Some Reflections on the American Press

A FREE AND RESPONSIBLE PRESS.
University of Chicago Press. $2.

A GROUP of gentlemen operating under the official-sounding title of the Commission on Freedom of the Press has published a slender book called "A Free and Responsible Press" that may be a mild shock to Henry R. Luce, who in 1942 plunked down $200,000 to finance the group's work.

The membership of the commission, selected by Robert Maynard Hutchins, includes no types remotely resembling George Seldes or Upton Sinclair, and yet the book, subtitled "A General Report on Mass Communication: Radio, Motion Pictures, Magazines, and Books," has little good to say about the American press of which Mr. Luce's publications form so imposing a segment.

Certain of the strictures even seem to have been set down with Time-Life operating procedure particularly in mind.

"Of equal importance with reportorial accuracy are the identification of fact as fact and opinion as opinion, and their separation, so far as possible," the commission says, high on its list of requirements for a free and responsible press.

"This is necessary all the way from the reporter's file, up through the copy and makeup desks and the editorial offices, to the final, published product." And again "Sales talk should be plainly labeled as such whether for toothpastes or tariffs, cosmetics or cosmic reforms, devices for reducing waists or raising prices."

Mr. Hutchins as chairman of the commission contributes a foreword in which he tells how the commission came to be, as a result of a brief conversation between Mr. Luce and him at a meeting of the board of William Benton's Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.—Old Yales are always up to big things—and how the commission worked, banging out every line of the report after argument, so that it is a collective expression. He says the commission carried out no elaborate "research"—the quotation marks are his, as if he considered the word a neologism—and I was inclined to wonder uncharitably as I read the book what they had spent the $200,000 on: it contains some sound, unoriginal reflections, but nothing worth over one grand even at Ladies Home Journal rates. It does not shed as much light on our journalistic dilemma as Morris Ernst's 1946 book, "The First Freedom," or the even more exciting seventy-two-page pamphlet printed for the Senate Small Businesses Committee—"Survival of a Free, Competitive Press," which you have to write to the committee to get, if there are any copies left.

Nevertheless, the book has importance in the long struggle for a truly free press that is beginning all over again because of technical advances which have wiped out the old freedom of any effective journalist who could hire a handpress to start an effective newspaper. It is important because a group that includes John Dickinson, Professor of Law at the University of Pennsylvania and general counsel for the Pennsylvania Railroad, and Beardsley Ruml, chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, as well as Archibald MacLeish and Arthur M. Schlesinger and William E. Hocking (there are thirteen members of the commission altogether, all with impressive signatures) has publicly recognized that the American press is more or less of a mess. The collective authors refuse to accept the propaganda put out by the officers of press associations and schools of journalism that the press is our national glory, distinguishing us from lesser breeds. They don't even think much of schools of journalism.

Their statement of the technical changes which have threatened a conception of press freedom that was fairly adequate in colonial times is concise and convincing. Their view of the performance of the press in our time is marked by considerable asperity—and a lot of sharp insights which break through at unpredictable places, as if some one member of the commission, with more feeling for newspapering than the others, was talking on a more craftsmanlike level all the time but only occasionally getting his remarks into the record. I liked particularly the commission's recognition of the death of mutual criticism among newspapers, and its almost certainly futile recommendation that it be revived.

"Whatever its shortcomings, the American press is less venal and less subservient to political and economic pressure than that of many other countries," the commission states. It doesn't say that the American press isn't venal or isn't subservient, or even that it is less venal or subservient than that of any other country. "The leading organs of the American press have achieved a standard of excellence unsurpassed anywhere in the world." It doesn't say unqualified, and it doesn't say which the leading organs are or how much of the national circulation they reach.

The book ends with thirteen recommendations for action by government, the press itself, and the public. Mr. Hutchins confesses, "The commission's recommendations are not startling. The most surprising thing about them is that nothing more surprising could be proposed." (An editor I know, reading Mr. Hutchins's copy, would have penciled there, "Who told him?"") A sample is, "We recommend that the agencies of mass communication accept the responsibilities of common carriers of information and discussion."

A chief service of the volume is that it makes criticism of the press respectable. Surely no one will accuse the general counsel of the Pennsylvania Railroad of following the Party Line.

A. J. LIEBLING

Maxim Gorki as Artist

BEST SHORT STORIES. By Maxim Gorki. Grayson Press. $2.75.

IN GORKI'S masterwork, "The Lower Depths," his greatest gifts shine most clearly: his immense—but not quite profound—perception, his concern for the wretchedness of people, his
almost romantic preoccupation with nature. And here, above all, is a carefully controlled rage at the lot of men and an insistence on their noble destiny.

In so far as one can tell from this translation, however—which, by the way, seems most uneven—he is far from a careful writer and by no means a great one. He is almost always painfully verbose and frequently threatens to degenerate into simple propaganda.

But though this wordiness persists in every story in the book, in such pieces as Creatures That Once Were Men, in Cain and Artyom, and in such shorter pieces as Red, Twenty-Six Men and a Girl, and Chums, the power of Gorki's sympathy almost succeeds in reducing his flaws to unimportance. There is ironic penetration and great tenderness here which none of the contemporary realists whom Gorki helped to father have yet managed to match. But having said that he is tender, ironic, and observant, and that most of his descendants are not, it must also be admitted that he is also quite frequently sentimental—as are his offspring—and that, regardless of how well they succeed as outraged citizens, they are incomplete as artists.

Gorki's range is narrow and in intention and effect alike he can scarcely be called subtle. He reiterates: men can be gods and they live like beasts; this he relates, quite legitimately, indeed necessarily, to a particular and oppressive society. ("And the men, too, the first source of all that uproar, were ludicrous and pitiable: their little figures dusty, tattered, nimble, bent under the weight of goods that lay on their backs, under the weight of cares that drove them hither and thither... were so trivial and small in comparison with the colossal iron monsters... and all that they had created. Their own creation had enslaved them and taken away their individuality.") This is a disquieting and honest report. Its only limitation, and it is a profound one, is that it remains a report. Gorki does not seem capable of the definitive insight, the shock of identification. Again and again we recognize a type with his human attributes sensitively felt and well reported but never realized. For this reason Gorki's sympathy is often mawkish, his denouements a brutal and self-consciously sardonic trick. He is concerned, not with the human as such, but with the human being as a symbol; and this attitude is basically sentimental, pitying, rather than clear, and therefore—in spite of the boast of realism—quite thoroughly unreal. There can be no catharsis in Gorki, in spite of the wealth of action and his considerable powers of observation; his people inspire pity and sometimes rage but never love or terror. Finally we are divorced from them; we see them in relation to oppression but not in relation to ourselves. In the short story, The Hermit, the lack of psychological acuteness he brings to a story intended to show the power of virtue (Love) and the roads taken to attain it make for a devastating and characteristic failure.

And yet Gorki was possessed by a rare sympathy for people. Such work as Cain and Artyom and even the rather superficial Red and the delightful Going Home would be impossible if this were not so. But his sympathy did not lead him to that peculiar position of being at once identified with and detached from the humans that he studied. He is never criminal, judge, and hangman simultaneously—and yet indubitably Gorki. His failure was that he did not speak as a criminal but spoke for them; and operated, consciously or not, not as an artist and a prophet but as a reporter and a judge.

It seems to me that in Gorki's failure can be found the key to the even more dismal failure of present-day realistic novelists. For as a school they do not even have that sympathy which animated Gorki. They do not ever indicate what Gorki sometimes succeeded in projecting—the unpredictability and the occasional and amazing splendor of the human being. It is a concept which today, and this is understandable, if alarming, is dismissed as mystic or unreal. Without the insight into the mainsprings of human needs, desperations, and desires, the concern with squalor remains merely squallid and acts to brutalize the reader rather than to purify him. If literature is not to drop completely to the intellectual and moral level of the daily papers we must recognize the need for further and honest exploration of those provinces, the human heart and mind, which have operated, historically and now, as the no man's land between us and our salvation.

JAMES BALDWIN

God's Angry Men

CRITICS AND CRUSADERS. By Charles A. Madison. Henry Holt and Company. $3.50.

"THE DEEPEST AMERICAN reality is the American dream. America's business is to transcend business." This thought was admirably expressed by Alfonso Reyes in his "Ultima Thule." It is implicit in Charles A. Madison's volume. "Men of substance and standing," "the well-born, the wealthy, and the wise," may attempt to stem the flood, but this country was born in radicalism, our keynoters were Jefferson and Thomas Paine. The protest recorded by Charles Madison is but the eternal vigilance of the prophets, the watch dogs of the Lord, to keep this country true to its earliest tradition.

Every one of the eighteen portraits is a brief but well-rounded study. But the book is no mere collection, it is particularly well-integrated. The critics and crusaders are divided into six groups, and each section is prefaced by a very valuable study of the common background. The table of contents will give an idea of the richness of thought contained in these pages: The Abolitionists—William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, Wendell Phillips; the Utopians—Margaret Fuller, Albert Brisbane, Edward Bellamy; the Anarchists—Henry David Thoreau, Benjamin R. Tucker, Emma Goldman; the Dissident Economists—Henry George, Brooks Adams, Thorstein Veblen; the Militant Liberals—John Peter Altgeld, Lincoln Steffens, Randolph Bourne; the Socialists—Daniel de Leon, Eugene Victor Debs, John Reed. Some had become a little nebulous—Brisbane, Tucker, Brooks Adams, de Leon, and, until Howard Fast's recent best seller, Altgeld. The classification might be different: Bellamy is a practical Socialist rather than a Utopian; Margaret Fuller and Thoreau might come under the Transcendental movement. But on the whole the scheme is clear, and the work, warm and vivid in its details, is impressive in its total effect.

A comforting book? Hardly. Most of these men ended in failure. On the other hand, many, and some of the boldest, found generous support among the common people. My quarrel with Madison is that in his generosity he sympathizes too heartily with all his heroes. I am a
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