

CURRENT OPINION

November, 1921

p. 624

AN AMERICAN DOUGHBOY'S PROTEST AGAINST MILITARISM

THE Great War has inevitably had its reflection in novels of many countries. Among such novels, Henri Barbusse's "Under Fire" and Andreas Latzko's "Men in War"—fierce anti-militarist documents—stand out preeminent. Now comes the first American anti-militarist novel, "Three Soldiers" (Doran), by John Dos Passos. In its pages may be found something of the anguish of young men who were suddenly torn from their homes to fight against the Germans.

This book is vivid, but not sentimental. It does not contain a description of a single battle. What it does describe is the transformation of minds and bodies under the stress of war.

The hero of the story is John Andrews, a highly sensitive musician from New York. His two chums are Fuselli, a thrifty, normal boy from the streets of San Francisco, and Chrisfield, a simple, good-hearted boy from the farms of Indiana. These are the "three soldiers" of the title. We follow them as they pass from training camps to transports and to French villages and the trenches; and the results are not reassuring. Two of the three end as deserters, and the third is finally sick with a disease which "some guys say no guy can ever be cured of."

The story is told with extraordinary frankness. Soldiers here talk as they do in real life. There is no effort to hide or disguise the ugly facts of drunkenness and prostitution. The pettiness of men clothed in brief authority is illumined. The total effect of military discipline upon a sensitive mind is revealed as nothing less than appalling.

The ghastliest passage in the book is that which describes how a sick lad in a dormitory is "yanked" from his bed by guards because he refuses to get up, and then falls back dead. In another place we find the following account of how John Andrews himself is tormented when

“Three Soldiers”

brought to trial because he went on a day's outing to Chartres without obtaining a leave-warrant:

“Handsome sat with his elbows on the table and his chin in his beefy hands. His face was flushed crimson, but the skin was softly molded, like a woman's.

“The light in the room was beginning to grow gray.

“Handsome and Bill Huggis stood up. A young officer, with clearly-marked features and a campaign hat worn a little on one side, came in, stood with his feet wide apart in the middle of the floor.

“Andrews went up to him.

“‘I'm in the Sorbonne detachment, Lieutenant, stationed in Paris.’

“‘Don't you know enough to salute?’ said the officer, looking him up and down. ‘One of you men teach him to salute,’ he said slowly.

“Handsome made a step toward Andrews and hit him with his fist between the eyes. There was a flash of light and the room swung round, and there was a splitting crash as his head struck the floor. He got to his feet. The fist hit him in the same place, blinding him, the three figures and the bright oblong of the window swung round. A chair crashed down with him, and a hard rap in the back of his skull brought momentary blackness.

“‘That's enough, let him be,’ he heard a voice far away at the end of a black tunnel.

“A great weight seemed to be holding him down as he struggled to get up, blinded by tears and blood. Rending pains darted like arrows through his head. There were handcuffs on his wrists.

“‘Git up,’ snarled a voice.

“He got to his feet, faint light came through the streaming tears in his eyes. His forehead flamed as if hot coals were being pressed against it.

“‘Prisoner, attention!’ shouted the officer's voice. ‘March!’

“Automatically Andrews lifted one foot and then the other. He felt in his face the cool air of the street. On either side of him were the hard steps of the M. P.'s. Within him a nightmare voice was shrieking, shrieking.”

Comment on “Three Soldiers” is widespread and ranges all the way from the bitterest denunciation to the most enthusiastic praise. In a leading article in the *New York Times Book Review and Magazine*, entitled “Insulting the Army,” Coningsby Dawson declares: “This is the kind of book that anyone would have been arrested for writing while the war was yet in progress.” He continues:

“Villainies of the kind depicted may have occurred, as they occur in peace life, and

"Three Soldiers"



HE STATES THE CASE FOR REBEL- LIOUS YOUTH

John Dos Passos is accused of "insulting the army" in his new novel, "Three Soldiers," but his aim, it is clear, is to tell the story of youth in bondage.

probably did occur in single instances in all armies; but the moment they were discovered they were punished. They were emphatically not a part of any army system. Mr. John Dos Passos seems to have either imagined or remembered every exceptional example of abuse of authority on the part of subordinates, and has pasted them together into a moving picture which he labels a novel. Tho the isolated cases quoted in this book may have taken place in scattered instances, the effect of them when joined up into one long film is unspeakably dreary and unconvincing. The spirit of the book is all wrong. It implies that every man in uniform above the rank of private was a bully; that in the army between men and officers there was never any bond of loyalty—only a gulf of hate; that the man in the ranks who went to France to fight, went as a slave, with a dull anger in his heart; that whatever his initial patriotism and idealism, it had all been battered out of him long before he reached the battle-line. Most of this is untrue on the face of it; for it was the man in the ranks who won the war. Moreover, it is a dastardly denial of the splendid chivalry which carried many a youth to a soldier's death with the sure knowledge in his soul that he was a liberator."

“Three Soldiers”

Henry Seidel Canby, in the *New York Evening Post*, also states his conviction that an argument against the American Expeditionary Forces and the conduct of the war built out of such material as that used in “Three Soldiers” is manifestly absurd; but, he adds, “this book is a very engrossing one, a first-hand study, finely imagined and powerfully created.” We may dismiss its philosophy as incomplete; we cannot dismiss its conception of the free soul, tortured, deadened, diseased by the circumstances of war. “It is convincing, even tho partial.”

Francis Hackett, in the *New Republic*, compares “Three Soldiers” with Stephen Crane’s “Red Badge of Courage”; and William Stanley Braithwaite, of the *Boston Transcript*, goes so far as to say:

“It is the novel of a man of genius. The intricate, complex, confused background of the machinery of the war, ceaselessly and brutally in action, snatching up its human material, grinding them out as so many articles of discipline, is epical in its effect upon the imagination. The sense of human foulness typified in the incessant desire of the men under military domination for drink and sensual excitement, would be unbearably sordid if Mr. Dos Passos’ power to balance it with the interweaving of beauty was not so great. There is page after page of exquisite description amidst the excessive vulgarity of human speech and of human action. We get inside of men’s souls, no matter what those souls are, whether they are the blunt sensuality of a Crisfield, or the sensitive spiritual dream of an Andrews. The blind forces of passion work toward their own ends in each. Passion is liberally spread all through the novel; beauty, with ineffable countenance, glows upon many a touching episode; and with these, anger burns righteously against all invested shams and false sentiments; and to show that the soldiers were exposed to these as well as to disease and German shells, Mr. Dos Passos sets up the targets of the emissaries sent to the front by the moral and patriotic opinion of the country. This same public opinion will be shocked by ‘Three Soldiers,’ but the art of fiction in America and the Goddess of Truth have a new and bright and faithful votary in the artistic gift of John Dos Passos.”