

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

P IETRO 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-

analysis in Vienna. His account begins with his first hallucinations. These were of an auditory character and hardly alarmed him. But as the symptoms progress and other senses are involved, despite the interpolations of humor and philosophy, the horrors of the threatened doom mount to an almost unbearable tension. He visits many specialists and succeeds for a time in confusing them and reassuring himself. He makes rounds in an insane hospital and succinctly describes the types of brain disease he sees there. He goes to a sanatorium for observation and comments wittily and shrewdly on his doctors and visitors. At last the verdict is read. He travels to Stockholm to one of Cushing's brilliant students, and after a tortuous operation the tumor is successfully removed while, conscious throughout, he notes his impressions and psychic agony. (He feels no physical pain for which the reader is immensely grateful). Such is the story.

The reader must decide for himself whether or not this "tale" provides for him the entertainment Somerset Maugham maintains is the essential quality of fiction. Physicians will marvel at the clinical verity of its medical comments, and they should find valuable food for thought in the reactions of a highly intelligent patient to their professional mores. The quality of the writing is far more distinguished than that of most novels, and as a horror story it unfolds with devilish ingenuity. The character of the hero is charming and provocative, and the translation is quite surprisingly good. Nevertheless it can be recommended only with reservation and to those of the steadiest nerves. Because of the art of its telling, it is far more disturbing—more convincing—than a straight medical treatise, and it is so detailed that if widely read might well result in crowding the offices of the brain men with affrighted hypochondriacs!

Dr. Ulrich, a graduate of The Johns Hopkins Medical School, was for some years a practical physician in Minneapolis.



Jacket design for "Ararat." From a watercolor by James Reynolds.

Epic Vicissitudes

ARARAT. By Elgin Groseclose. New York: Carrick & Evans, Inc. 1939. 482 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by RAYMOND HOLDEN

IN this sincere, sober, and often moving novel, Mr. Groseclose has set himself a task of great difficulty. His major theme is, it appears, the reconciliation of the dynamic and static attitude toward human life, the Promethean and the mystic. His setting is an unfamiliar one—the region, lying south of the Black Sea and the Caspian of which Mt. Ararat is the topographical center and which is bounded today by Turkey, Persia, and the U.S.S.R. His people are Armenians, Russians, and Turks, plus one all-important American. The events of the narrative are mainly those vicissitudes which befell a village of Armenians during the thirty years between the time when the Turks decided that all male Armenians must be destroyed and the close of the Russian Revolution.

The story opens in the village of Dilijan, Turkey where, in 1895, an American missionary, an ex-cowboy from Texas who has made the Armenians his flock, was interpreting to them his personal God. Through massacre, migration, and maltreatment of all kinds the indomitable Armenians survive—at least their children do—always presided over by the booming evangelism of Amos Lyle, who, incidentally is the only character of any importance to get from the first half of the book into the second.

This shift of persons, although it enables Mr. Groseclose to get through three decades of narrative and still have two young people to bring together at the end, has the unfortunate effect of sidetracking the narrative. Thus Paul Stepanovitch Markov, a Russian bourgeois officer, son of a character in the opening section of the book, is introduced on page 183 and does not reach Amos Lyle's side until

page 320 or thereabouts. In the intervening space the fortunes of the Dilijan Armenians are left in suspension while the reader is carried with young Lieutenant Markov through the Russian Revolution and thence into exile. Only when Paul Stepanovitch reaches Amos Lyle, does the conflict of his self-reliant individualism, his mild cynicism, with Lyle's massively sublime faith in God, the Provider, bring the two threads of the story together and run it toward its quite noble if somewhat inconclusive conclusion. Markov ends by thinking that he has saved the Armenians and then catches himself and thanks God for doing the job. Mr. Groseclose concludes that all that is necessary to reconcile the apparent conflict between man's will and God's will is love,—“the understanding from which all harmony proceeds”—“the sanctuary and salvation which all men desire.” This is an agreeable belief with which the reader will not be disposed to quarrel even though he may feel it rather more than Mr. Groseclose could handle.

The difficulty of the book lies in pulling unfamiliar elements into a whole with the intensity and grandeur required by the epic quality of its material. Mr. Groseclose has not been quite successful in a large scale task. His book, however, is stimulating for all its structural weaknesses.

Poor Woman

“... to keep back Beauty, keep it . . .”
Gerard Manley Hopkins

By SARA HENDERSON HAY

FIND something equal to replace
The shape of Beauty in your face,

This transient honor time disproves.
Oh, is there not some worthier gift,
Some cancelling comfort better still?
More durable to serve, to lift,
To minister to your self, your loves?
This is too slight to wring you so,
(I say) that time has done you ill,
(I say) that Beauty is brought low,
That the hight breast, the cheek, the thigh,

Will droop, fade, slacken; the curved arm

And kindling hands less quick, less warm,

The guarded panic in the eye
Tell you again the thing you know.

Oh find some wealth more sure, more true—

Poor woman. Poor myself. Poor you
Who read, if you be woman, too!