

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

By CHARLES POORE.

SCOTT FITZGERALD once made a memorable point about a certain eminent American novelist—a master of elaborate obscurities who wrote various demi-sagas. We'll just call him Mr. A. The theory, Scott Fitzgerald suggested, that Mr. A. has tremendous things to say, and that he has a terrifically hard time putting them into words, is erroneous. For as a matter of fact Mr. A. has practically nothing whatever to say. And he says it with great skill.

We quote Scott Fitzgerald from memory. His remarks appeared in *The Bookman*. John Farrar will correct us if we're wrong. But, at any rate, we thought about that judgment when we heard people saying that Pietro Di Donato's "Christ in Concrete"* was a remarkable novel because it was written by a man who earns his living as a bricklayer and who, therefore—so they thought—must have had a terrifically hard time expressing himself through the form of the novel.

Nonsense. Many a writer has another trade. John Steinbeck was also a bricklayer—or, rather, a hod carrier. (He is said to have been a great help in the building of Madison Square Garden.) Conrad was a seafaring man. And so on. Why, you have only to take a scalpel to any doctor and you're sure to find a man who writes books between appendectomies and bedside calls.

A Tale of Italians in America

Mr. Di Donato is, if anything, overladen with the art of the novel. He can write, at will, like Sherwood Anderson, Dreiser, May Sinclair, Joyce or any of the experimentalists who have heard the siren song of Stein. He has brewed a pretty strange and fiery mixture of realism, romanticism, naturalism and impressionism in telling this moving and eloquent story of Italian immigrant life in America. Nicholas Murray Butler may one day hand a deserving scholar a degree for analyzing its stylistic elements—citing authors Mr. Di Donato will be traditionally bound to say he never heard of before. But it's very effective.

For unlike Mr. Fitzgerald's Mr. A., Pietro Di Donato has a great deal to express, and the chromium glare of his over-ornamented prose often adds nothing whatever to the chronicle of lives that arouse our liking and admiration from the very start.

Fundamentally this is the story of what John Dos Passos called one man's initiation. It is the story of Paul, son of Geremio, the master bricklayer, and the harsh encounters that taught him what life was like after his father was killed (you won't forget that searing scene) and he had to take up the support of the sprawling family.

The Elementals of All Lives

The fact that the novel's principal scenes have to do with such elementals as death and birth and marriage and sorrow and religious faith and religious doubt and hunger and merrymaking and desperation and the search for a job and family solidarity (Annunziata, the mother, is wonderful) and puppy love and widowhood and helpless orphans and kind friends and manifestations of man's humanities (thank you, Mr. Edman) as well as man's inhumanities to man, give it universality.

But of course it is Italian to the core. It is by turns operatic, lyrical, ferocious and hilarious. There are uncommon warmth and understanding

*CHRIST IN CONCRETE. By Pietro Di Donato. 311 pages. Bobbs-Merrill. \$2.50.

in Mr. Di Donato's writing. He makes full use of the five senses in his descriptions. To see the variety of his command of situations you have only to compare his description of the birth of the young Geremio with the blasphemous celebration of the workmen or the inevitable description of a wedding feast.

One Man's Initiation

To see the variety of his command of idiom you have only to compare the way he renders the Americanese of the half crazy old medium who communicates with persons in the hereafter for a modest fee of one dollar (a cup of tea thrown in if she likes you) with the way he renders the language of the Negro worker the day Nazone is killed.

The rendering of Italian thought into English speech is, oddly enough, often far less convincing. That, I should say, is because it is there that Mr. Di Donato shows most strongly the influence of experimental writers in English. And that is apt to make anything strange.

Such sentences as: "Garish sickness of sweating yellow narrow kitchen walls in the slowly dying gaslight" merely take us back to the early impressionists. But the picture of Nazone, who "flung out his arms and rested on the speed of space that sucked him down," really gives you an idea of what a man looks like when he is falling to his death.

And that is one of the milder intimations. Mr. Di Donato is never half-hearted in describing the crucial moments of existence. No one will ever doze over his pages.

New Editions of the Week

THE astounding popularity of John Steinbeck's magnificent novel, "The Grapes of Wrath," must by now have surpassed just about every one's expectations. It continues to be the most popular book in America—even in States that have seen an effort or two to censor it.

Such efforts, of course, seem unusually odd at a moment when the complaints over the censoring of European news will no doubt make Americans extremely sensitive to any sort of censorship, whether native or foreign.

Two earlier books by Mr. Steinbeck have just appeared in new, inexpensive editions. One is "In Dubious Battle,"* first published in 1936, and far more like the Steinbeck who wrote "The Grapes of Wrath" than the Steinbeck who wrote "Of Mice and Men." The other is "Cup of Gold,"† first published ten years ago, and perhaps sufficiently described in its subtitle as "The Amazing Career of Sir Henry Morgan, Buccaneer, With Occasional Reference to History."

Other new editions of the week: "Six Plays by Clifford Odets" (also in the Modern Library) and four new titles in the phenomenally successful and well-made Pocket Book series at 25 cents each: Pearl Buck's "The Good Earth," "The Great Stories of De Maupassant," Edna Ferber's "Show Boat," and "A Tale of Two Cities," by Mr. Dickens.

On the endlessly debated subject of cheaper books, this department's platform has always been a firm belief that books should certainly be cheaper—and so should everything else, as well.

*IN DUBIOUS BATTLE. By John Steinbeck. 348 pages. Modern Library. 95 cents.

†CUP OF GOLD. By John Steinbeck. 126 pages. The American Mercury. 25 cents.