

TO TOKYO TWICE

THE SHADOW OF A WAR. By James Bertram. Victor Gollancz, London.

IT is a month since I read this book, but I am still unable to say why I could not at the time, and cannot now, admire it without qualification. Every book has faults to every reviewer. But with important books no wise reviewer looks for the faults or makes a needless song about them if he can't help seeing them. Apart from everything else he knows that the man who dwells on the spots on any sun advertises his own blind eyes and dull mind. And this certainly is an important book—in subject, in conception, and in execution. No other New Zealander could have written it, and although it was not written for New Zealanders only, no one who was not a New Zealander could have thrust so deeply under our skins and still been tolerated. I think Mr. Bertram's incursion into party politics (party within party) was ill-advised. He had not the space, even if he had the inside knowledge to get the Lee story in focus without getting his own story out of focus, and in relation to the tremendous events that followed it had very little significance

anyhow. But it is something more elusive than this that holds me back from complete surrender.

I think it is a combination of three factors, two of them trivial. The most trivial is Mr. Bertram's habit of giving every chapter a text. Texts may or may not be necessary for preachers, but if a book is divided into 50 chapters, and each chapter is given a motto, some will be pointless, some will be obscure, and some will be so obviously dragged in that they will not lie down on the page. That will be so if they are all in English; but if they are in three languages and almost in four, since Chaucer to many of Mr. Bertram's readers is only English with a struggle, and if they range from Sun Yat-sen to Shakespeare and from Shakespeare to R. G. Menzies and Charles Brasch, it is permissible, I think, to protest. I think, too, that if twenty-one chapters begin in the same way it is too many for easy tolerance.

Book One, Chapter I.

"Djibouti!" said the steward of the Third Class, and spat contemptuously over the side.

Book One, Chapter III.

"There she is," said the Eighth Route Army man with enthusiasm. "Isn't she a beauty?"

"My God!" said Norman. "Do you expect to get that to Yenan?"

Book One, Chapter V.

"Meiyu Fatze!" said the young Chinese mechanic, squatting back on his heels on the dusky roadway.

There are only five chapters to each book, and when that happens 21 times in a possible 50, it is difficult not to feel embarrassed. (I know the number only because the trick was repeated once too often for my patience, and I was then surprised, when I turned back and counted, to find that the score was only 21.)

That is my second complaint, even more trivial than my first.

My third I don't know how to make clear without offensiveness, but it is related to the first two. It was my feeling as I read that the book was too cunningly contrived to be true. Everything happened, but much of it, I kept feeling, did not happen precisely as we get it in these 350 brilliant pages. Nothing is over-written or under-written. Mr. Bertram is far too intelligent to offer us fine writing and far too sensible to bow himself out of horrifying situations with the swagger of mock modesty. His account of the fall of Hong Kong, for example, is admirable. It leaves nothing out that it is necessary to know, but the deft inclusion of two or three sentences turns what was merely a hopeless battle into a searing humiliation.

Overnight we had been turned from men with a purpose into figures of ridicule. We had coached ourselves for tragedy, and we had got this shabby farce. . . . The Japanese simply ignored us. Having cordoned off the peninsula and established a

system of sea-patrols, they left us to our own devices while they busied themselves in gathering and burning their dead.

In another situation—when he revisits Japan and meditates on the contrasts between Nikko and the Ming Tombs of China—he can be just as effective. His reflections on Nikko yield the best writing in the book and the most fundamental thinking:

The Chinese tombs are vast, sprawling, and neglected. Colour is fading on the eaves, grass grows between the marble slabs beneath the wooden pillars. . . . Both in their scale and in their human disorder the Chinese tombs are the memorial of a generous, extraverted, fallible people, whose temples express them because they are the fertile and imperfect creations of inexhaustible imagination. It is somehow right that they should always be a little shabby and "lived-in" . . . Nikko, by contrast, is the product of Japanese fancy at its best. The forms of the buildings are narrow, severe, disappointing. The very richness of ornament—the lacquer carefully tended, the colours still fresh and vivid after years of war—and the concentration of detail upon a single gateway or screen, suggest everywhere the loving dedication of the craftsman among a nation of artists. But artists of the second order of creation, not of the first.

It is an ungrateful task to question a man whose eye can see such things and pen convey them. Nor do I forget that he must have written this book at the rate of two or three chapters a week—an astonishing performance both in quantity and quality. He has in fact so many wise, searching, and now and

(continued on next page)

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