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Book review of Agnes Smedley's Battle Hymn of China

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Ten Years with the Chinese People

By E. O. LORIMER

A GIFTED writer is Agnes Smedley, a superlatively brave woman and an honest one, whose account of ten years' life in China, China of the Civil Wars, China of the Japanese invasion, bears the unmistakable hallmark of first-hand experience and of first-hand observation faithfully and fearlessly set down.

Prejudices she has in plenty, against wealthy landowners and rich merchants, corrupt officials, exploiters, appeasers and puppets kowtowing to the foe; bitter scorn and loathing of those American and British business men who feathered their nests by supplying Japan with oil and scrap to aid her murderous assault on China ("Japan had no sword, America gave her one")—these feelings we most justly share—and burning passion for the oppressed, the suffering and the poor.

Some bees there undoubtedly are in her bonnet, but despite prejudice and passion she must herself have caught a suspicion of their buzzing, and the introductory chapters to her *Battle Hymn of China* (Gollancz, 7s. 6d.) supply a brief autobiography, moving in its simplicity and its lack of self-pity, that arms the reader against the bees.

In America, in abject poverty, Agnes Smedley was born of a wastrel father and a cruelly overworked mother, and at the age of nine she began to earn her bread. Her dying mother's urgent injunction: "Get yourself an education," she could fulfil only by omnivorous, indiscriminate reading and by snatching at evening classes or special courses when the day's bread-winning was done.

Before the First World War chance brought her into contact with Indians in America whom the Germans were already diligently plying with pro-German and anti-British propaganda, and she spent some time in gaol, in solitary confinement, wrongly suspected of being a German agent. Emerging morose and embittered, without ties or prospects at home and full of adventurous longing to see the world, she set out for Germany with introductions from her Indian friends to the community of Indian malcontents whom Germany was sedulously cultivating for future use.

For eight years she lived in Germany as the unofficial wife of their leader, a learned, cultured, high-caste, disillusioned Brahmin, whose soul was storm-tossed with passions, resentments, and mental conflicts, whose home was a rendezvous for conspirators, a hospital for the sick, a refuge for the homeless. The physical strain of playing Martha to this ever-changing household, to whom she always remained an incomprehensible foreign drudge, added to the emotional strain of living in a psychological whirlpool of highly-strung neurotics, at last brought on a nervous breakdown and she quit, to earn her bread by journalism and teaching.

Agnes Smedley is, as I have said, an honest woman, and we must hope that some day she will find time to

study Indian history from untainted sources and blush to have written "that the British Government is imperialist no one can deny and India provides the bloody proof."

Her intention to see India for herself was diverted by a tempting offer from the *Frankfurter Zeitung* to send her as their special correspondent to China. In 1928 she arrived in Manchuria and promptly sent back articles on "Japan's mailed fist in Manchuria," which the paper hesitated to believe and did not print till 1931, after the Japanese invasion. She visited Peiping, Nanking, Shanghai, Canton and many other places and got some insight into the life of well-to-do and leisured China, but always she was instinctively drawn to visit rather hospitals and factories, schools and workers' tenements than the houses of the wealthy and cultured.

She found that the Kuomintang party, which had started with genuine socialist and revolutionary leanings, had now been invaded by the rich and influential, inclined to appeasement at any price, living in greater dread of Chinese reformers and Chinese Communists—indiscriminately dubbed "Reds"—than of Japanese invaders.

The Kuomintang had organized a kind of anti-Red Gestapo, the Blue Shirts, who tracked down, kidnapped, tortured and slew anyone suspected of "subversive activity." Miss Smedley has many vivid and horrible episodes to relate of this persecution. Her resolution was taken: "I would write of the common people, the soldiers, the peasants and the intellectuals who struggled for liberation from any form of oppression."

The year 1933 was eventful for her. The Nazis closed down the liberal and enlightened *Frankfurter Zeitung*, ending her contract and leaving her penniless. Severe heart trouble compelled her to spend her scanty savings on seeking a cure in Russia. Here she found that her pen could earn easy money, "but I could not imagine spending my life outside China." She ran home to seek a correspondent's contract in America, but found that her fact-reporting would be unwelcome. "We want peace," was the cry. Later when eloquently pleading for relief funds she bitterly notes: "If you write the facts the neat little souls of Americans and Englishmen will be so shocked that they will give no money at all but just go to another movie where Love solves everything."

Back she went to China to spend herself day and night for the country of her adoption: "I almost forgot I was not a Chinese myself." Living like the poorest, marching by night with guerrilla bands past Japanese-held positions, crouching in ditches as hostile planes thundered over—"symbols of Japanese imperialism and American greed"—toiling in improvised hospitals, organizing Industrial Co-operatives, encouraging village women in their National Salvation Associations, lecturing to troops and students,

assembling technical libraries for behind-the-Japanese universities, conducting anti-rat campaigns, and always, always writing reports and appeals, telling of China's bitter need for arms, ammunition, medicines and food. "I have always been a tinker, attempting many things, proficient in few." The world could do with more "tinkers" of the Smedley type.

Most of Miss Smedley's work was done behind the enemy lines with various units of the Red armies, ill-fed, ill-equipped and almost wholly without medical care. But such few doctors as there were established hospitals with what meagre resources they had, and trained thousands in first aid and simple relief work and sent them forth to train others. With crusading zeal and touching faith the "Reds" even established universities where refugee professors, lacking textbooks or material, taught mainly from memory. Here, too, they trained thousands to go out and spread such knowledge as they had gained, the students' slogan being "Fight and study; study and fight."

After a painful period of personal poverty, Miss Smedley was appointed correspondent to the *Manchester Guardian*. On one occasion enthusiastic women poured out of a village to greet the first foreign correspondent to share the work of guerrillas behind the Japanese, displaying banners on which was inscribed "Long live the *Manchester Guardian*, Voice of Democracy!"

Little as German or revolutionary Indian had disposed Miss Smedley to love the Briton, she writes with generous admiration of the unflinching sympathy and active help of every kind she could always count on from Sir Archibald Clark Kerr, the British Ambassador, and of the Medical Officer of Hong Kong, Dr. Selwyn Clarke, and his heroic wife who toiled unceasingly for China. These two heroic people refused to be evacuated from Hong Kong when its hours were manifestly numbered, but stayed to render what help they could to fellow sufferers in Japanese hands. Before this type of courage all other valour pales.

Though inevitably painful and harrowing, this is a great and gallant book and almost every page is lit with tales of such courage, sacrifice and fortitude that they stir the heart and fortify the faith in human nature. Miss Smedley has a rare gift of pen-portraiture and the reader is left with a whole treasure-house of living sketches of men and women, famous or obscure, whom it is an honour to have met. Not the least memorable is the portrait, unconsciously drawn, of the author herself: a great and gallant figure.

That so vital, so valuable, so unforgettable a book (with excellent map) should be made available at so derisory a price is surely a triumph of wartime publishing. Go buy it, read it, lend it, and draw from it hope and inspiration.