

REVIEWS IN BRIEF

THE STORY OF THE 2/2 PIONEER BATTALION, by E. F. Aitken.—Published by the Battalion Association, 19 Hunter Street, Sydney.

THE 2/2 Pioneer Battalion, A.I.F., was formed in 1940 to work as engineers, but it was so organised that it could be used, in emergency, as infantry. In the event, as General C. S. Steele observes in a foreword, there always seemed to be an emergency, and rifle and bayonet were the tools with which the Pioneers became most familiar.

The battalion met its first emergency at Merdjayoun, Syria, in grim and bloody fighting against the Vichy French, which cost Australia some 1,700 casualties.

Later, ill-equipped and unsupported, it was thrown into Java. There, the original battalion ceased to exist, and a new one was formed in Australia from the scant nucleus of the old.

The new battalion went on to play a gallant part in the Lae-Ramu Valley campaigns in New Guinea and on the beaches of Borneo.

To the general reader, interest in this record of courage and endurance will centre on the brief and hopeless campaign in Java—a part of Australia's war record about which little has hitherto been written.

Singapore had fallen, Lord Wavell had advised against any strong reinforcement of Java, which he regarded as untenable. But it was considered that some aid should be given to the Dutch forces, and a scratch Australian

brigade was hastily formed from miscellaneous units available.

Without adequate support or even information, fighting as and when it could, the brigade was doomed, and its doom was sealed by the Dutch capitulation. Finally, and its doom was sealed by the Dutch capitulation. Finally there came surrender, and afterwards the horrors of the Burma railway.

—G.E.W.H.

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THE SINNER OF SAINT AMBROSE, by Robert Raynolds.—Secker and Warburg, London.

ALTHOUGH this is a grandiose and ambitious historical novel, its central theme is simple and effective enough.

It concerns the struggle, at the end of the 4th Century of a pagan Roman noble, Gregory Julian, to gain power and to end conflict between his own paganism and his wife's Christianity.

Set against the vivid, exciting background of the decaying Roman Empire, the story moves between Italy, the Danube, Constantinople, North Africa, Spain and Britain.

In the tradition of "Quo Vadis," there is plenty of fighting, murder, martyrdom and intrigue, while in the tradition of Hollywood Technicolor history there is an abundance of false sentiment, melodrama and glittering pageantry.

By striving for too much Mr. Raynolds overcrowds his scenes at the expense of his leading characters. As a result, few of his people and incidents stay in the memory.

Occasionally, as in the case of Alaric, the march of the Goths and their attack on Rome, Mr.

Raynolds shows real creative power, but often his handling of emotional episodes is naive and false.

—T.D.

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THE RED BISHOP, by Howard Mason.—Joseph, London.

WHEN Charles Scrivener, sporting journalist, unexpectedly succeeded to the Stonybridge title, he was a disappointed man. Beyond the entail, his great-uncle, the 7th viscount, had left only a little money and an antique but serviceable Rolls Royce. His vast wealth had vanished.

The new peer's succession revived interest in the "Red Bishop Case," so-called from a chess-piece brought to Charles by an aged, wasted man, who died after uttering a few puzzling words. The police could not identify him. The bishop was of 16th century German workmanship. Many tried to buy it, burglars came searching for it, and it was finally stolen by a trick.

The fingerprints of one of the burglars are in Scotland Yard files and give a lead to Nobby Chalmers, the new peer's valet and tipster, who has numerous underworld acquaintances. Nobby's discoveries send the Rolls Royce panting along the Bruges-Ghent road, carrying viscount and valet towards adventures that eclipse anything in Burke's "Romance of the Peerage."

The noble lord's story has speed, humour, and a piquant, turfy flavour. He would have added to our pleasure if he had supplied a plan of the oubliettes and secret passages under Burg Endert on the Moselle.

—J.J.Q.