is an even bigger love and an even greater sympathy for the Chinese people.

And there is Agnes Smedley herself. You must read about her childhood and adolescent years on a poor farm in Missouri and in a dismal mining town in Colorado. Her mother "intermittently worked as a washwoman and a keeper of boarders," her father as an unskilled laborer who "drank to forget his hopes," and there were two brothers, poor laborers, too, of whom she tragically writes that they had "lived like animals without protection or education." But the frail, sensitive and stubborn girl did not give in and finally broke loose to snatch some formal education. It all took a long time and that is why Agnes Smedley was past forty before she ever read a play of Shakespeare's. But at this time of her life also she had already travelled all over Europe, spent eight strange years in Germany, played some part in the Free Indian movement and had visited the Soviet Union three times, the last time for almost a year. By the time, Agnes got around to read Shakespeare's plays, she who had never finished grade school and never attended high school, had already published hundreds of well-founded and well-written articles for big papers and several remarkable books. She had become one of the most ardent advocates of modern China where she spent 12 years, from 1928-41, not only as a foreign correspondent, but as an active participant in the heroic Chinese fight for freedom, following the armies, caring for the wounded and sick as a member of the Chinese Red Cross Medical Corps and in between lecturing and pleading for foreign aid and volunteers. Driven at length beyond the limits of her endurance, she fell ill of malnutrition and malaria and had to return to the United States where, fortunately, she regained her health and wrote this great and rich though often violent and bitter report on her twelve years in China, a report in which as a friend of hers and a great friend of China's, Lieutenant Colonel Carlson of the U.S.M.C. put it, "the blood and tears and sweat of the author merge with those of the people of whom she writes."

ELISABETH HAUPTMANN.