Commonwealth Has Advisory Committee

Commonwealth College now has an advisory committee of fourteen. Members of this committee are: Oscar Ameling, editor of the American Guardian; Roger N. Baldwin, director of the American Civil Liberties Union; John Bosch, president of the Minnesota Division of the National Farmers’ Holiday Association; George S. Counts, E. C. Lindeman, and Alexander Meiklejohn, all well known as educators and authors; Clinton S. Golden, field organizer of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America; Carl Haessler, managing editor of the Federated Press; Alice Hanson, social worker, labor journalist and former teacher at Commonwealth; Florence Curtis Hanson, secretary-treasurer of the American Federation of Teachers; Scott Nearing, well-known writer and economist; I. M. Rubinow, secretary of B’nai B’rith; Hilda W. Smith, specialist in workers’ education with the administration; Luther Ely Smith, St. Louis attorney.

Not all of these are immediately identified with the radical movement, but each has had a wide and varied background.
GRANVILLE HICKS’ "GREAT TRADITION"

By WILLIAM CUNNINGHAM

The Great Tradition — By Granville Hicks. The MacMillan Co., N.Y., $2.50.

GRANVILLE HICKS’ "GREAT TRADITION"

The appearance of Granville Hicks’ "The Great Tradition" is an event of minor importance in the American literature classes of our great universities. Liberal professors, ever on the alert for new methods of torture, will assign to their students, this book as an Ouster. But they will get attention on the back row by the simple method of hinting that perhaps one of the questions in the final exam will be based on this book.

Thus stimulated to an intense intellectual curiosity, the school-weary student will check out "The Great Tradition" and dig into it. With every paragraph he will ask himself: "Will the old cuss get a question out of that?" He knows the old cuss rather well, for that is his specialty. Sizing up professors is something at which he must be good. If you’re good enough you make Phi Beta Kappa.

The Revolutionary Tradition

Anyway, he’ll read the book and, tired as he is, will discover nothing unusual about it, perhaps, until he comes to this sentence: "This party (Communist), whatever its weaknesses, has raised the standard of revolution on American soil, and the revolutionary tradition is now a fact in American life." "Well, I’ll be darned," our tired hero will exclaim. "I wonder if this fellow’s name—Hicks—is a radical? Well, anyway, the old cuss won’t ask that on the final." A few pages more to go, and he encounters this paragraph:

"This is the great tradition of American literature. Ours has been a critical literature—critical of greed, complacency and meanness. Now someone seeks to strike at the sources of the evils they have so constantly attacked. It has also been a hopeful literature, touched again and again with a passion for brotherhood, justice, and intellectual honesty."

"There’s what the old cuss will ask," our specialist exclaims. He copies the paragraph in his note book, memorizes it.

Sure enough, that is what the old cuss asks: "According to Hicks what is the ‘Great Tradition’ of American literature? That is the only thing the professor asks, if he wants to hold his job, on the other hand, and pass a majority of the class, on the other.

The Newies-Reids

But "The Great Tradition" will be a much more important event to those delightful boys and girls whom Har- old Cox has called, "the radical sons and daughters of department store owners." Most of them are really in earnest about proletarian culture. What they demand of the book is simply this: a Marxist-Hicksist line for literature.

But Hicks is perplexing to our well-meaning young contours. He has told them that they should not merely believe in the cause of the proletariat; they should, or should try to make themselves, members of the proletariat. Does that mean getting a job in a factory? He has objected to their assumption that "that literature is best which so affects its readers that they struggle better on behalf of the proletariat." He asked them how, on this assumption, they can evaluate the greater part of the literature of the past and present? Is it wholly bad, "to some extent as it does not directly contribute to the advance of the proletariat?" He has asked them why, by their standards, a novel can be good both in Russia and in the United States, and how any novel, however good today, ever have any value after the establishment of a classless society? They can’t answer him.

They are young. They are newly-reds, no matter how hard their fists may be clenched. Radicalism is still a pose, a new and more exciting kind of fashionable stance. Now they spend their days in argument. They make no distinction between argument and propaganda. They reason that since all act is propaganda and all propaganda is argument, therefore only argument can be art. They are proletarian in the head but bourgeois: up and down the spine. "The Great Tradition" is little comfort to them.

Not Argumentative

But the appearance of this book is one of the very first importance to a few (their number is growing) young radicals who have achieved complete proletarianization and are now learning to express themselves in literature. Since they belong to the working class emotionally and intellectually they are not primarily interested in argument. They do not argue radicalism, they assume it. They are incapable of seeing life except in terms of the class struggle.

Perhaps they have made some timid attempts to present life as they see it and have had their work brushed aside, because it was not argumentative, by the noisy young over-simplifiers.

The importance of Hicks’ book to them is that it gives them confidence. They understood and agreed instantly when he said (New Masses, February, 1933) that "the aim of an author is to present, in terms of his chosen medium, life as he sees and understands it." Now, with Hicks’ "The Great Tradition" they can review that literature with which they are most familiar. American literature since the Civil War, and clarify their thinking. At last they have the support of someone who knows literature and sees life as they see it. The young proletarian writer gains most by the appearance of "The Great Tradition."

Hicks’ Method

Hicks’ New Masses article, "The Crisis in Criticism," should be read along with the book. In this article he says: "The tasks of criticism are, as almost everyone will agree, explanation and evaluation. Unfortunately the first attempt on a large scale to apply Marxist methods to the explanation of American literature clearly reveals a great danger. Whatever one may think of V. P. Calvert’s moral or his style or his lack of art, it is my contention that in The Liberation of American Literature he is applying the Marxist method to the best of his ability, and that, so far as an understanding of the broad class bases of our literature is concerned, his book is a useful one. But the great concern of Marxist historians of American literature in the future must be the avoidance of Calvert’s failings, and especially of his sin of over-simplification. Obviously it does not help us much to know that James, Howells, and Mark Twain were all members of the bourgeoisie we knew that all along, and, knowing that, we want to find out why, though they were members of the same class, they wrote so differently."

"Over-simplified Marxism of the Calvertov variety reduces aesthetic categories, as Burnham points out, to economic categories. It is possible to avoid this, and at the same time to show the fundamental dependence of literature on the economic organization of society. One way of doing this is to concentrate attention on the interaction of writer and his work. First of all, the writer’s attitude towards life must be defined in terms of his work. This attitude can then be explained as one of the possible variations of the fundamental attitudes of his class. Certain limits, in other words, were imposed on the attitudes of Howells,
James, and Mark Twain by the state of bourgeois thought in the middle of the nineteenth century; but within these limits variations were possible. The limits of possible variations can be still further narrowed by a consideration of the status of the particular section of the class to which the author belonged: this introduces, for example, the factor of the frontier in the case of Mark Twain and the factor of leisure and travel in the case of James. And within these narrower limits variations are still possible, variations which the present state of psychology may or may not permit the critic to explain.

This is the method Hicks recommends and the method he employs in explaining the works of American writers. It is "a refined and complicated method of procedure."

Why Read a Novel?

In evaluating literature he begins with "the assumption that literature is to be judged in terms of its effect on its readers."

"Therefore literature affects the reader's attitude towards life. His attitude may be affected by the actual extensions of his experience; he may be brought to contact with kinds of persons or events he had not known. It may be affected by a change in the mode of experience; that is, his reading may lead him to look at events and persons in a different way. It may be affected by the re-interpretation of experience; he may understand more clearly his own thoughts, emotions, and observations. A great work of art will change the readers attitude toward life in all these ways and perhaps in many others."

"And why should one read a novel," he asks in "Tradition," "if it does not give him a sense that he is moving, with enhanced powers of perception and a greater certainty as to direction, through the strange world of "Tradition"?"

A description of Hicks' method of explaining and evaluating literary works is the best possible recommendation of the book. When Upton Sinclair scratched at literature with his muckrake he thought he was applying the Marxian method. Liberal professors, some of them, took his word for it, and laughed both at 'Mammonart' and Marxism. But now that the Marxian method has actually been applied to literature they must take it seriously.

The Great Confusion

Since a reviewer feels obliged to complain about something, I might say that the central theme of the book seems not to be the 'great tradition' but rather the great confusion of American literature. Hicks is more interested in showing that American writers have been confused on economic issues than he is interested in showing that they have been 'critical of greed, cowardice and meanness.'

And rightly so. America attained maturity in an age of confusion and rapid change; it is little wonder that our writers have been confused. And this is the value of Hicks' book: it holds this confusion up for critical study.

The great service that 'The Great Tradition' will render the young writer is this: It will help him rid himself of that confusion which has played havoc with the writers of the past.

QUESTIONS

"Is labor the only source of material wealth?"

Bill Cunningham, pencil-fitting for the regular Marxian teacher until the latter arrives, asked each member of the class in political economy that question. Thirteen of them said "yes" and four said 'no.' When the argument had developed sufficient heat, the teacher explained that the answer would be found in the next assignment in "Capital."

David Engelsstein's class in public speaking is concerned with the question, not so readily answered: 'What is capitalism?' Members of the class are searching for an answer in various works ranging from the dictionary to 'Capital."

David started his class in working-class history by bringing up the questions: 'What is history?' and 'What is the scientific interpretation of history?'

Lucien Koch has his class in labor problems worried over the questions: 'What is the labor movement?' and 'What is the labor problem?'

The Commonwealth News Letter lists the following questions as those over which students argued most during the fall quarter:

How will a radical worker function if the U. S. should declare war?

Is the move for a fourth international an aid or detriment to the revolutionary labor movement?

What should be the relation of the farmers' movement to a social revolution?

Should "left" industrial unions be formed, or should radicals work within the conservative unions to turn them left?

FREE LABOR SKITS

Commonwealth teachers and students have written a number of labor skits that have been produced at Commonwealth and by various labor groups elsewhere. Four of these have been printed in the Fortnightly and reprinted in pamphlet form. Copies of them are sent free to anyone who encloses postage in his request.

They are:

Risen From the Ranks

By Harold Coy

The horrid radical agitator induces the workers in the pretzel factory of Mr. Millionbucks to strike for the full product of their tool and product and a half for overtime. But Oswald Sapp, the office boy, invents a pretzel-bending machine: sells the agitator, earns a column every issue of our paper. The play has a fine lesson for young men who want to rise in the world.

Until the Mortgage Is Due

By William Cunningham

The banker explains in song to the farmers he is about to evict that he "always protects the American home, until the mortgage is due."

The Forgotten Man

By Bill Reich

This play is full of songs to popular tunes. The charity worker, the banker, the business man, the brewer and finally Mr. Roosevelt all save the forgotten man, who dies of starvation while they are saving him.

I'm Predictin'

By Agnes Cunningham

The poor farmer keeps predictin' that the president will do something for the farmer, but each year he gets closer to starvation. Finally he learns the value of organization.

"I must say that Commonwealth Press Service stands out as one of the best branches of labor journalism in the country. Red's 'Such a System' is so good that we are going to use his column every issue of our paper." - Gerry Allard, editor of the Fighting Miner.
WITH MALICE AFORETHOUGHT

BY CLAY FULKS

The Commonwealth seismograph registered a slight shock at 5:49 (Central Standard Time) Saturday evening, December 30, when headlines in the capitalist papers blared forth: "STALIN SAYS ROOSEVELT IS A BRAVE LEADER."

What? Stalin--our own great Comrade Stalin--says Roosevelt is a brave leader? Shades of Marx and Lenin! Why, bravery is a virtue: and a virtue--any virtue worth mentioning is something which no capitalist-class politician can legitimately possess; and Roosevelt is a capitalist-class politician, ergo . . . .

Of course, we know that headline writers—that is to say, those of the capitalist press—take atrocious liberties with the text of important political reports coming across party lines. And in this instance the report (Walter Duranty's) quoted Stalin as saying, "by all appearances a decided and courageous political leader." (The Italics are mine.)

But even without the saying phrase employed by the sagacious Bolshievik leader, his quoted statement didn't intimate, as some of us triumphantly pointed out, "how political leader Roosevelt is, and that, necessarily, such omission was full of significance. Others insisted, however, and perhaps not without valid reason, that, unfortunately, the minds of most newspaper readers not agile enough to suspect the mental reservation with which Stalin must have spoken and that, consequently, the general assumption will be that he meant to characterize Roosevelt as a "decided and courageous political leader" of the American people as a homogeneously whole—not merely the leader of a sharply differentiated exploiting class.

But my point is—and I think it is well taken—that however he may be understood, or misunderstood, by most newspaper readers, no intelligent reader who takes the trouble to read beyond the headlines can draw such a general conclusion. For, it should be noted, Stalin was not thinking of the New Deal Roosevelt is supposed to be giving the American people; he was thinking and directly speaking, of the new deal in the matter of recognition, which Roosevelt had given the Soviet Republic. In this matter, surely even the revolutionary radicals can concede him a measure of comparative courage.

And Stalin showed, in this interview, a keen and penetrating insight into the murky psychology of those American administrations which had refused recognition of Russia, and, incidentally, a rare sense of humor; for those administrations, he intimated, had clung to the strange theory of solipsism.

His use of that metaphysical term, "solipsist," undoubtedly sent many American editors scurrying to their dictionaries to ascertain whether the English vocabulary contains what must have lacked, to many of them, like some mysterious Bolshevik malacodiction. The editor of the St. Louis Post Dispatch, however, was generous enough to acknowledge Stalin's wit. In the concluding paragraph of a classic editorial on the point he writes:

"The canny Stalin has found just the word to describe the viewpoint that held our country so long aloof from Russia. We may imagine the shredol Bolshievik chuckling quietly in the Krem­lin over the little lecture he thus read to America for its years of shunning the U. S. S. R."

And now I must revise somewhat my own tentative judgment of the man Stalin. (I do this out of pure magnanimity of spirit and without any thought of whether he reciprocates.) The hard-headed Bolshievnik leader, I had inferred, betrayed himself as lacking a sense of humor—and, consequently, as lacking those invaluable elements of personality known as imagination and sympathy—when he boasted the able, redoubtable—and, perhaps, irresistible—Braunstein out of the country. Besides, Braunstein, I assumed, was greatly needed in Rus­ sia, and it struck me that it was a stolid and implacable Stalin who had stooped to a crudely cruel and out­moded method of ridding himself of a rival who had him intellectually out­classed. But now, as I say, I must revise my judgment of the man.

(The foregoing little essay, I am sorry to admit, had to be set down without malice.)

Treasurer

Continued From Page One

Treasurer continued in addition, clothes, tobacco, razor blades, hospital fees, etc., for half of this number, who are teachers and maintenance members.

It cost during 1933 on an average, $80 to keep one person three months. The cost in 1932 was $29. The increase is largely due to higher prices.

Commonwealth can operate upon this low budget only because no teacher or maintenance worker receives a salary and because everybody works. About 48,950 hours were recorded as put in during 1933 at the various tasks, including teaching. If this work is valued at only twenty-five cents per hour it represents a donation of $12,245.75. No record was kept of several thousand additional hours put in by maintenance workers on the farm.

The work at Commonwealth was in 1933 divided as follows: academic, 2780 hours; library, 2252; food (farm, land, stock, kitchen, canning, etc.), 21,977; business management (administration, office and publicity, accounts and store, printing, purchasing trips, etc.), 9063; wood-cncutting and hauling, 5681; building and repairing, 4163; laundry, ironing, sewing, 2241; miscellaneous, 628.

The school spent $1,580.13 for equipment. Five hundred dollars of this amount came as a grant from the Mrs. Leonard Elmhirst Committee. A sum of $570.29 was left over from a grant of $5,000 made in 1932 by the Carnegie Corporation. The rest was from the regular plant and equipment fund.

Friends of the school donated $3,578.91, as against $1,737.61 in 1932, and paid $309.50 upon pledges, as against $931 in 1932. Total cash receipts, not including the grants mentioned above, amounted to $6,221.23, as against $8,287.03 in 1932.

Advisory

Continued From Page One

experience and is capable of giving Commonwealth sound advice in practical matters of finance and administra­tion.

Members of the committee will serve as counselors. Each quarter the governing body of Commonwealth will send them a report on the progress of the school.

COOK NEEDED

Continued From Page One

Commonwealth needs an experienced cook, preferably a man, to take charge of the kitchen. Commonwealth workers, like the others, are paid salaries but get their maintenance.

NOTICE

Due to a shortage of space, publication of the "Thanks, Friends" item had to be postponed to the next issue.