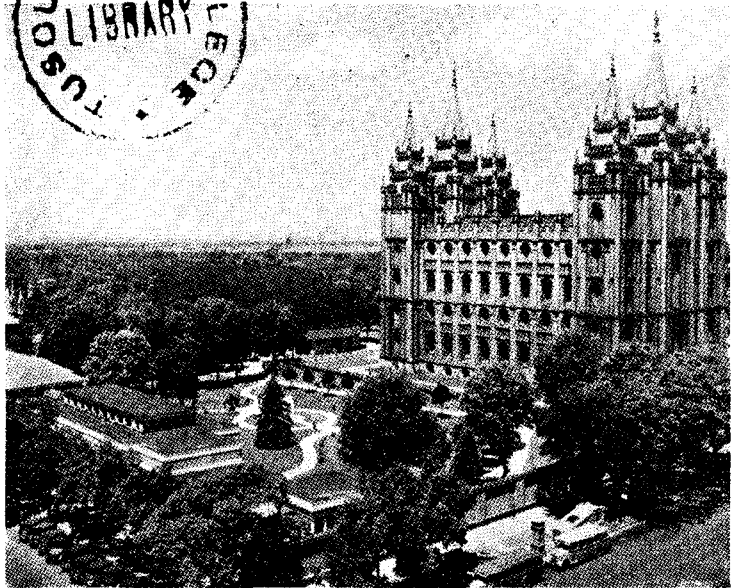
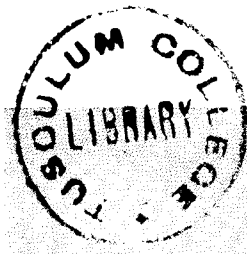


Millennial Millions

THE STORY OF THE MORMONS

BY BERNARD DeVOTO



Temple Square in Salt Lake City

IN April, 1830, a poor and almost illiterate young man named Joseph Smith, who for some years had claimed to be in communication with almighty God and with various angels, apostles, and other heavenly personages, announced that he had re-established, in central New York, the only true church, whose withdrawal from the earth in apostolic times had necessarily made all later Christians heretics. Three months later he published a book which purported to be a miraculously translated historical record of the discovery and colonization of the American continent, several centuries before Christ, by a branch of the true church that had migrated from Jerusalem, reared a civilization here, and then degenerated. This was the "Book of Mormon," a third Testament of greater authority than the other two since there were no errors in its translation, and it was one of the bases in prodigy of his church. His followers believed him to be a prophet; his neighbors and enemies regarded him as either a lying charlatan or a maniac. No matter; the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints grew rapidly.

As it grew it incorporated doctrines from most of the evangelical sects of the time—the time of the wildest religious excitement that the United States has ever known. Also it developed social, political, and economic practices, some of them adapted from the communistic experiments of the period and others forced on it by the opposition of its enemies, which brought it into steadily more serious conflict with American society. Its history during Smith's lifetime was one of periodic mob violence and included one voluntary withdrawal from Ohio,

two expulsions from its property in Missouri, and the climactic guerilla warfare in Illinois which ended in the lynching of Smith and the withdrawal of the church under Brigham Young, with tremendous violence and suffering, across the uninhabited West to the valley of Great Salt Lake. There in the mountains Young, who had saved the church from dissolution after Smith's death, gave it an organization and unity it had not had before and, helped by the isolation of distance, made it secure. It grew rich, it grew powerful—and after Young died it grew much less revolutionary. It kept its persecution-begotten and martyrdom-sealed sense of religious brotherhood, but it lost most of its economic singularity. Its communistic elements were abandoned, its coöperative system declined into a caste system, and in short Mormonism became a Republican big business which found ways of capitalizing religious faith and energy precisely as any business capitalizes its assets. It had begun as the one way to salvation in the dwindling hours before Judgment Day, a fiery millennial vision, an instrument for the execution of God's will, a last security against His imminent wrath. It continued through many years as a defiance not only of American religious doctrines but of American social sanctions as well, existing as a consequence in a condition of dynamic hostility that was little short of organized revolt. But it came into our own times as something that differed only in its eccentricities from Methodism on the one hand and from a holding company on the other.

The story of the Mormons is one of the great stories of American history. It has everything: mobbing and martyrdom, lust and murder and the vision of eternal life, tenderness and

brutality and the deepest faith, frenzy and despair and prophecy, the drive Westward that is the basic experience of the American race, humble folk, adventurers, criminals, traitors, villains, great men, men drunk on cruelty, men drunk on Godhead, great bravery, great suffering, great betrayal, insanity, starvation, massacre—all perfumed with heaven and highlighted by the fires of hell. It is so great a story that one who thinks in terms of literature is apt to believe that its tremendous reality must make trivial any attempt to use it in fiction. Up to now that belief has been supported by all the fiction actually written about Mormonism. There is a mass of devout and nearly unreadable novels by pious Saints, published in Utah and taken seriously by the church publications. Only the saved or the obviously damned could read them, and the saved could not possibly enjoy them. There is Harry Leon Wilson's sentimental melodrama, "The Lion of the Lord." Sherlock Holmes began his career against a background of Mormon intrigue fully as melodramatic and rather more grotesque. Romantic novels by the dozen have found in pure women beguiled into polygamy and Destroying Angels foiled of their revenge a convenient rearrangement of the clichés. . . . I was thinking of this literature when, at about the time Mr. Vardis Fisher entered "Children of God" in the Harper Prize Novel contest which it has just won, I pub-

*CHILDREN OF GOD. By Vardis Fisher. New York: Harper & Bros. 1939. 769 pp. \$3.

Next  Week

AMERICA AND POETRY
By LEONARD BACON

WATCH FOR THE DAWN
By STUART CLOETE
Reviewed by C. D. Abbott



lished in *Harper's Magazine* my belief that there never would be a good novel about the Mormons.

That, like Joseph's date for the end of the world, was bad prophecy. "Children of God," though about the Mormons, is a very fine novel. It is also, on the basis of his earlier books, an astonishing novel in both kind and quality for Mr. Fisher to have written. He had published, I believe, six earlier novels, the first an unimpressive blend of pastoral naiveté and choleric realism, the sixth an experiment in what came out not quite comedy and not quite tears, and a tetralogy which can only be described as, always excepting the books of Thomas Wolfe, the most completely unbuttoned fiction of our time in America. The honesty, the integrity, and the terrible striving of that tetralogy are not to be impugned. The author's will to tell the truth can be heard vibrating a mile away, and all four books heave and even retch with moral earnestness. But

the theme of them is the integration of a literary neurotic and they riot with all the subjective implications it contains. They are a passionate, sometimes revolting, and on the whole dull catharsis, discharged directly from phantasy to print. They depict a Eugene Gant with anxieties instead of frenzies, with a firmer prose, less hungry for the world but more tortured by himself, set in the Rockies and Chicago rather than Old Catawba and New York. His name is Vridar Hunter, and a casual reader might take that anagram as a suggestion that the tetralogy, whether in fact or in phantasy, is as autobiographical as it is introspective. On this showing, though we might anticipate from Mr. Fisher novels more intricately wrought and projected farther from their source, or perhaps more sophisticated in their psychological preoccupations, or even more tranquil, we could hardly expect him to write objective novels. In order to do so he would have to become a wholly different kind of novelist.

That is precisely what he has done, and it is one of the most amazing transformations on record. "Children of God" is as objective as "The Three Musketeers," and it is so free of neurotic material that it does not even acknowledge the neuroses of some of its characters. It is hard and firm,

devoid of analysis, rigorously contained inside the events it records. Its emotions are those of its characters, not of its author. It is straightforward, factual, so undecorated and so harmonious with its material that it seems impersonal. But it is thoroughly alive.

Mr. Fisher's subtitle calls it "An American Epic," and the noun is justified not only by its objectivity but also by its scope. It begins with young Joseph Smith seeing God for the first time, and it ends with a grandson of a youth who had seen Smith mobbed in Missouri, now a bishop and the head of the last remaining communistic order in Utah, leading the few faithful who will follow him away from the church that is recreant to its early vision, toward some valley in Mexico where, like Joseph before him, he may restore the ancient faith. Between these scenes is compacted most of the history of the Mormons. The fable follows the history so closely that only a

specialist will be aware where and to what extent Mr. Fisher has departed from it. No one can object to such departures as he makes, for they illuminate his understanding and support his interpretation of the Mormon drama.

Like Mormonism itself, the book is built around and derives its force from the two heroic personages, Smith and Young; like Mormonism, it is less vivid, even less real, when they have left the stage. Historically, Joseph Smith was a borderline paranoiac who swung to and fro between sense and insanity, slowly drifting farther on the wrong side till he was quite mad when he was martyred. In Mr. Fisher's portrait he is thoroughly sane but endowed with a vivid phantasy-life through which he expresses his religious impulses and which leads him on through millennial grandeurs progressively more immense—and more vague. His inspiration is rationalized impulse, his doctrinal inventions are the crude but logical implements of his will, his ecclesiastical structure derives its

purposes, its weaknesses, and its contradictions from his own. It is wish and dream, not delusion, that makes him blind to the realities over which he continually trips, and he learns but slowly, a tracebound man, from the opposition of the sinful and the failures and treasons of the Saints.... Mr. Fisher leaves out Joseph's recklessness and arrogance, his bucolic pretentiousness, and the coarse humor that has endeared him to many a detached student. The historical Joseph had more anger and more guile than Mr. Fisher gives him. But the portrait is lifesize and living, and it is convincing in its own terms. Such a man could have founded such a church.

Joseph's portion of the novel is subtitled "Morning." It contains not only the apocalyptic visions but also the exterior violence of the persecutions—rather too much of it—and the interior of polygamy. (This last, in Mr. Fisher's version, is the result not of Joseph's peculiar gifts but of his wife's disbelief and frigidity.) There is an excellent movement and interplay of scores of lesser characters. The thing marches. It retains the fundamental incredibility of the history it deals with—no one can quite believe, even in the presence of the facts, that Mormonism rose and has endured—but it carries conviction from within.

Like Mormonism, however, the best of the novel is its second phase, "Noon," which deals with the ministry of Brigham Young, and its high point is the hegira, the movement of the church from Illinois to Utah. There is occasional evidence that, like a number of earlier writers, Mr. Fisher finds Young either less interesting or less explicable than Smith, but the under-

lying richness of the glazier turned empire-builder triumphs over the author's reluctance and Brigham comes out a genuinely great man. The church has changed, both in vision and in circumstance. Persecution remains active but is less effective, isolation permits the building up of the kingdom, and Brigham shapes it toward his own ideas of glory, which are of this earth

rather than hereafter. This second section pivots on polygamy, its domestic trials and tensions and the uproar about it in the world outside. But there is also the long struggle with

(Continued on page 14)



Joseph Smith



Brigham Young

Muscular Novel of Immigrant Life

CHRIST IN CONCRETE. By Pietro di Donato. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co. 1939. 311 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by LOUIS ADAMIC

PETRO di DONATO is the American-born son of an Italian immigrant and laborer. He is himself a bricklayer by trade. His first book, which is an expansion of a celebrated magazine story, is a clear and solid reflection of his background. It is a highly interesting, perhaps a significant, book.

So far, in America, most novels of the laboring class have been reflections of the economic treadmill on the tenuous cheesecloth fabric of an ideology. Truth was shaped, adjusted, twisted to conform to the intellectuals' notions of synthetic Marxians. People in the stories were not characters, but caricatures, puppets yanked this way and that way by the whims of a preconceived philosophy of life and action.

Novels of immigrants and their adaptation to the American scene have usually been sentimental, apologetic, insinuating, and even subservient. The only exceptions that come to my mind are "My Antonia" and "Giants of the Earth." Most of the few immigrant writers have stood in awe of the America they tried to write about, and have been biased in their judgment and blurred in their perspective. Old-stock American authors have been either condescending and patronizing toward the immigrants or inadequate because lacking in intimate understanding of their situation in the New World.

Although not reaching the epic quality of Rölvaag's novel of the Norwegian pioneers, and missing the objective discernment of Willa Cather's story of Antonia, "Christ in Concrete" comes curiously close to both. There is no doubt of its importance as a book that has sprung out of the seldom-tapped sources of immigrant life, nor that Di Donato is an important addition to the thin ranks of writers of the new-immigrant strains. His importance lies in the fact that he articulates the qualities of the Italian element in the United States.

Mr. Di Donato's publishers offer the book as a novel. I fear that the experts will waste a great deal of time and space on whether or not it is a novel. I, for one, scarcely care whether it is or not. If it is, I am inclined to agree with those who will say that it is not a good novel. It is not fluid in its entirety, but parts of it are. Some of it is ill-planned, shooting out in vague directions. Here and there

the book appears spasmodic in inspiration, even ill-defined and formless.

The first chapter is a good short story; the remainder is an attempt to follow its theme, which is the power of the job—work, employment, the need of livelihood—its hold on the poor Italian and his weakness and strength in yielding to it and in combating it. The theme, I am afraid, is



Pietro di Donato

not strengthened sufficiently after the first chapter. Some episodes, indeed, seem to clash with it instead of augmenting it. The end is rather weak, leaving one asking for fuller understanding and completion. But this bricklayer can write, and—although this is almost a direct contradiction of what I have just said—there is no lagging. The writing is far too intense for that. The words are powerful. They carry sounds and smells. The sentences are held together by a muscular vitality.

Reading "Christ in Concrete" one thinks of that other Italo-American writer, John Fante, whose novel "Wait Until Spring, Bandini!" appeared a few months ago. Like Fante, Di Donato is robust and full-blooded and passionate, now and then almost to the point of craziness; and also like Fante, he has imagination and a healthy sense of the source of poetry in the Italian. In this latter quality Di Donato perhaps even surpasses Fante, who is superior to Di Donato in other respects. Di Donato has achieved something extremely difficult. He has translated the spirit of the Italian lyric conversation and colloquialisms into American speech, which strikes one as quite natural. Sometimes one feels as though bricks and

stones and trowelfuls of mortar have been thrown on the pages and from them have risen words. The book is a sincere, honest job.

There is nothing twisted to fit an intellectual hypothesis. There is no ideology, no simplification of life which usually simplifies nothing but only confuses. There is no sentimentality or subservience. There is always a sense of the dignity of man and the worker. Di Donato's people are poor. They strain themselves to forge a livable pattern and to pour their energies into something which they do not understand, striving to be creative in their narrow and, at the same time, universal ways. They are alive. They die horribly but magnificently.

Louis Adamic, as those who have read his "The Native's Return" will know, was himself an immigrant to America.

A True Horror Story

A JOURNEY ROUND MY SKULL. By Frigyes Karinthy. New York: Harper & Bros. 1939. 288 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by MABEL S. ULRICH, M.D.

FOR most laymen brain and psyche are still one. Through countless years the skull has been to mankind the habitat of the spiritual half of his being. All the efforts of modern psychiatrists have been unable to dispel the unique fear and horror the average person associates with a diseased brain, and the miracles of brain surgery, so recently and brilliantly developed, owe no small part of their fascination to the almost superstitious awe with which we have long regarded the "organ of thought."

This extraordinary book may be counted on to dispel much of the reader's ignorance, but it surely will do little to quiet his fears. It is a "true" horror story, written in a brilliant, often beautiful style, concerned wholly with the subjective effect upon a sensitive, articulate artist, of a developing brain tumor, his experiences with doctors, clinics, and sympathetic friends, his impressions during the five long hours he lay bound on an operating table under a local anesthetic while surgeons turned back his skull and made their journey round it, his convalescent dreams. The patient—the author—is a Hungarian writer; the scene is Budapest. He writes plays, poetry, articles; he delights in playing with more or less fantastic ideas and his mind has an ironic and philosophic twist that expresses itself in delightful and unexpected paragraphs. He lives with his young son and visits his wife, who for the time being is at work on psy-