

Two North Carolina Novels

A STONE CAME ROLLING. By Fielding Burke. New York: Longmans, Green & Co. 1935. \$2.50.

Reviewed by SELDEN RODMAN

THIS is less a novel than a slice of saga. Rapidly shifting from family to family and from town to country, the story embraces an entire community in North Carolina. Dunmow is a typical Southern industrial town, dominated by mill-owners and preachers. Its "proletariat," but recently drawn from the countryside, is of God-fearing native stock. Only since the depression, as wage-cut follows wage-cut, have the textile workers organized or rebelled. But most of them can still be aroused by religious exhortation and race prejudice to those excesses of reactionary violence for which the whole country blushes.

These people are already known well to the readers of modern fiction through the works of Faulkner, Caldwell, Grace Lumpkin, and William Rollins, Jr. But what distinguishes Fielding Burke, at least from her fellow Southern writers, is her kindness of heart. She cannot see her townspeople and country folk as puppets of poverty, racial hatred, and lust. She sees positive forces at work among them, and she believes they are moulding new destiny out of their very poverty and defeat. This faith is summed up in the heroic character of Ishma Hensley, farmer's wife and strike leader.

The story of Ishma's mountain girlhood and marriage was told in Miss Burke's first novel, "Call Home the Heart." In the earlier work the emphasis was on Ishma as a mountain woman, with only a brief sojourn in the city to show her identification with industrial revolt. In "A Stone Came Rolling," Ishma's love of nature and her love for her fellowmen have merged. Hers is the sensitive poet-consciousness through which the author speaks. Hers also is the character, blending courage with gentleness, which most redeems from hopelessness the scene of strife and suffering in which she lives.

Fielding Burke, who has written for many years under the name of Olive Dargan, is native from way back. Her picture of a civilization and a social order is accurate and convincing; the reader has no difficulty in living the big textile strike, the Fourth of July barbecue, or the day-to-day farm existence. It is not so easy to realize the characters as human beings. Miss Burke can make us like or dislike people, but with a few exceptions she does not make us see them. However, except for such fuzzy characterization, and a certain lack of structure to the book as a whole, she has lived up to the high promise of her first novel. It is to be hoped that its chronicle will be carried further in another novel.

THIS BODY THE EARTH. By Paul Green. New York: Harper & Bros. 1935. \$2.50.

Reviewed by HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

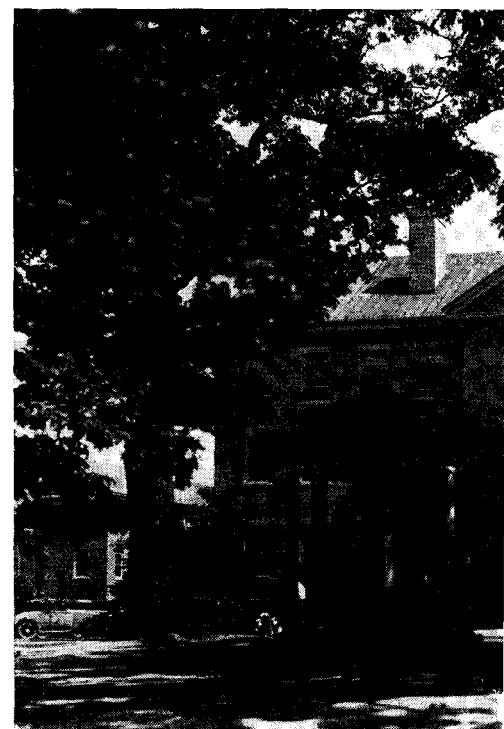
THE difference between proletarian literature and literature about the proletariat is excellently illustrated by Paul Green's novel about the tenant farmer. The story of Alvin Barnes, grimly ambitious and doomed to failure, might have been written in a mood of blazing indignation at the injustices prevalent in the social system, when the result would have been something like the novels of Mr. Upton Sinclair, in which one respects the honesty of the author's wrath, and wishes that his anger did not continually betray the integrity of the artist. Mr. Green, however, has conceived his story in terms of the human spirit, and with the exception of a few scenes (among them a bitter picture of a Carolina chain-gang) has built his work around the ancient conception of a tragic flaw. Alvin Barnes is grimly ambitious, but his ambition is wholly for himself.

Mr. Green's plays have continually threatened to turn into novels; his novel now profits from his experience with plays. The action is confined to a limited area around Little Bethel; the persons, numerous though they are, are drawn from a single social unit; and the action of the story is the slow rise and tragic fall of the principal character. Stubborn, uncommunicative, tenacious, Barnes clings grimly to his theory of work, only to marry the wrong woman and miss the right one, and then, incapable of understanding any nature other than his own, loses all his gains in a wild fit of anger, and is thrust back into the social class from which he has struggled to emerge. In one sense, the tale is the old story: slow rises worth by poverty oppressed. In another sense, the tale is an equally old story: he that findeth his life shall lose it. The Biblical simplicity of the book forces one back to consider Biblical wisdom.

The tenant farmer has appeared in other novels about the South, but never before in a work of such integrity. Others have carefully and conscientiously observed this life; Mr. Green has lived in it. The land, the people, the conversation, the point of view are all of one piece. There is a vast, brooding poetry in this book of poverty and struggle and disgrace. The political economy of the story, like the political economy of its characters, is of the simplest and most rudimentary sort. Cotton-picking, tobacco-growing, mules, the labor of women in the fields, the bare furnishings of the houses and the bare furnishings of men's souls in such a life—we have had pictures of these things before, but never with

such simplicity of acceptance, such fits of elemental anger. In this book it is not individual scenes—though some of these are drawn with great power—but the total impression that counts. If you cut this book, it will bleed. Towards the end, it is true, there is a falling off, as if the vast weariness which overcomes Alvin had also overcome the author. For men caught in the trap which the conditions of life have set for them, there seems to be no hope—except in the primal verities of pity and kindness and love. The handling in the last quarter of the book seems a little uncertain, as if the author, having broken his hero's spirit, scarcely knew what to do next. The pictures of the local bankers pass from reality into grotesque marionettes, caricatures of forces which Green thoroughly hates. The chain-gang scenes are, as I have said, out of key with the low relief of the rest of the work. But once more the slow, compulsive force of the narrative sets in, slowly swallowing up the hopes and ambitions of Barnes as it had slowly moved him from point to point in the long curve of his laborious existence. The earth closes over him, and the system of share-cropping goes on. "And when the first night-fall lamp was lighted in the big house on the hill, she rose and went on across the fields towards the great friendly oak that stood up muffled and dark against the stars."

Howard Mumford Jones, professor of English at the University of Michigan since 1930, formerly taught Comparative Literature and English at the Universities of Texas and North Carolina. He is the author of a number of books, among which are "America and French Culture" and "The Life of Moses Coit Tyler."



THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA
Fielding Burke (Olive Tilford Dargan), Paul Green
these pages, all hold degrees

Thomas Wolfe's Short Stories

THOMAS WOLFE, *FROM DEATH TO MORNING*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1935. \$2.50.

Reviewed by HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

I THINK it is Chesterton who remarks there is no such thing as a Dickens novel, but only a series of segments cut off from that vast and flowing thing which is Dickens. "From Death to Morning" is a collection of fourteen segments cut off from that vast and flowing thing which is Thomas Wolfe. The fourteenth of these, "The Web of Earth," is a large fragment from the Gant saga; the others are mainly remembrances of Mr. Wolfe's life in North Carolina, New York, Europe, or wherever his spirit has carried him. I suppose the collection is best described as a group of sketches, for none of them rises into a full-bodied short story, and only one of them, "The Men of Old Catawba," sinks into the more passive condition of the essay. But as in Mr. Wolfe's novels form cracks and dissolves in the current of emotional life, so in these sketches the ordinary canons of form disintegrate.

Mr. Wolfe has not increased his resources. The characteristic combination of brooding emotion and graphic brutality, of poetry à la Whitman and realism à la Zola which we have learned to expect of him, again appears. In certain cases the being confined to shorter space (I cannot call it form) improves the unity of impression, but Mr. Wolfe is uncertain, and often wilfully violates the simplest principles of construction. "The Four Lost

Men," for example, begins as a prose rhapsody about a young man in war-time, continues as a realistic transcript of the elder Gant's conversation regarding presidential elections, and concludes as a Wolfian prose-poem about life, death, war, and time. The graphic and painful "Death the Proud Brother" describes four deaths which the author has witnessed in New York, and has, in this sense, unity, but there is neither rhyme nor reason in the proportioning of space among its fifty-five pages.

Admirers of Mr. Wolfe say these things do not matter, and they are encouraged in their indiscriminate adulation by the excitement of the reviewers, who have exhausted language in praising this writer. Mr. Wolfe has power, passion, a singular fearlessness, the ability to create individual scenes of brilliant truth, a genius for lyrical prose unequalled in contemporary letters, insight into certain types of characters and problems. But Mr. Wolfe the artist has advanced scarcely a step beyond "Look Homeward, Angel." He is full of self-pity. If he is a genius, he is still an adolescent genius. His universe is utterly or mainly subjective, and the result is a transcript of experience curiously true in some particulars, curiously false in others.

Take, for example, Mr. Wolfe's heroines. No one seems to have remarked the incredibly naive formula on which they are constructed. Most of them resemble the heroine of "Dark in the Forest" in the present volume, voluptuous and beautiful. This one is "a miracle of loveliness," of "a superb and queenly height," a "lovely figure" which "seemed never to have lost the lithe slenderness of girlhood" and is yet "undulant with all the voluptuous maturity of womanhood." Mark the clichés. When we meet this woman in Ouida or Bulwer-Lytton, we smile at this falsity. Not so Mr. Wolfe. The thought of this wonderful creature stimulates the flow of his adjectives. She has "a vague, voluptuous smile." When she speaks, it is "eagerly, earnestly, gleefully," and her laugh is "welling low, rich, sensual, and tender." There are in his endless pages only two sorts of females—the houri and the shrew.

This simple antithesis is characteristic of the universe he creates. He sees only elemental distinctions. Life is either vast, noble, brooding, and lyric, or it is sordid and mean. Men are either demigods or cowards. He is forever in extremes, and that between the extremes there is a place for rational human life he does not seem to suspect. In fact, he has no place for reason. It may be true, as Mr. Canby says, that Mr. Wolfe "has more material, more vitality, more originality, more gusto" than any two other novelists, but this vitality, this gusto swing like a pendulum from heaven to hell, from rapture to disgust. He is the most restless of

writers. His characters are forever making Gargantuan journeys over the face of the world or else sulking in one place, timid, bitter, beaten, and without will. One's first contact with this powerful spirit is like an electric shock, but after a series of such shocks the mind grows fatigued, attention wanders, and one begins to suspect that if there is something Homeric in Mr. Wolfe, there is also in him the shoddy violence of Jack London.

The American novel needs what Mr. Wolfe has to bring to it—curiosity, beauty, emotional energy—and I do not in the least mean that Mr. Wolfe is not an important writer. It is, however, precisely because he has done so well that it is essential for him to do more; and if the next portions of the Gant saga simply repeat the formula he has established, Mr. Wolfe is doomed to sink into repetitiveness. The present collection has its brilliant moments, but the total effect of the book is to make one uneasy about Mr. Wolfe's future development as an artist.

Mountain School

SCHOOLHOUSE IN THE FOOTHILLS.

By Ella Enslow and Alvin F. Harlow.

New York: Simon & Schuster. 1935. \$2.

Reviewed by MARISTAN CHAPMAN

THIS is the story of a woman school teacher's experiences in a Southern mountain cove. The author gave her services (at fifty dollars a month, reduced from sixty dollars) for five years to the mountain people. In her book Miss Enslow tells all, including a great deal of inutile fact about the author's self. The story reads like the excited report of a young, earnest missionary, home for first furlough and going over all the adventures. With tedious self-glorification, the recital repeats itself like a decimal, and from the recurrence of such words as "quaint" and "bizarre" we judge that her own fantastic conception of what goes on in native minds is set down by this author as "their" philosophy.

From this misconception onward a horrid possessiveness pervades the book. Ignoring the recent courtesy and reticence usually accorded among friends admitted to intimacy, Miss Enslow pleads for "her" people, broadcasting her achievements—which doubtless were notable—in the matter of clothing, culture, and tonsillectomies. Perhaps Mr. Harlow, the actual writer of the experiences "as told" by the school teacher, was carried away by the contagion of excited discovery. At any rate a different approach would have enabled the reader to appreciate the worth of the school-teacher's services, while avoiding the weariness of the first person narrative.

Maristan Chapman, now a resident of Florida, for many years lived among the mountain people of Tennessee. It was of them she wrote her "The Happy Valley" and other works.



SOUTH BUILDING, BUILT IN 1798

Thomas Wolfe, whose latest books are reviewed

University of North Carolina.