

VI - 73 E - 26. "This Is China: An Outstanding Book" - Book Review  
by V. J. Hearn of Agnes Smedley's Battle Hymn of China

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V1-73-E-26

# This is China: AN OUTSTANDING BOOK

Reviewed by V. J. HEARN

SO little is known of the Chinese people in this country that one doubts if the average person, putting his coin into the local Aid to China collecting box, is aware of more than that they are a numerous race who have been at war a long time with the Japanese. Of the political situation in the country, the causes of the Sino-Japanese war, what the Kuomintang is, and the policy of Chiang Kai-Shek, he probably knows little or nothing.

This is not surprising. From newspapers during the past eight years we have had only strappy information, because the Chinese official censorship was and still is rigidly strict, and very few foreign journalists have penetrated far into the fighting areas. Therefore the average person is left with the old fictional figure of the Chinaman with a pigtail, sinister and knife-throwing, or alternatively, dumb and obsequious.

More recent books about China, such as Dr. Lin Yutang's "My Country and My People," give another picture that has a great appeal to the aesthetes—the old world of culture and philosophy, the benevolent, happy Chinese sipping exquisite tea beneath the blossoms in his garden. But millions of Chinese sip only boiled water and exist on rice—because, like the Indian peasants, they grow it themselves and cannot afford a change of diet. To know the real China means to know these people, the inhabitants of the small villages and towns in the vast battle areas.

### INTERNAL STRIFE

China has been a battlefield for over twelve years, with internal strife as well as invasion. After the death of Dr. Sun Yat Sen in 1925 the Kuomintang, party of democracy, became a mixture of reactionaries, cynics and fascists, with only a small number of democrats left. Instead of continuing to improve the lot of the people as laid down by Sun Yat Sen, the chief occupation of the Kuomintang was Communist hunting. This took the form of persecuting anyone of progressive views, whether actual members of the Communist Party or not, and in so doing methods were employed that even the Nazis could not better.

In the north-west provinces the Communists had a large army, under-fed and ill-equipped because of their poverty, yet a People's Army in the true sense of the word. In the districts they occupied, the soldiers and the people were one. The story of China's Red Army has been written by Edgar Snow in "Red Star Over China," published in 1937. They are tough fighters, and were the first to resist Japanese aggression and to call for a united front in China to face the enemy. It took the Kuomintang some time to realise that the Japanese were more deadly than their fellow-countrymen in the north. After a period of appeasement, the Government troops ceased to direct their whole attention to the Communists and commenced to fight their common foe.

The forces of reaction and democracy, the old feudal China and Young China, continue to jostle each other even now. It is a conflict not yet solved. But one fact remains—the common soldier in the Chinese Army, whether part of the Eighth Route Army or the Government forces, has undergone, and is still undergoing, the

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utmost hardship and misery in his fight with inferior equipment against the modern war machine of Japan. A war machine supplied, to our everlasting shame by materials from the democracies of Great Britain and the United States until, at Pearl Harbour, the dog bit the hand that fed it.

All this, and a great deal more, is the background of Agnes Smedley's book.\* She went to China in 1928 and stayed there almost continuously until 1941. The book is about the Chinese people, not Miss Smedley. At the beginning she flatly tells her readers that although not a Communist, her sympathies are with the poor and oppressed. She hates the indifference and callousness shown by many of the white people who live among the Chinese. This militant spirit dominates the book and flares up against a wounded soldier into their hospital because he had no money to pay for his bed; against a German pilot who had watched a dozen workers beheaded for their beliefs and had made no protest; and again against the appalling inadequacy of the medical services.

### LIVING WITH THE GUERILLAS

Agnes Smedley's story is not one of a few weeks' adventurous journeying, written to amuse us or provide the vicarious thrills of foreign travel. She actually lived among the Chinese people, eating the same food and sleeping in the same huts; talking to them and learning from them; using her own money (it wasn't much, but seemed a lot to the peasants) to buy extra medicines to give to the sick. She visited the Eighth Route Army and the New Fourth Army, went through the Jap lines and spent some time with the guerillas, as well as moving through the areas held by the regular Army.

In the province of Shansi in 1937 the author saw her first batch of wounded soldiers. Rows of them lay on the earth in dirty, bloody bandages. They had made their way somehow or other from the battle-front and awaited transport across the Yellow River. She says, simply, "They had no doctors, nurses or attendants with them." Thousands had died on the way and many more would die before receiving attention. The medical department of the Shansi Army was primitive—no blood-transfusion, no X-ray, no modern drugs; yet the medical staff worked eighteen hours a day to cope with the large number of wounded that passed through their hands.

Agnes Smedley writes: "Over this problem of the Chinese wounded, I used to torture myself through endless nights . . . should I write the truth?" She did, and in addition joined the Chinese Red Cross as a publicity worker, using her pen to tell the world about the needs of the wounded. She still continued to travel about the country, inspecting hospitals and trying to improve the medical service. It is interesting to note that in response to her appeals Jawaharlal Nehru organised an Indian Medical Mission to China, composed of Congress doctors.

It is almost impossible to do more than pick out this one aspect of the author's life in China. The whole book

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\* "Battle Hymn of China." By Agnes Smedley. (Gollancz, 7s. 6d.)

## ALL IN THE DAY'S WORK

### A Food Office Documentary

IT is nine-thirty. The janitor opens the doors of the office and in rush the people who have been queuing up since nine o'clock.

A small woman lays a ration book and identity card on my desk.

"It's me brother," she says. (An incomplete approach of this sort no longer bewilders you when you have been doing general counter work for two years.)

"Oh, yes," I say, and inspect the R.G.12A., only to find there is no milkman's name in the space provided.

"Do you know the milkman's name and address, in Essex?" I ask.

"Eh, it's no good askin' me," she replies morosely. Further scrutiny shows that the ration book has one address and the identity card another.

"Which was his last address?" I ask.

"Eh! it's no good askin' me." She repeats wearily. "Well we must have this information," I tell her.

"And do you know his date of birth?"

"Eh! now it's no good askin' me!" she insists. And on her way to the door informs the public loudly that it's worse than being in Germany, and she'll not bother to come again!

In the meantime a big elderly workman approaches my desk, refusing to be seated. He prefers to lean across the counter in case I cannot hear what he is about to say. He has halitosis!

"Ah want some clothin' coupons," he bawls.

"Where is your clothing book?" I say.

He says he has used them all.

"Then," I tell him, "I'm afraid there are not extra coupons to be had in your case."

"No extra coupons," he yells. "We'll see about that. I hev only this one shirt and canna ger'rit washed. D'ye want us ter gan lousy. Looker that!"

And seizing a handful of unclean shirt from the region beneath his armpit he attempts to drag it forth and thrust it into my reluctant face. The combined fumes are causing the utmost nausea, so I turn to Mr. O. and say appealingly:—

"Can you help this gentleman, Mr. O.?"

He comes to the rescue, and One-shirt Sam is induced to depart whilst I seek a glass of water as a restorative.

A young, sweet-faced girl next takes the chair before my desk and offers me her identity card and ration books. She has two R.B.'s as she is an expectant mother. In the course of the desultory conversation I have with her she tells me that her husband in the R.A.F. has failed to return from operations and she is coming home to be with her mother until the baby is born. As my own husband is in the R.A.F., I feel a stab of agonised compassion for her, and silently salute her courage.

The next customer is a gentleman with a traveller's ration book. He asks for four weeks' emergency cards.

Whilst I am preparing them, a woman leans over his shoulder and asks some involved question.

"One moment, madam, please," I say.

The gentleman then says:—

"It may interest you to know that I am —," naming a famous radio star.

"Yes, indeed," I reply mechanically.

"We are in the show at the —, naming the local theatre. Would you care for a ticket?"

"That's very kind of you," I say, "but —"

At this moment the woman leans across his shoulder once more, almost flattening him to the desk, and reiterates her confused query.

"One moment, please, madam," I say testily.

"Oo the 'ell do yer think you are," she says loudly, "a ruddy countess or summat? More like ruddy twerpy Annie, if yer asks me!"

The radio star extricates himself from under the folds of her ample bosom. I manœuvre his documents into his hand and he fights his way through the crowd to the door and escapes, having forgotten all about his offer of a free ticket.

The woman has taken the chair and now says: "All I'm askin' yer is this, Where d'ye get the material for large families?"

"The material?" I falter.

"Ay," she says.

"Well, if you could explain a little more fully," I say nervously.

From the torrent of abuse which now overwhelms me I gather that a neighbour has told her that free black-out material is provided for people with large families!

Knowing nothing of this myself, and doubting its veracity, I direct her to the information bureau in — Street.

"Ay, yer b——," lifting her ample built-up areas into a standing position and looking around the office for support for her views, "it's b——s like us wot 'ave ter pay b——s like you, and yer no good anyway. My lad's away fightin' for the likes of you lot. It's the Forces where some of you b——s want ter be. Yer don't know there's a war on, makin' money out of it, that's all you b——s think about!"

And departs like a ship in full sail.

Incidentally, the two men clerks at our counter were through the entire 1914-18 war and both severely wounded, and one of my women colleagues has just heard that her only son—indeed, her only child—has been killed in this war and she lost her husband in the last.

It's a grand life! M. I. S.

### THIS IS CHINA—(Continued from page 251)

is full of incident and encounters with interesting people of all kinds, from Madame Kai-Shek to the grand old peasant woman, Mother Tsai, who organised the women of her village into a group of "new women" to carry on while their men were at the front.

In 1941, mainly through ill-health, Agnes Smedley reluctantly returned to her own country "to tell America the truth about China." In this book she tells us also, and not only makes the reader want to visit China himself, but arouses a deep compassion for the Chinese people. It should be read by all who are organising the "Aid to China" Fund in our branches.

V. J. HEARN.

[This is the China which needs your help. Organise collections in your Branch, concerts, entertainments, raffles, competitions, as you did for Russian Aid. The proceeds may be sent to the C.S.C.A. Aid to China Fund, Manor House, Lewes Road, East Grinstead, Sussex, or direct (indicating that it is a C.S.C.A. Fund contribution) to the United Aid to China Fund, 57, New Bond Street, London, W. 1.

This is how some of the last instalment of £140,000, sent by Lady Cripps to Madame Chiang Kai-Shek, was allocated: £15,000 to National Association for Refugee Children; £10,000 to Chinese Industrial Co-operatives; £8,000 each Friends of the Wounded Society and Chinese Red Cross; £12,000 National Student Relief Committee.]