

Hill-Billy of the Ozarks

THE WOODS COLT, A Novel of the Ozark Hills. By Thames Williamson. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1933. \$2.

Reviewed by STANLEY VESTAL

THE hill-billy of the Ozarks has long proved a tempting subject for writers of regional fiction, and novelists have not been lacking who attempted a picture of the mores and the natives of this stronghold of a primitive American culture. The crude manners, the grotesque superstitions, the "old-time religion," the pioneer virtues, and especially the Shakespearean speech of these unreconstructed mountaineers have offered rich prize to the writer. And the obviously unbroken tradition going back to England and the first English settlements upon American soil have strongly appealed to all those of antiquarian or literary tastes. Here is something genuinely our own, unspoiled, and as ancient as anything European can be on this continent.

It is always a pleasure to pick up a book on the mountaineers; one is hopeful that this time it may do the trick. For, if the truth be told, most of the novels have failed to be convincing, whether because they were too literary, too antiquarian, or written by an author who was slumming, or at least condescending. Most of these books lacked inwards.

Mr. Thames Williamson has left them all at the post in "The Woods Colt." His book is remarkable in its kind, and excellent in many ways—quite the best novel on the Ozarks of which we have knowledge. And this is due to his skill as an artist, and his fine masculine sensitive-ness to the materials he handles. He has taken great pains to be authentic, and not content with his own knowledge, has called in as a critic no less an authority than Mr. Vance Randolph, whose books on the hill-billies in another kind are so well and favorably known. "The Woods Colt" is probably as nearly "regionally perfect" as a piece of fiction can be. Yet the mores are not dragged in pedantically, or to instruct the reader; every one of the references to Ozark custom is a cog in the plot, and helps the story and the characterization forward. Every one of the native types portrayed—and how they are portrayed—is introduced to further the action. They appear in great variety, and are sketched with a few significant strokes, a most satisfying economy of means. The incidents also, though good, strong dramatic ones, are such as might readily happen in the life and death of such an out-cast as the woods colt hero, who gives his name to the book. For, as the author informs the uninstructed reader on the fly-leaf, "a woods colt is what you-uns call a bastard, only our way of sayin' it is more decent. More natural-like, too; kind of wild and bred in the hills and the devil be damned, somethin' that-a-way."

With such a hero, two gals, a treacherous rival, a trouble-making friend, an irate father, a moribund feud, sundry "furriners," revenuers, sheriffs, and barrels of moonshine, the author distills a heady draught of believable adventure. It is the sort of book one reads at a single

sitting. A thoroughly workmanlike job, just as a story.

But the glory of the book is its style. Mr. Williamson has used the mountain idiom throughout. He has brought the lilt of the play-party and the folk-song in constantly, but only where it served his purpose. He has not gone literary, or made his people a race of sure-fire poets. The rigid, bare, primitive, savage, intolerant life of the hill-billy is not glossed over or poeticized. The poetry in the book is not faked, and the idiom is not overdone. "Hit jest comes natural," as one of the characters might say. The author makes it his own.

Mr. Williamson has the secret of throwing himself into the life he describes, as in his book on Mexico. As a rule, the literary men who crave and seek something primitive are somewhat lacking in virility, their palates are jaded, they really have no taste for raw meat. But Mr. Williamson writes with virility; one feels that the adventures of his hero might, under certain circumstances, be possible for him. He accepts the world he portrays as a reality: it is, for him, neither a museum-piece nor a peepshow. "The Woods Colt" is one of the best regional novels of our time. It is illustrated admirably with woodcuts by Raymond Bishop.

Wise and Wicked

TALIFER. By Edwin Arlington Robinson. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1933. \$1.75.

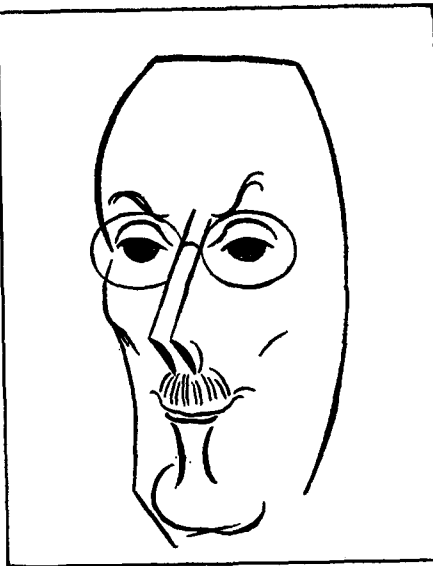
Reviewed by LOUIS UNTERMEYER

"TALIFER" is the happiest of all Robinson's longer poems—and it is also the best. It is, furthermore, the easiest to read, less knotty in dialectic, less gnarled in diction than most of the lengthier pieces. This ease is communicated at the very opening of the poem with its striking metaphor:

Althea, like a white bird left alone
In a still cage of leaves and memories—

and it is reinforced by the direct progress of the narrative. There is no fumbling of detail, no faltering of effect in these scant hundred pages.

The story itself is simpler than most of Robinson's later works. Instead of the usual triangle, there is a quadrangle—or, to be more literal, a quartet with one dissonant player. There is, first of all, Althea, a combination of white bird and impatient Griselda, who loves Talifer and was to have married him. Talifer, "a rather splendid sort of ass," turns from Althea to Karen who, inheriting "a face and little else than a cool brain," is not so much in love with Talifer as she is bent on having him because Althea has him. She succeeds, and Talifer, being neither as strong as Fate or Karen, marries her, believing that Karen spells Peace—with an underlined capital. Within a year he is disillusioned. Doctor Quick, his good friend and Althea's faithful slave, acts partly as counsel, partly as Greek chorus; yet it is not Quick but "Time and Events" which quite fortuitously separate Talifer from the beautiful basilisk and bring him back to Althea who has acquired, in the tense



EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON
A caricature by Eva Herrmann, from "On Parade," Coward-McCann

interval, a sense of comedy instead of the expected tragedy. The ending as indicated, is a happy one—something of a departure for the grim author of "Matthias at the Door" and "The Glory of the Nightingales." There is even a child—the first appearance, I believe, of an infant in any of Robinson's dramas of marital maladjustment.

This crude recital of the plot of "Talifer" does great injustice to the work as a poem. For it is as poetry, not as a versified play, that "Talifer" is important. It marks a return to Robinson's nimbler manner, his neat asstringency, his uncanny skill as dramatist and dissector. He is still fond of the sentence that turns upon itself, still given to the circumlocutory monologue which results in passages like:

... For in every heart,
I fear, there lives a wish that has a life
longer than hope; and it is better
there
Than an undying lie, and is far safer,
And has more kindness in it. If I felt
Or feared in this the presence of a loose
And easy reasoning, I should not be
happy;
And surely not, so far as I'm the measure,
The happiest man alive. But even the first
Among the chosen of the undeserving
May wish there were no price of pain
for those
Who may not be forgotten. . .

But the poem is far more stripped, the narrative far more active, than such an excerpt would promise. There is a teasing humor throughout, a rallying irony which recalls the earlier Robinson, the Robinson of "John Gorham" and "Bewick Finzer" and "Miniver Cheevy." It is extended throughout the concluding section of the book, but it is in almost all of Doctor Quick's speeches. Even the connubial scene does not inhibit him.

"An anniversary nap,"
Quick said, "is always a brave evidence.
It argues that a year of discipline
Has not undone the present or laid waste
The future. You will live for a long time
And may as well prepare."

It is because of his gallery of portraits that Robinson will be longest remembered, and here he has added four more full-length figures to an already crowded collection. It is hard to forget the blundering and bewildered Talifer, the rewarding Althea, the whimsical and wise Doctor Quick; hardest of all to forget Karen, that "sphinx-eyed Greek-reading Lorelei, or philosophic siren," whom Robinson reveals with joyful malice and leaves to her own divorces in a university town with

Dons following her like dogs, and ancient sages
With a last gleam of evil in their eyes.
Watching her and forgetting their arthritis.
Your father, free and far away from her,
Forgives her—and, as long as his remittance
Has wings, she will have paradise in the bank.

It is a fine blend of sadness and satire which individualizes "Talifer," a strange combination of pity and pungency, of elaborate analysis and incisive phrase. It could be managed by no other American than Edwin Arlington Robinson—and not too often by him.

Sigrid Undset Writes of a Broken Marriage

IDA ELISABETH. By Sigrid Undset. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1933. \$2.50.

Reviewed by PHILLIPS D. CARLETON.

LIKE the last two books of Sigrid Undset, this is a polemic, and a good one. There is still a good deal of truth in Georg Brandes's saying that a literature lives when it has social problems to discuss—as witness this book and the last decade in America. Twice before Sigrid Undset has dealt with the religious life in the modern world; now she has turned to seek enduring bonds supporting marriage behind the obvious ones of religion—perhaps substantiating them.

Ida Elisabeth, divorced from a moronic and idle husband with her two children in her care, refuses to marry again: one of her children is backward and sensitive and Ida Elisabeth feels that she has no right to withdraw from him the affection that he demands or to share it with another. This summary (like all summaries an unfair method of criticism) bears all the marks of that class of novels written with the definite "purpose" of exposing something, proving something, or accomplishing something. The dice are loaded to make the issue clearer. What could be clearer than the need for divorce from a moron who not only could not support his wife, but hindered her efforts to support him? What greater coincidence than to have the divorced husband come to die of tuberculosis in the town in which his former wife is contemplating an immediate marriage?

But one must go softly in making such assumptions; there was a man named Ibsen of the same people as Sigrid Undset who set the world by the ears with social dramas a half century ago—dramas that still have an enormous vitality and sufficient complexity underlying the surface polemic to set people quarreling. Perhaps any great author unconscious sees more deeply than he comprehends and records more than he realizes. The "Doll's House" becomes not merely a blow for woman's freedom under Wiegand's criticism, but a savage attack on the woman who prefers to wield the undoubted weapons of her sex, beneath which Torvald endured inglorious defeat.

Sigrid Undset belongs to that great breed of authors to whom the characters seem to dictate their life stories—singularly significant characters—to be sure, and life histories modeled on the austere-ly tragic, but none the less stories that throw a new light on this everyday business of living. Compare in the light of these remarks the novel "Ida Elisabeth" with a recent American novel concerned with the freedom of women ("Ann Vickers") and note the different emphasis: in the American novel against a firmly conceived and vigorously detailed background the main figure moves jerkily and unconvincingly; she has no life apart from the succession of incidents through which she is forced. The author has created her to serve the purpose of a white-hot social indignation, and she has been forced through the cauldrons he has prepared for her. In the Norwegian novel the small-town life is only here and there indicated; the drabness and monotony of a little fjord village is lost sight of in the overwhelming drama that the main character is living through (it is an overwhelming drama to her, at least), and it is only through her eyes that we see the things about her, surroundings vitalized only by their importance to her. Before this conception the incongruities of the plot melt away; they even acquire a specific interest as events in the life of this particular woman. So there remains the story of a certain woman as real as one's next door neighbor, and an intimate knowledge of her life impossible outside of fiction. Given this particular woman, events have a definite logic about them, but not necessarily only one meaning. Perhaps it sums up the story to say that people can quarrel as eagerly about the fate of Ida Elisabeth as I have heard them quarrel about that of Kristin.



WOODCUT BY RAYMOND BISHOP FOR "THE WOODS COLT"

North of Hollywood

GIVE YOUR HEART TO THE HAWKS.
By Robinson Jeffers. New York: Random House. 1933. \$2.50.

Reviewed by HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

ROBINSON JEFFERS lives on that Pacific Coast which for good and for ill has so powerfully stirred the American imagination; he draws his themes from a territory of the imagination (a region of strong and often morbid sensation) which lies nearer to California than to any other mundane state; indeed he is one of those poets, and they are not the least important, whose work is an emanation from an environment definitely geographical as well as spiritual, and an interpretation of Nature in a way which Wordsworth and Emerson would have understood. His poetry, which is certainly major at its best, stands apart from cults and schools. It is as untroubled by the intellectualisms of the metaphysical school as the mist-wreathed, sun-baked slopes of the California foothills. The passion for perfection of the imagist, and also his reticence before the common passions of humanity, are unknown to it; like California, it is made up of masses where fineness of detail is lost in the sensationalism of vio-



ROBINSON JEFFERS

lent contrast. But it escapes even less than the metaphysics of T. S. Eliot from the current implications of this troubled period. Indeed, like so many of the best novels of our time, its uncritical inclusiveness makes it a better register of the Zeitgeist than work more withdrawn into the inner rooms of the scholar's or the esthete's mind.

Now Jeffers has been known as a poet of cruelty and horror, who has celebrated in dramatic narrative, sensational to the point of melodrama, the harsh incoherences between man's expectancy and his fate. The inhumanity of his monotonously beautiful coast seemed to weigh upon him until, ignoring its cities and bungalows, he peopled the empty cañons of its wildernesses with figures in which perverted passions broke through suppressions into blood and fire. His rather loose verse took on aspects of grandeur as it lifted the mountains and the sea to a plane of wild imagination, then too often broke into sensationalism as the passions and despairs of his homely people were unloosed, like hopeless souls of sinners in some old illuminated manuscript, writhing toward the eternal pit.

His cruelty, his almost brutal pessimism, has been in close accord with the spirit of the newer American novelists, although the difference in style, and especially in subject matter, has obscured the resemblance. The readers who rushed for Hemingway or Faulkner, have hesitated before the poet's lift out of realism into a super-world as heroic as a Wagner drama. But relative neglect does not imply lesser significance.

Jeffers's new book is called "Give Your Heart to the Hawks, and Other Poems." The poet, he says in "Triad," is one whose affair is "to awake dangerous images and call the hawks." Like science he feeds the future, he serves God,

Who is very beautiful, but hardly a friend of humanity.

How often when writers of our cheerful race (Poe, Melville, O'Neill) look into the

depths they find God to be no friend of humanity! The God of Jeffers approves of stoicism. His title poem, a battle of souls in a mist of blood, differs from the relentless poems of his past in that stoicism wins through at the end, when the genial optimism of our progressive period and the laissez-faire of conventional act and orthodox religion have all been defeated. That poem begins on what might be called the 1929 levels of familiar experience. "Under the vast calm vaulting glory of the afterglow," a drunken party is under way on a wild and lovely California beach. It mounts into vulgar horseplay and sexual desire, while undercurrents of finer emotions sweep through the protagonists, hot contraband liquor not sufficing to quench the consciousness of the "enormous peace of the sea," and the cruel beauty of the cliffs overhanging. Then in a release from inhibitions, retarded action breaks out of the subconscious where it has long been willed. There is adultery, murder—a brother kills a brother, and a guilty wife begins a long struggle to save her guilty husband from moral disintegration.

Now, as after the easy self-indulgences of the twenties, the characters in this story face realities they had ignored. Life drops from the happy commonplace into horrid depths; the old human struggle, familiar in starker eras, begins again.

Give your heart to the hawks, says the young wife caught in casual adultery, to her husband who has killed his brother, the courts will only free your body, conquer your own remorse, and trust nature which is beautiful and of which perversions, like you and me, are only a part. The hawks of nature feed the future, thus serving God, and for that you must endure. When deep passions are stirred, the easy compounding with error which serves Hollywood and the bungalows is a way to destroy the soul.

Tortured by inarticulate remorse, driven by her will, the husband tries to rely on a self which in the easy days has never met spiritual emergencies. He fights against nature, he fights literally against the hawks which carry his wife's symbolism. The poem sways between a majestic beauty of encompassing landscape where the décor is a vital part of a human story (in this how often do Americans fail!), and a battle of minds, made morbidly concrete in bloody circumstances, where the brute creature lifted by his wife's will toward self-reliance smashes and kills as he slips back toward convention, superstition, self-pity, and mere despair. She loses him, of course; in the moment of his yielding he kills himself because he cannot "peel off" his humanness, rise to her belief that all human feelings, repentance, and blood-thirst too, are not very important in so vast a world. Her will and the unborn child she has forced from him remain. The poem ends, unlike Jeffers, in a stoic triumph for those who are free of a world that believed God cared for its pleasure—for those "more hawk than human."

And it is recorded here not only for its current moral significance but for the extraordinary beauty of its descriptive verse, its skilful blending of the familiar and exalted, which suits the changed temper of a new day that is repelled by mere heroics yet craves a lift above realism, and for the singularity of sadistic cruelty, spiritual torture, revealed and resolved in a culture which has given us gold, oranges, sentimental movies, the open-air life—and now this. But it is recorded particularly for its moral significance, since here is an American poet who, while Hollywood danced and Los Angeles sold real estate below him and San Francisco played the market above, like some morbid Hebrew prophet saw visions of blood and disaster on his mountains, and now that the iron has crushed the soul of so many pleasant illusions, seems perversely to have felt the strength of will, the depth of energy, behind the aimless scurry of American life, and has made a woman the symbol of the anti-defeatism of a race that, even if God is no friend of humanity, will accept the rigors of nature, seeing its grandeurs, and fight on toward a future.

Is this too metaphysical an interpretation of a poem of adultery, murder, and the fruits of remorse? Murder has supplied the trivial reading of Americans for a decade now; we murder more freely than other races; violence is in our blood, mixed with benevolence and a restless energy; here is a murder story (like Browning's) intended to hold the mirror up to nature—the inhuman nature of the hills, the too human nature beneath the superficialities of the American scene. Malicious critics will say that Jeffers and O'Neill should sit telling old tales together with a pool of blood between them. But good-natured peoples go to excess when they feel deeply. In spite of its morbidity, and perhaps because of it, here is a poem that troubles the water as if there passed by some angel of judgment.

A Chinese Classic

ALL MEN ARE BROTHERS. (Shui Hu Chuan.) Translated by Pearl S. Buck. New York: The John Day Co. 1933. 2 vols. \$6.

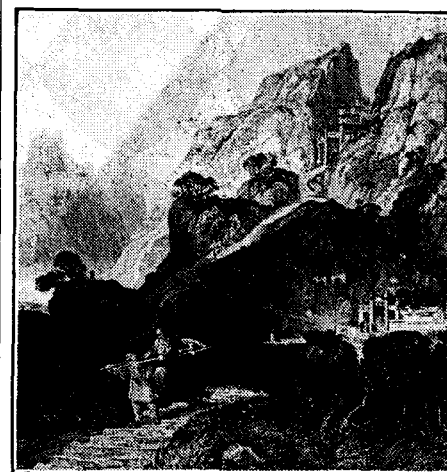
Reviewed by TAI JEN

Editor's Note—Mrs. Buck's translation of one of the great works of Chinese fiction makes available in English a book that should go into every gentleman's library along with other classics. It is a work of impressive character, lengthy, panoramic, full of life and color, a narrative that contains a hundred stories and paints a picture of a civilization. Today when China is once again as it has so often been in its long history, infested with bandits, its tale of a band of outlaws who make their lair in the mountains and prey upon the wealthy often for the benefit of the poor, has a timeliness that makes it as much a contemporary as a historical novel. It is a book that can be dipped into at random, for wherever the page is turned there sweeps across it that pageant of Chinese life which more than its individual incidents lends the work its character. It is a motley, lively, populous world that is revealed, running the gamut of humanity, rich and picturesque in its blend of vigorous incident and varied personality. Mrs. Buck has translated the original into flowing and animated English. Of the qualities of the work in the Chinese and the sources of the story we leave it to Mr. Tai Jen, who is steeped in the classic of his country, to speak.

THIS is a representative translation of the great Chinese novel, "Shui Hu Chuan." In view of the exceeding difficulty of rendering the work into English, Mrs. Buck has done a beautiful job. She has at last brought to the English reading public one of the world's greatest novels in its true light.

There are, of course, a few flaws which to mention here is my duty both to Mrs. Buck and the novel. First, the title, "All Men Are Brothers," is too general, too far fetched. I agree with Mrs. Buck that a literal translation of the original title would give "an unjust impression of the book" to the English reading public. I also agree with her that since the spirit of brotherhood is one of the essential facts of the novel, the use of this Confucian saying as its title has ample justification. But, as Mrs. Buck must know, the spirit that motivates the book is that of Robin Hood, of robbing and killing for the cause of justice and righteousness; and would have been more accurately conveyed by a title like *The Righteous Brigand, A Brotherhood of Righteous Robbers*, or simply by Liang Shan Po, *The Robbers' Lair*. Secondly the setting of the story is laid in the twelfth century during the reign of Emperor Hwei Chung, not in the thirteenth century as Mrs. Buck states in the introduction. Thirdly, there are here and there little phrases not quite properly rendered which, I hope, Mrs. Buck will rewrite later. Finally, her verse renderings are far less satisfactory than her prose renderings.

Thirty-six of the hundred and eight characters who figure in the novel were actual historical robbers who terrorized both the people and government toward the end of Northern Sung Dynasty. The



FOOT OF THE TOO-HING, PROVINCE OF SHEN-SI

novel is a weaving together of many stories about them by writers of Southern Sung and Yuan Dynasties and of tales current among the people of the times. It represents more than two centuries of longing on the part of a suffering people, denied championship from other sources, for the leadership of a Robin Hood, or Robin Hoods, to free them from the iron hand of corrupt government, foreign invaders, and alien rulers. It is a hysterical outcry for justice, righteousness, equality, and fraternity, by the people of the Southern Sung and Yuan Dynasties, and perhaps, by the age-long, suffering Chinese.

According to the critic, Dr. Hu Shih, the novel is the crystallization over a period of four hundred years, that is, from about the middle of the twelfth century to the last decade of the fifteenth century, of the story of Liang Shan Po, the robbers' lair. The chief grounds on which he bases this belief are that the somewhat immature literary technique and imaginative power of the Yuan Dynasty writers could not have produced such a great novel as "Shui Hu Chuan" and that its final form must, therefore, have been given it sometime during the early part of the middle of Ming Dynasty by some unknown writer who, for political reasons, assumed the pen name of Sse Nai-an. But Dr. Hu Shih forgets first, that literature follows no definite laws but may swing from better to worse, later works on a particular theme being less good on occasions than earlier. And second, he forgets that if this novel does represent a sort of popular yearning for justice, righteousness, peace, freedom, and racial awakening there could have been no time better for its advent than toward the end of Yuan Dynasty when the Chinese people were suffering uprisings in addition to alien oppression. The question remains, however, as to whether or not the literary genius of the period of the Yuan Dynasty was mature enough to produce this novel. I see no reason to question the literary technique and imaginative power of the writers of the era. We must remember that when the dramatic poets of the Yuan Dynasty, like Kao Wen Siu, were writing about the stories of these robbers, they wrote without the main intention of creating characters or presenting pageants of tragic life. They preferred to paint the atmosphere rather than to depict characters. This is merely a choice of pattern and execution.

"Shui Hu Chuan" is not only popular in China but also in Japan, and the Japanese have paid the highest tributes to it by their admirable imitations and valuable researches. There is no doubt that "Shui Hu Chuan" is one of the greatest monuments of Chinese literature and there is no doubt that that "Shui Hu Chuan" and "The Dream of the Red Chamber" are the greatest of all Chinese novels and two of the greatest of the world's novels. Both are pageants of Chinese life and in them we see all sorts of Chinese people passing before our eyes and remaining forever vivid in our imagination. Both are supreme in characterization and in creating atmosphere. Both are written in the vernacular language but each represents a different world; while "Shui Hu Chuan" presents to us a world of blood and strife, "The Dream of the Red Chamber" presents to us a world of powder and paint. Would Mrs. Buck like to translate "The Dream of the Red Chamber," too?