When Calvert L. Olson became Governor of California, he named a young Los Angeles lawyer, Carey McWilliams, Commissioner of Immigration and Housing. The office originated in 1915, after a gun battle between deputies and migratory workers in Wheatland. The “riot” led first to a frenzied attack on the I. W. W. and then to a twinge of conscience. When there are but nine outdoor toilets for the use of 2,800 hop pickers and the ranch owner provides insufficient water because his cousin has a lemonade concession, it is possible that discontent may be due to other causes than the doctrines of syndicalism. Governor Hiram Johnson thought something ought to be done about it, nothing drastic but at least a little investigation, and gave California’s miserable farm workers their first official champion by picking Simon J. Lubin to head a state Commission on Immigration and Housing. Lubin’s name is still gratefully remembered on the Coast, where the Simon J. Lubin Society carries on a David-Goliath fight against the financial giants that dominate California’s immense fruit and vegetable gardens. Mr. McWilliams’s new book proves him a worthy successor to Lubin. Its facts are mobilized with passion and march toward bold conclusions. Steinbeck’s “Grapes of Wrath” here finds its sequel, and who would understand and help the Joads must read “Factories in the Field.”

The “Okies” and “Arkies,” come out of the Dust Bowl in their jalopies to pick lettuce or chop cotton in the valleys of California, are but the most recent in a long line of the exploited. Grants extorted from bribed legislatures and well-greased sessions of Congress by railroad promoters, and fraudulent Mexican claims validated by American speculators in compliant courts early laid the basis for the state’s huge land monopolies. Federal marshals and national guardsmen drove settlers from their homes on these preempted acres to provide the beginnings of a rural proletariat.

“Nowhere else,” Marx’s sharp eye noted in 1860, “has the upheaval most shamefully caused by capitalist centralization taken place with such speed.” By 1870 the railroads—whose construction often seemed an excuse for grabbing public lands—owned some 20,000,000 acres. “Our land system,” Governor Haight said at the time, “seems to be mainly framed to facilitate the acquisition of large blocks of land by capitalists or corporations either as donations or at nominal prices.” It was no accident, as McWilliams points out, that Henry George and the single tax came out of California.

The slow rhythm of the farmer at his plow and the bond that grows between a man and the land he tills were always foreign to California, as they are today. Its land barons set to work in the get-rich-quick spirit of the Forty-niners, from whose ranks many of them came. The search was always, McWilliams shows, for quick returns and large-scale cash crops. First there was a boom in wheat; fruits followed, with the development of the refrigerator car. The sugar beet was next; the latest boom crop is cotton. “The lands receive neither rest nor manure,” reported one of the obscure travelers whom McWilliams’s industry has resurrected. Another, traveling through California in the eighties, said, “I did not see ten honest hard-fisted farmers in my whole journey. There are plenty of city-haunting old bachelors and libertines, who own great ranches and lease them; and there are enough crammers of wheat, cramners of beans, cramners of mulberries, cramners of anything that will make their fortune in a year or two, and permit them to go and live and die in Frisco.” To this day the dominant psychology in rural California is that of the gambler; agriculture there is a form of roulette, not a way of life; the landowner is always hoping that with the next spin of the seasons potatoes or cantaloupes or peas will make him rich; he tends to plunge on a single crop, win or lose. Usually he loses, and sooner or later California’s banks, the croupers in this game, rake him in. At one time during the depression, McWilliams notes, Bank of America owned or controlled half the farm land in northern and central California.

The exploitation of man in California has been as ruthless as exploitation of the soil, and the militant “Americanism” of its vigilantes hides a longing for labor as docile and easily satisfied as the Chinese coolies whom the growers always preferred to their own countrymen. In the seventies 90 per cent of the farm labor in the state was done by coolies, and the landowners were shamelessly candid in expressing their preference “The Japs and Chinks,” said J. L. Nagle of the California Fruit Growers’ Exchange, “just drift—we don’t have to look out for them. White laborers with families, if we could get them, would be liabilities.” When protests against employment of the Chinese culminated in the race riots of the depressed nineties, the Pacific Rural Press, now mouthpiece for the Associated Farmers, characteristically took the side of the land barons. It sneered at indignant white workers as “low tramps and bummers who, if offered work, will not accept it . . .” Exclusion of the Chinese brought a search for new sources of cheap labor, and the sufferings of Japanese, Filipinos, Hindus, Armenians, Portuguese, and Mexicans find a voice in McWilliams’s moving record. The growers understood the Führer’s formula long before Munich, and early learned to play one race among their workers against another. The rural Babel created convenient obstacles to unionization; in McWilliams’s story of the events preceding the Wheatland “riot” we learn that the I. W. W. had to use seven interpreters at one of its mass-meetings.

The Joads soon encountered plug-ugly deputies in the Promised Land of California, and the reader of “Factories in the Field” will see how familiar and accepted is the strong arm in the state’s history. The “vigilance committees,” recruited from the more prosperous classes, were soon turned against labor. Rival land barons organized virtual armies
in their spectacular struggles. Even the cooperatives—and the California variety bears more resemblance to the Iron and Steel Institute than to the ordinary cooperative—have used force to bring independents into line. Finally, so far as labor is concerned, success in the past has made the ruling class of California confident that the deputy's gun, the vigilante's club, and "the law" offer the best way to deal with unionism. The story of the war on the heroic "Wobblies," culminating in nation-wide raids by federal agents in 1917, is retold by McWilliams. Similar tactics and criminal-syndicalism prosecutions smashed the Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union in 1930 and the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union in 1934. In California, with its monopolistic industrialized agriculture and its huge mass of farm laborers, the only way permanently to prevent organization of workers on the farm is to suppress civil liberties. The growers have done it time and again on a small scale. The danger is that they may try it on a systematic state-wide basis, and provide storm troops for the rest of the country in the process.

Class war seems endemic in California. Imperial Valley, Stockton, Salinas, and Santa Rosa may prove to have been but preliminary skirmishes. Unchecked greed seems to be shaping up toward an irreconcilable conflict in California, and one can see no easy solutions. Farm workers just manage to keep this side of starvation; small growers, desperate for capital to carry on the state's intensive, irrigated agriculture, hang on just this side of bankruptcy, at the mercy of banker, canner-processor, grower-shipper. There is enormous waste—of men, capital, and land. "The real solution," McWilliams has the courage to conclude, "involves the substitution of collective agriculture for the present monopolistically owned and controlled system.... The abolition of this system involves at most merely a change in ownership." There is dynamite in the adverb.

L. F. STONE

Poets Under Fire

JOURNEY TO A WAR. By W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood. Random House. $3.

This book is ostensibly a record of a trip through war-torn China by two of the most talented young English writers of our day. But primarily it is a book about the conscience of a Western ruling class faced with the agony of an Oriental people to whom they feel responsibility. It is funny, brilliant, fierce, tragic, and technically superb. It is entirely in another class of usefulness from Agnes Smedley's, Edgar Snow's, or John Gunther's books. Reading these other remarkable records does not obviate the necessity of owning "Journey to a War." Less encyclopedic, less factually inclusive than any of the others, it is nevertheless perhaps the most intense record of China at war yet written in English.

It is a diary, with photographic and verse commentaries. The initial shock is Isherwood's. His "Good-bye to Berlin" suffered a curious fate in America. Brilliantly reviewed, as it well deserved, it was nevertheless allowed to lapse almost unadvertised, as if its publishers were upset by the attitude of the author toward pre-Hitler Berlin. This attitude was different from the loose and merely indignant expressions which are currently fashionable in liberal literary circles. It is Isherwood's particular talent to hunt deeper than apparent outrage or obvious injustice. He tries to find the root of terror and frequently does. The actual search is disturbing, but what he finds is more so.

His prose is full of the dry crackle of witty short circuits. His humorous exasperation has the fascinated gaze of a patient watching the surgeon operate on him under local anaesthetic. He is soberly lyrical over the veiny glories of a superb sarcoma. During a permanent nervous breakdown he nicknames his naked nerve ends. His irony springs from the dichotomy of an excellent education and a realization of where such conditioning has served to place that class which he cannot choose but represent. It is the self-accusation tormenting a middle-class Englishman at this juncture, in this place: China, 1938. With dry anger and antiseptic self-exposure, he uncovers his own moral sickness and hence his country's. This involves Hamlet doubts concerning his own or any writer's usefulness. He is of use in direct proportion to the intensity of his awareness, which is deep. His manners are those of the stock English gentleman, reversed. A lurid rat-like politeness is sprayed all over himself and particularly over such others as young Peter Fleming, the streamlined Etonian, the dazzling special correspondent who, bred to the modern sciences of appeasement and face-saving, has inevitably elevated himself from the Times closer to the Foreign Office. Isherwood awards all honors to the adversary. How droll the courtesies of the permanent duel; how comic the steady treachery. It is as if in some music-hall undertaking parlor he spiritually arranged the suicide of the English so that the removal of their living corpses might make it somehow easier for China. His diary makes the tire-some war glow with klieg-lit back-stage reality. The actors by some cosmic vaudeville turn are murdering their audiences.

With Auden it is different. He is a poet and, to a degree, apart. In fact, he is a monster of verse, or rather a monstrous genius inhabits him. He pilots his large instinctive talent, which he increasingly masters, around the big fresh graveyards of our world, and it produces for him with funeral splendor. Since Yeats's death he has taken his place as the first poet writing in English. At the sick breast of fact he taps for fault; extracts the limping organ, inspects it and puts it back. The disease has advanced too far for one pair of fingers to heal—he knows it—though if he were a surgeon he would be another Cushing. Yet he is always suspect—a really dangerous person, in so far as anyone is dangerous—for he threatens even our most recent and difficulty entrenched ideas. He also employs pragmatic treachery to every preconceived poetic formula. In this treachery he uses as forced allies any English poet from Beowulf to Byron. He sacks these allies, one after the other, to found a new front which may have certain special uses. Unlike others of his publicized group, his talent proceeds in spite of direct experience with violence or politics. It is not arrested in the rut of comfortable memoirs, on account of it. He has too much respect for poetry not to be interested in his own genius and proper personal survival. It is his good fortune that he can make poetry out of realizing what sort of man Chiang Kai-shek really is from having seen him, rather than from hoping what Chiang Kai-shek might under optimistic circumstances do for new China. Frequently a talent has been "greater"
Copyright of Nation is the property of Nation Company, L. P. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.