

The Knowledge Bank at The Ohio State University

Ohio State Engineer

- Title:** The Engineer's Bookshelf
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- Issue Date:** Dec-1939
- Publisher:** Ohio State University, College of Engineering
- Citation:** Ohio State Engineer, vol. 23, no. 2 (December, 1939), 6-7.
- URI:** <http://hdl.handle.net/1811/35657>
- Appears in Collections:** [Ohio State Engineer: Volume 23, no. 2 \(December, 1939\)](#)

The Engineer's Bookshelf

By W. R. Dumble

Christ in Concrete*

During the last hot days of recent August, when the American populace was sitting with its ear firmly glued to the radio to catch every word of the foreign broadcast commentators, and when one had scarcely gotten to sleep before he was awakened by the shrill blare of the morning newsboy crying "War!", there appeared on the literary horizon unheralded and unostentatiously, a novel that within the last couple weeks has attained the high rank as the best-selling piece of fiction in the country. Almost unnoticed at the time, copies of "Christ in Concrete" by Pietro di Donato were stacked in the bookstalls, only to find a war-weary public, no doubt, caught by the striking title, and turning to buy them with almost unprecedented vigor.

The result has been amazing. Every place one goes he hears the book discussed. Have you read it? What do you think of it? Who, pray tell, is Donato? These and many other questions about the book are fired right and left. Over their beer long-haired men and short-haired women are exulting in its praise; and over their champagne, white-armed and sable-bedecked matrons shiver as their escorts tell the story of Geremio's death and Annunziata's struggle for life. All who read it are caught by the power of the moving story of twelve-year-old Paul taking over the reigns of the large American-born Italian family after the tragic death of his father. In many instances, readers are for the first time realizing that proletarian literature has gained a definite place in the literary annals of America.

Not that proletarian literature is new. It is not new to American readers. Strictly speaking it dates back to the days of Rebecca Harding Davis, to the stories that she published in the *Atlantic* in 1861, and especially to one called "Life in the Iron Mills", a drab and dreary tale of capitalistic bosses exploiting labor under working conditions that beggar description. For proletarian literature, you realize, deals with the working class and the wage-earning class, with strike-breakers and hard-hearted bosses. Malcolm Cowley tags proletarian writing as "literature of social protest," which, after all, is a better phrase probably than any that has been coined for it.

No, literature of social protest is no new form of writing; but in the last ten years it has taken on a different form of expression. In the nineteenth century proletarian literature had a habit of preaching, sometimes straight for the shoulder. "And when you preach," said the critics, "writing loses its art. It becomes propaganda." True or false, as this may be, literature of social protest during the past decade has taken on a far different cloak: It merely presents the plight of people living and working under certain conditions and allows the reader to draw his own conclusions. The results are amazing, so amazing in fact, that

quite a few of the best-sellers in the last few years have been numbered in the list of social writings.

One of the first, probably, was Michael Gold's "Jews Without Money". This was published in 1930, only a few months after Black Thursday, the name given to the date of the stock market crash on October 15, 1929. Soon after the Gold publication came Erskine Caldwell's "Tobacco Road", too well known to a reading and play-going public to be mentioned here. The Jeter Lester family, no doubt, formed the prototype for the Joad family in John Steinbeck's "Grapes of Wrath". Members of the Joad family are the Jeter Lesters "on the loose." Even the stories of Albert Maltz fall in this group, especially those published in 1935 in a volume called "The Way Things Are and Other Stories." Its most famous tale is "Man on a Road", a pathetic picture of a silicosis victim writing a farewell note to his wife and children. All these and many more picture the people and the conditions, leaving the conclusions to the mind of the reader. No attempt is made to preach, yet the lessons taught are all the more powerful because of the preaching-element silence.

Nor has the drama been neglected. There is Albert Maltz's "Merry-Go-Round", Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men", Maxwell Anderson's "Winterset", Irwin Shaw's "Bury the Dead", and Clifford Odets' "Waiting for Lefty". Each tells its story of strike-breakers, of depression victims, and of war's futility.

And now we have Donato and his "Christ in Concrete". First it was a short story appearing in a recent issue of "Esquire". Now it is a novel, with the short story used as the opening chapter. That first chapter tells of a Maundy Thursday accident to the concrete pourers on a large construction job in New York City. When the scaffolding breaks, ten minutes before quitting time, five men are thrown to their deaths. One of the men, Geremio, is impaled between the wooden supports into which the fresh concrete is being poured, and before the rescue squad can reach him, he sinks to his death in the congealing cement, his arms outstretched in Christ-like fashion.

The remaining four chapters are equally convincing. Annunziata, Geremio's widow, dies in child birth five days later, and little twelve-year-old Paul assumes the leadership of the smaller brothers and sisters. To finish the book is actually more of an experience than to read only the first chapter which was the original short story.

The author, Pietro di Donato, we are told, is relating his life story. He actually is the Paul in "Christ in Concrete". Possessing only a grade school education and thrown out of work in 1930, Donato spent hour after hour, day after day in the Public Library in New York City, reading, reading, reading. He was greatly impressed by the plays of Clifford Odets, especially by

"Waiting for Lefty". No doubt the mantle of proletarian writers which fell from the shoulders of Odets when he went to Hollywood after his brief and meteoric success in Manhattan, has fallen on the able and broad back of Donato. It remains to be seen if he can carry on after this first great success.

Like all good literature of protest "Christ in Concrete" does not preach; it gives a real and historic pic-

ture of life. Although it is writing with a purpose, that purpose does not destroy everything else in the story. And since it is a good story it will survive as a piece of writing regardless of the doctrine it expounds. Since it does not preach a theme or a moral, it is the latest contribution to the ever-growing collection of books starting with Michael Gold's "Jews Without Money".

**Christ in Concrete*—by Pietro di Donato—Bobbs Merrill—\$2.50.
