<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>An Introduction to Alvah Bessie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Robinson, Leroy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citation</td>
<td>長崎大学教養部紀要 人文科学篇 1984, 24(2), p.153-178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue Date</td>
<td>1984-01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10069/15183">http://hdl.handle.net/10069/15183</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NAOSITE: Nagasaki University’s Academic Output SITE

http://naosite.lb.nagasaki-u.ac.jp
An Introduction to Alvah Bessie*

LEROY ROBINSON

Alvah Bessie was born on June 4, 1904. He was born in New York City, in the area called Harlem. In 1904, Harlem was still a middle-class neighborhood.

Bessie went to public schools in New York. When he graduated from high school, at a time when only a few young American men could go to college, he entered Columbia University, which is, as you know, a private Ivy League school.

Bessie majored in English.

When he was 20 years old, he graduated from Columbia, and he became an actor. He was an actor for four years; but he decided he was not a good actor, so he quit the theatre.

Bessie went to Paris, France. In Paris, he got a job on the Paris Times, an English-language evening newspaper. He worked there a few months, then quit, and returned to New York.

In New York, he became a free-lance writer of short stories. But he earned most of his money doing part-time jobs in the publishing industry, for example, at the New York Herald Trib-

* This is a transcription of a talk given recently to members of N.I.C.E. (Nagasaki International Culture Exchange). Brief salutations are omitted.
une and at The New Yorker.

He kept writing short stories.

Most of his short stories were not published. But some of them were. And a few of them were selected among the best short stories of 1931, 1932, 1933, 1934...and they were included in a famous series of books called The Best Short Stories of 1931, 1932...

But Bessie could not live off his short story writing, so he tried to find other jobs in order to earn a living.

You know that the 1930s were years of severe economic depression, and millions of Americans could not find steady work and were forced to live very poorly.

Alvah Bessie got a part-time job that helped to change his way of life for a short time and that helped to change his view of American society for a long time.

I should say that Bessie and his wife got a part-time job, together. They worked together as servants. They worked as servants in the summer house of a rich upper class family. Bessie worked as a handyman and driver. His wife worked as a cook and maid.

That job as servants lasted only one summer, but Bessie got to see how at least some of the upper class people lived, and Bessie was disgusted by their heavy drinking and their heavy gambling. He was disgusted by their loose and wasteful way of life—at a time when most Americans were suffering from the economic depression.
But even as servants, the Bessies were lucky. They got a place to sleep, when thousands of people were sleeping outside. They got something to eat, when thousands of people were not getting enough to eat. And when thousands of people were not getting any money, the Bessies got a little money. Which they saved.

In those days the price of land in New England was comparatively cheap. Alvah Bessie and his wife bought a small farm in New England, in the state of Vermont. He lived on the farm and tried to be a farmer, and he continued to write short stories.

Bessie could not earn enough money as a farmer, so he worked as a farmhand for other farmers. He took home most of his salary in the form of potatoes—that is, he was paid for his work mostly in potatoes. But, if you don’t mind a joke, in those days potatoes wasn’t peanuts.

Once while Bessie was working on a potato farmer’s land, a man from a big supermarket chain came to buy potatoes. Bessie’s boss had thousands of potatoes to sell. The man from the supermarket chain offered such a low price for the potatoes that Bessie’s boss was shocked. He had bought a special machine to dig potatoes. He had bought special chemicals to grow good potatoes. It had cost him more to grow the potatoes than the supermarket chain wanted to pay for them. Bessie’s boss refused to sell his potatoes for such a low price. Instead he gave them away to any of his neighbors who wanted them.

The following year Bessie’s boss planted only enough potatoes to feed his own family. The man from the supermarket chain came again and this time offered a high price for the
potatoes. The farmer had none to sell.

Bessie says that from this experience he realized for the first time how big supermarket chains were able to manipulate the prices of farm products, and Bessie thought this was not fair to the small farmers that he knew.

Coincidentally, at about the same time, on one of the trips Bessie took to New York City to try to sell some of his short stories, he met an editor of Scribner's Magazine who bought some of Bessie's stories and gave Bessie books to write about. So Bessie was able to make a little money writing about other people's books.

More important, that Scribner's editor gave Bessie a lot of radical political literature--articles, pamphlets, books--and Alvah Bessie heard about Marxism for the first time. He began to think about American society in a new way.

Then Bessie began to write a novel which was published in 1935 under the title Dwell in the Darkness. (I have not read this novel. I haven't read anything about it either. So in the question period please don't embarrass me by asking questions about it.) When the novel was published Bessie was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Writing. The Guggenheim Foundation awarded him $2,000--that was a lot of money in the 1930s--and this award encouraged Bessie to keep on writing.

Bessie was now about 31 years old.

Then in late 1935 Alvah Bessie got a new job. He sold his farm in Vermont and went back to New York. He went to Brooklyn, New York. He became the assistant editor of the
Sunday magazine section of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle. Bessie wrote articles about books and plays and movies.

And for the first time he began to write for labor organizations. Let me explain how he happened to do this.

In 1936 there was a big labor strike in Brooklyn. The East Coast seamen went on strike. The owner of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, the newspaper Bessie was working for, opposed the strike. Bessie supported it.

Bessie went to see the president of the seamen’s union and advised him to write a letter to the owner of the Eagle explaining the position of the union. The union president agreed to do this. In fact, he himself visited the owner of the Eagle and gave him the letter explaining the union’s position in the strike.

As you may have guessed, this letter was actually written by Alvah Bessie. After that, the president of the seamen’s union asked Bessie to write other things for the union.

Bessie has said that this close contact with union men deepened his understanding of the relations between economic classes in the United States and he began to think of himself as a member of the working class.

Then Alvah Bessie became actively involved in another strike -- a strike against the management of the Brooklyn Eagle, the newspaper he was working for. Let me explain the circumstances of this strike briefly.

The owner of the Brooklyn Eagle bought another newspaper in Brooklyn. He wanted to dismiss all the newspapermen on this
second newspaper, and he wanted the newspapermen on the Eagle
to write both newspapers.

A new newspapermen's union had just been organized, and
that union called a strike at both newspapers.

Alvah Bessie joined the strike against the Eagle.

The newspaper union won the strike.

Alvah Bessie was glad that he had taken part in his first
strike as a union man, even at the risk of losing his own job.

Bessie was now about 34 years old.

Now let me say something about the history of Europe--in
particular, the history of Spain.

In 1931 the king of Spain was thrown out of power. A re-
publican government came into power. The republican govern-
ment was a coalition government--that is, it was composed of
liberals and socialists and communists.

In 1936, in July, General Francisco France organized a rebel-
ion against the republican government. The Spanish civil war
began.

In August 1936 the United States and Great Britain and France
made an agreement not to interfere in the Spanish civil war.

But Germany and Italy broke this agreement, and they sup-
plied military weapons to Franco's anti-republican forces.

The United States and Great Britain and France refused to
give military support to the republican government.
Only the government of the Soviet Union supplied military assistance to the republican government of Spain.

But from many countries of the world, especially from Europe and the United States, many young men volunteered to go to Spain to fight to try to save the republican government.

These volunteers were called the International Brigades. The volunteers from the United States were called the Abraham Lincoln Battalion.

Now, let's get back to Alvah Bessie.

Early in 1937 Alvah Bessie quit his job at the Brooklyn Eagle and went to work for the Spanish Information Bureau in New York City. The Spanish Information Bureau published propaganda for the Spanish republican government. Alvah Bessie began to write articles and leaflets and pamphlets in support of the republican government and against the Franco rebellion.

Bessie worked at this propagandist job for about eight months. Then he left it. He believed the fight to save the Spanish republic was part of a larger fight—the fight to save democracy wherever it was threatened by fascism. Bessie wanted to get into that fight, not just as a journalist writing about it, but as a soldier fighting in it.

So, in 1937 Alvah Bessie joined the Abraham Lincoln Battalion and he went to Spain.

Many years later Bessie talked about his reasons for going to fight in Spain as a member of the Lincoln Battalion. This is what he said: "The historical events coincided with my long-felt
desire to destroy the middle-class training I had received all through my life. I went to war in Spain to achieve self-integration and to lend my individual strength to the fight against our eternal enemy--oppression. It was necessary for me as a man to work for the first time in a large group of men, to submerge myself in that mass, to achieve self-discipline and to achieve unselfishness...

In Spain, Bessie fought hard. He fought well. He fought bravely. But by the end of 1938 the republican government was losing the war, and all the volunteers from all the International Brigades were withdrawn from Spain.

Alvah Bessie returned to New York.

He looked for a job.

And he wrote a book about his experiences as a member of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion in Spain. This book was called Men in Spain. Men Spain is non-fiction. It is not a novel.

Men in Spain was published the same week the German army invaded Poland, beginning the second world war in Europe--a war that many people believe began in Spain in 1936 and might have been prevented if the United States and Great Britain and France had supported the republican government as much as Germany and Italy supported the Franco rebellion.

Incidentally, it may interest you to know that in Spain in the late 1930s, Alvah Bessie met Ernest Hemingway, who was there not as a fighter but as a writer, a war correspondent. Hemingway advised the Scribner's publishing company to publish Bessie's book about the Spanish civil war, Men in Battle. Hemingway
said it would be a very good book. And it is. I recommend that you read it.

After Men in Battle was published, Bessie got a job on a radical magazine called The New Masses. In the New Masses Bessie later criticized Hemingway’s novel set in Spain during the Spanish civil war, For Whom the Bell Tolls. Bessie wrote: “Ernest Hemingway is less concerned with the fate of the Spanish people than with the fate of his hero and heroine who are himself. They are Hemingway and Heminway alone in their meaning of individual death, personal happiness, personal misery, personal significance”.

As you can see, Alvah Bessie had rejected the concept of the lonely hero, which is the foundation of so much American fiction of the 20th century. That is Bessie had rejected individualism.

Then something happened that led Alvah Bessie to write his second novel, Bread and a Stone.

A friend of his who had also fought in Spain gave Bessie a handgun as a souvenir of their experience as members of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion.

It was against the law to have a handgun in New York City, so Bessie gave the gun to another friend of his who lived in the country.

The man that Bessie gave the gun to was out of work and he could not find a job. He decided to use the gun to steal money. Trying to steal money, he killed somebody with that gun. He was arrested. He was put in jail. He was tried. He was sentenced to death. And he was executed.
Bessie's novel Bread and a Stone (the title comes from the Bible (a hungry man asks for bread but is given a stone instead) is based on this man and his case. Bessie hoped that the publication of his novel would help save his friend from being executed in the electric chair. Unfortunately, it did not.

In Bread and a Stone, Bessie describes the man as a victim of a society that exploits him. Bessie describes the man's crime as being motivated by the pressures of unemployment, by the desperation of a man without a job in a period of nation-wide economic depression.

As you know, this is a typical theme in the kind of writing called naturalism or critical realism.

While Bessie was working at the New Masses, the German army invaded the Soviet Union, and the Japanese Imperial Navy attacked Pearl Harbor.

In 1942 Bessie was 38 years old.

Bessie published two booklets, The Soviet People at War, which described how the people of the Soviet Union were defending their country against the German army, and This Is Your Enemy, which described the brutality of the German army in Europe.

In 1943, Alvah Bessie got an offer to work as a screen-writer in Hollywood, California. Bessie went to Hollywood and worked for Warner Brothers Picture Studios for three years. Then he was fired.

Let me explain why.
Just after the end of World War II there was a labor strike in Hollywood. The strikers were workers at motion picture studios.

One day some members of this union formed a picket line at Warner Brothers Studio. As the striking workers marched in front of the movie studio with their picket signs, they were attacked by a gang of men who began to hit them. The striking workers fought back. The police came.

Alvah Bessie was a member of the Hollywood Screenwriters Guild (guild means union). The screenwriters union was not directly involved in this strike. But Alvah Bessie wrote some pamphlets in support of the striking workers. Soon after the end of the strike, Warner Brothers fired Bessie. Jack L. Warner, the head of the motion picture company, thought Alvah Bessie was in some way responsible for the strike.

This happened in 1946. After that, Alvah Bessie was never able to get a regular job as a screenwriter in Hollywood--that is, he never got a regular contract, and so he had to work as a free-lance writer.

By this time, the cold war between the Soviet Union and the United States had begun. In the United States there was a great fear of the Soviet Union. A fear of communism. A fear of socialism. A fear of radicalism.

This was a time of loyalty oaths and security checks—in short, the beginning of the period of McCarthyism.

In Hollywood an organization called the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals requested the U.S.
House of Representatives’ Committee for the Investigation of Un-American Activities to investigate what the Alliance called communist infiltration into the motion picture industry.

To put it simply, the House committee said many movies had communist propaganda in them, and the committee was going to expose the propaganda and the people who put it in the movies, especially the screenwriters.

Actually, the House committee never did this—it never exposed communist propaganda in the movies, because it never actually investigated it.

As a matter of fact, there was nothing to investigate.

You may ask me, “Nothing?”

And I will answer, “Nothing”.

Let me refer you to a famous research study that was published in 1956, a few years after the House committee’s hearings on communism in the movies.

The title of this study is Communism in the Movies. This study is an in-depth content analysis of all the movies written by the screenwriters who were investigated by the House committee.

The writer of this study was Dorothy B. Jones.

You’ll ask me, “Who was she?”

Well, Dorothy B. Jones was the chief of the Film Reviewing and Analysis Section of the Office of War Information.

What was that?
The Office of War Information was an agency of the United States Government, and Dorothy B. Jones was a government official.

You may also ask what is communism in the movies?

Dorothy B. Jones defined communism in the movies as a statement of Marxist philosophy or a statement following the political line of the Communist Party of the United States.

In the case of all the films she studied, Dorothy B. Jones found no evidence at all of Marxist philosophy and she found no evidence at all of statements following the line of the Communist Party.

On the other hand, Dorothy B. Jones found that in Hollywood, in the motion picture industry, motion picture producers have such complete control of film-making that it was impossible for a writer to get communist ideas into a movie, even if he tried to do so.

As was said before, the House committee never actually investigated ideas in the movies, anyway—in fact, at the end of the committee’s hearings, the committee chairman, J. Parnell Thomas (please, remember that name for a few minutes), Thomas said, “This committee has concerned itself principally with identifying communists in the motion picture industry”.

In the hearings of the House committee there were two kinds of witnesses—friendly witnesses and unfriendly witnesses. Friendly witnesses cooperated with the committee. Unfriendly witnesses did not cooperate with the committee.
During the first week of hearings, in October 1947, only friendly witnesses appeared before the committee.

The first friendly witness was Jack L. Warner, head of Warner Brothers Pictures, the man who had fired Alvah Bessie from his job as a screenwriter about a year before.

The first man that Jack L. Warner said was a communist was— you guessed it! — Alvah Bessie. And Warner said he himself personally had taken communist ideas out of Bessie's film scripts. But Warner did not say specifically which communist ideas he had taken out of Bessie's film scripts, and the committee did not ask him to be specific.

That was in October 1947.

In September 1947 Alvah Bessie had been ordered to appear as a witness before the House committee in Washington, D.C. in October.

During this month, Bessie and other screenwriters who had been ordered to appear as witnesses decided what they should do, and they finally decided to rely on the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

Bessie and these other screenwriters were unfriendly witnesses— that is, they did not cooperate with the committee. They did not exactly refuse to answer the committee's questions about their lives and careers and ideas, but they insisted on answering the questions in their own way.

For example, before he began answering the committee's questions, Alvah Bessie made the following statement to the com-
mittee: He said that the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States prohibits Congress from passing laws against freedom of speech, so, if the congressional committee was prohibited from recommending laws against freedom of speech, then the committee did not have the constitutional right to investigate people's political ideas or political connections.

I should say that Bessie's point was legally debatable.

But I would also like to make an important point here: The Fifth Amendment to the United States Constitution says that no person shall be compelled to be a witness against himself in a legal proceeding. If Alvah Bessie had relied on the Fifth Amendment instead of the First, he would not have been indicted for contempt of Congress, as he was, and he would not have been sentenced to prison, as he was.

Now, you will ask me, "Why did he rely on the First Amendment then? Why didn't he rely on the Fifth?"

Because Bessie wanted to challenge the right of the committee to ask him questions about his political beliefs and his political affiliations. That is, he wanted to challenge the right of the committee to exist. By using the Fifth Amendment he could not make that challenge legal.

Anyway, Alvah Bessie refused to answer the committee's questions with simple yes or no answers. But I will tell you this: if you meet Alvah Bessie personally, and if you ask him the same questions that the committee asked him, he will answer you frankly, but he will also tell you this: "I will never answer any question under duress—that is, under pressure—I will never an-
swer as a condition of employment, never under a threat of loss of employment, never under a threat of loss of status, or under a threat of imprisonment, and never if my answer means my naming any other human being and certainly never if my answer means placing in danger any other human being”.

In time, Bessie was charged with contempt of Congress. His attorney failed to get this charge dropped (in your program you have a copy of Bessie’s lawyer’s argument to the Court). Bessie was put on trial before the Sixth District Court in Washington, D. C.

During the trial—that was on June 29, 1950, 25 days after Bessie’s 46th birthday—Bessie made a statement to the judge. Part of this statement will show you how Alvah Bessie saw himself at that time and how he saw what he was doing in the context of the history of the United States.

For example, Bessie said to the judge: “Today we honor Thomas Jefferson for fighting the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798—but at that time Jefferson was denounced as a traitor to the United States and as an agent of a foreign power—France. Today we honor Henry David Thoreau for refusing to pay his taxes as a protest against American black slavery. Thoreau was put in prison. Today we honor Abraham Lincoln for opposing the war we started against Mexico in 1848. But at that time Lincoln stood almost alone on the floor of Congress in his opposition to imperialistic war”.

Then Bessie said to the judge: “I do not equate myself with these giants of our American past. I possess neither their literary genius nor their statesmanship. I merely point out the par-
allel: citizens persecuted by their government, blacklisted from working in their professions, and jailed in 1950, may in the future be found not in the minority but in the majority of those Americans who fight to preserve our freedoms”.

But this judge found Alvah Bessie guilty of contempt of Congress. Bessie’s appeal to a higher court was rejected. Bessie was imprisoned for 10 months in the United States prison at Texarkana, Texas.

Bessie considered himself a political prisoner.

But his fellow prisoners were thieves and rapists and murderers--many of them neurotic, some of them crazy, and most of them poor.

At Texarkana, Bessie was given a job in the prison garage. His job was to put gasoline in the tanks of trucks and tractors used on the prison’s big farm, where many prisoners worked as farm hands.

Now, if you do not mind, I would like at this time to tell you a very short story.

Do you remember the name J. Parnell Thomas?

J. Parnell Thomas was the chairman of the House Committee on un-American Activities--the committee that put Alvah Bessie and nine other screenwriters in prison. J. Parnell Thomas said these 10 men were un-American.

Well, my little story is this: J. Parnell Thomas was put in the same prison with two of the screenwriters he and his committee had called un-American. Thomas was imprisoned after
being found guilty of requiring workers on his congressional staff to pay him money out of their salaries for the jobs he gave them.

We have a saying in the United States, Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel.

To go on, in April 1951 Alvah Bessie was released from prison. He returned to Hollywood. He began to look for a job. It was impossible for him to get another job as a screenwriter because he was blacklisted--his name was on a list of writers that the motion picture studios refused to give work to. So he looked for other kinds of work.

Once he was offered a job as a door-to-door salesman selling books--expensive books--and he was told he had to sell these expensive sets of books to working class Mexican-Americans. I mean Bessie was told to force these poor people to buy books that they could not afford. Bessie refused to do this, so did not accept this job.

Bessie had written letters asking for work to many labor union newspapers all over the United States. Fortunately, he got a job as an assistant editor of the newspaper of the International Longshoremen and Warehouse Workers Union in San Francisco. Bessie was 47 years old.

He worked for the ILWU newspaper for five years. During those five years he wrote his third novel. The name of this novel is The Un-Americans. It was published in 1957.

The Un-Americans is a political novel about moral struggle. Two men have been friends for a long time. Both of these men are writers. Both of them are called as witnesses before the
House Committee on un-American activities. The two men first meet in the 1930s in Spain, where they are both newspapermen. One is a famous journalist for middle-class newspapers. He supports the republican government in Spain, but he is mainly an observer. The other man is a reporter for a radical newspaper. He too supports the republican government, but he feels the cause of the republican government so deeply that he joins the Abraham Lincoln Battalion and participates in the civil war in Spain as a soldier. Then World War II comes. The famous journalist joins the United States army as a war correspondent. The other man also joins the United States army, but not as a writer, as a soldier. The first man gets a medal for writing, the second man gets a medal for fighting. After the war, both men are ordered to appear as witnesses before the House Committee on un-American activities. The first man is afraid of losing his fame and his status and his money, so he cooperates with the committee, and he testifies against his friend. The other man, the radical journalist, refuses to cooperate with the committee, is convicted of contempt of Congress and is sent to prison.

Let me go back a little in time.

After Alvah Bessie left his job on the union newspaper, he got a job as a stage manager in a night club in San Francisco. While working in this night club, he continued writing. His next book was called Inquisition in Eden. This book is autobiographical, about Bessie's experience in Hollywood. It was published in 1965.

By 1965 Bessie had already begun his next novel. This novel was called The Symbol. It was published in 1967. Bessie was
then 63 years old.

The Symbol is about a woman motion picture superstar. The story is about her life as a child without parents, her unhappiness in orphan homes and in the homes of foster parents, some of whom treat her badly. The story tells about her career as a model, her unhappy marriages, her career as a movie actress, and her relations with Hollywood film producers who control her acting career for the sake of their own profit. Finally she commits suicide.

The Symbol was a best-selling novel. One reason it became a best seller was that most readers (including me) thought the main character of The Symbol was a fictional portrait of Marilyn Monroe.

Alvah Bessie, however, denies that The Symbol portrays Marilyn Monroe. This is what Bessie says: "The Symbol incorporates how I grew to feel about the motion picture industry... I've told the story in terms of human character... Those who run the industry do not care at all about the personal problems of the creative people who work for them... The great concern of those who run the industry is to make money... The result is sometimes the destruction of human personality... I've written about a girl who resembles many girls I've known--very few became stars... But most of them were destroyed... I am outraged by this exploitation of human beings... Anybody who wishes to find parallels in The Symbol with the life of Marilyn Monroe can do so, but my book is a complete fiction... I have tried to write a serious, compassionate book..."

The Symbol became a T.V. movie that you may have seen on
T.V. in Japan a few years ago. The T.V. movie was called The Sex Symbol.

Alvah Bessie did not call it that--the movie producers did. The movie producers also changed Bessie’s original script. They changed its content to emphasize not symbol but sex. Bessie protested against this change in his work, and he asked that his name be removed from the movie’s list of credits--he refused to take credit as the writer of this film.

Now you must understand that in Hollywood writers need screen credits in order to get jobs. Please remember that this was Alvah Bessie’s first screen credit in 25 years. But he asked to have his name removed from the film.

Incidentally the T.V. film came much closer to representing the life of Marilyn Monroe--her sex life--than Bessie’s original novel. The film was very successful, commercially, not morally.

After this experience, Bessie said: “I will never again sell anything I have written or may write to commercial television”.

In 1967, the year The Symbol was published, Bessie got an offer to go to Spain to work on a movie about the Spanish civil war, in which he had fought in the 1930s.

The title of this film was Espana otra vez, Spain Again. The story of Spain Again is about an American doctor who returns to Spain many years after fighting on the side of the republican government in the civil war of the 1930s.

When he himself returned to Spain to work on this film, Alvah Bessie discovered that the producer of the film had not
only fought on the side of Franco against the republic but also
had fought in the same battles in which Bessie had fought against
Franco. Bessie also discovered later that much of what he
wrote for this film was removed from his script by the producer.

In 1975 Bessie published a book called Spain Again. In this
book he describes his return to Spain after about 30 years.

Since 1975 Alvah Bessie has written two more novels. He
writes articles for liberal magazines and newspapers such as In
Our Times. He is sometimes interviewed on radio or television.
Last year he visited several universities in the American south-
west where he was invited to speak about his life and work.

In March 1978 he had a surgical operation and in October
1979 he had another surgical operation. He has heart trouble.

Nevertheless, he recently went to Morocco in North Africa,
then he drove from Morocco to Paris, driving over 1,000 kilome-
ters. He lives in San Rafael, California, a small town near San
Francisco. He is in his late ’70s. He is still writing.

Sometimes when he is not too busy he writes a letter to me.

A line or two from a letter of his dated November 4, 1979,
will tell you a little about his spirit even as he approaches his
80th year.

As you may know, I recently visited the country of Israel.
I went to many places in Israel. For example, Bethlehem, the
town where Jesus Christ was supposed to be born. I did not
visit a place called Masada, where, during the days of the Roman
Empire, many Israelis committed suicide rather than surrender
to the Roman army. Bessie wrote that if he had gone to Israel he would have visited Masada—“A fantastic story,” Bessie wrote, “though I thought it would have been better if rather than kill themselves they had decided to fight the Romans to the last man”.

Now my time is almost up. But before we start the question period, let me finish this introduction to Alvah Bessie by repeating some of the important questions Bessie asked himself when on his return to Spain to work on the film Spain Again he met with the kind of censorship he had met in his short life as a Hollywood screenwriter.

In his book Spain Again Bessie says about this experience with censorship in Spain: “I remembered the testimony of the friendly witnesses in 1947 who had accused me of slipping communist propaganda into the movies. I wondered if that’s what I had tried to do. But I had not done that. What I had not done resulted in my expulsion from the motion picture industry. Was it communist propaganda to tell the truth? Was I attempting to slant a film? Was I distorting the truth? Was I using the truth for the purpose of propaganda? What is the difference between truth and propaganda? How is reality reflected in a motion picture?”

Unfortunately, Alvah Bessie does not answer these questions, these important questions, in Spain Again, but I think you will agree with me that these are among the vital questions any writer or teacher must consider, not only about movies but about all forms of art in which ideas are expressed.
The question period that followed the above Introduction to Alvah Bessie was a lively one. Space does not permit a description of all the questions and answers, but here are a few.

Q. What kind of questions did the House Committee on un-American Activities ask Alvah Bessie in 1947 and how did he answer them?

A. One question was: Are you a member of the Screen Writers Guild? Bessie's answer was that this question involved his associations.

The Committee then asked Bessie if he was refusing to answer their question. His response was: "I must answer the question the only way I know how, and that is such a question violates my right of association, and I do not believe this committee has the right to investigate my associations."

Another question that the Committee asked Bessie was: Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party? Bessie answered: "Gentlemen of the committee, unless it has been changed since yesterday, in our country we have a secret ballot, and I do not believe the committee has any more right to inquire into my political affiliations than I believe an election official has the right to go into the voting booth and examine the ballot which has been marked by the voter."

Q. What kind of material was censored out of Alvah Bessie's film script for Spain Again?

A. Here is one speech that was removed from Bessie's script:
"If the tourist business becomes bad, everything would become bad...Hotels would be closed...It would mean unemployment for cooks, waiters...for all those people who live on the tourist trade...These people, without work, would buy less clothing, fewer TV sets...their level of consumption would fall...There would be a crisis in other industries, the shoe industry, and all the rest..."

Q. How were the House Committee hearings conducted?

A. Let me answer that question in this way: Witnesses before the committee had none of the protections ordinarily assured by the U.S. Constitution in a court of law. There was no jury of one's peers, for example. Witnesses were not permitted to cross-examine.

Q. Was Alvah Bessie really a Communist or not?

A. Yes, he was a member of the Communist Party of the United States. He joined sometime in the 1930s before he went to Spain as a member of the Lincoln Battalion. But he quit the Communist Party in 1953 because he considered the Party to be too dependent on the U.S.S.R. Bessie once said that the C.P.U. S.A. never learned to speak to the American people in terms that the American people understand.

Q. What are Bessie's political ideas now?

A. Bessie still considers himself a Marxist. I have here a quotation from him on this point. Let me read it. Bessie said: "Everything I have learned about the world has convinced me a hundred times over of the correctness of the Marxist interpretation of history and society, and I firmly believe that most of the
major problems of the world's people can be solved and will ultimately be solved by a truly democratic socialism”.

(Received September 29, 1983)