

Book Review

The Call

Reviewed by Alan Gates

The Call, by John Hersey. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985. 767 pp., \$8.95.

At the turn of this century the Student Volunteer Movement thrust upwards of 10,000 men and women into virtually every mission field of the world. Many found their way to China and carried with them the movement's slogan, "The evangelization of the world in this generation." Historians have asked, "Did these people change China, or were they changed by China?"

Hersey's book is a development of this theme fleshed out in the life and labors of his fictitious protagonist, David Treadup. Meticulously researched and woven into a stunning but lengthy historical novel, *The Call* embraces China's recent history of humiliation and revolution, stretching from the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 through the early years of the People's Republic of China.

Treadup was converted in the midst of the missions fervor sweeping North America's college campuses in the late nineteenth century. Stirred by the preaching of "James B. Todd" (John R. Mott), David is recruited by the International Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) to take the Gospel to China. In 1905 he enters the network of YMCA ministries across China—including everything from urban evangelism to rural programs of literacy and agricultural reform.

Treadup's labors span 45 years and chronicle for the reader a long, painful pilgrimage from a faith of sorts to a self-confessed agnosticism. This process is nurtured by conditions of intermittent peasant rebellion, famine, foreign invasion, and guerrilla-inspired terror broken by too few furloughs and summer respites from the withering heat of China's coastal cities of Shanghai, Tientsin, and Pao Ting.

A recurring theme is worked out in David Treadup's efforts for the "regeneration of China" through science lectures in the cities and rural literacy work on behalf of China's peasants. Much of the groundwork he lays and many of the methodologies he develops are later taken over and perfected by the Communist party. As Fairbanks writes, "The missionary was the forerunner of the Communists."

Treadup's drift into the field of social and humanitarian labor takes place under the lengthening shadow of doubt, first as to the abiding value of his strenuous efforts, then to the validity of his Christian faith. Long years of separation from his beloved "Em" and three boys and time spent in a Japanese concentration camp and Communist jails further erodes Treadup's faith in God as a presence to be counted on in a disintegrating China. After deportation and the Japanese surrender, he eventually returns to the country, but China and his beloved peasants are just not the same.

Ultimately, Treadup was too hard on himself. Contrary to his worst fears of a lifetime of labor lost in China, his ministries of love and compassion doubtless were part of what a sovereign God has used under His "Cyrus"—the Communist movement—to bring forth a Church the size of which David Treadup could never have imagined in his wildest dreams.

The Call is necessary reading for today's youth, many of whom are rediscovering the mighty moving of God during the era of the Student Volunteer Movement and who aspire to similar visions of reaching the whole world—especially the

“unreached peoples” of this generation. To these, The Call points out the need to wed zeal to wisdom and vision to reality. This book also points out the predictable results of ministry which speaks only to the social and economic needs of a people to the neglect of the equally legitimate and more profound need for spiritual rebirth.

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