

Old Man Hudson

THE HUDSON. By Carl Carmer. Plus a Supplementary Essay on "Rivers and American Folk," by the late Constance Lindsay Skinner as original editor of the Series "Rivers of America." Illustrated by Stow Wengenroth. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1939. 434 pp., with index. \$2.50.

Reviewed by JOHN PALMER GAVIT

REGARDLESS of any demurrer hereinafter expressed or implied—a corking book this, by Dr. Carl Lamson Carmer, poet and novelist and Litt. D. of Elmira College; hitherto best-known, perhaps, for his "Stars Fell on Alabama" and "Listen for a Lonesome Drum." I commend it with enthusiasm, both as fruit of evidently long and exhaustive research *con amore* in documents and by first-hand investigation, and as exceptionally charming writing. Out of eons of geological time, nobody knows how many centuries of human life, upwards of four hundred years of written history, and personal contacts with men and women, from shad-fishermen to a thinly anonymous President of the United States resident on the river bank, he has derived a river-biography crackling with human interest, especially for anyone who like myself has this "Old Man Hudson" in his heart. All about the Hudson Valley, from the little tarn Tear-o'-the-Clouds under Mount Marcy in the Adirondacks to the great harbor where the mighty stream stalks majestically out into the Atlantic to meet the commerce of the whole world—some of it nowadays on its way upriver to the expensively fabricated "Port" of Albany; the river itself, and between the mountain skylines east and west the people notable and obscure who have done things therein, thereon, and therefrom. He has boiled down cunningly an immense amount of information, fact, and legend; most of it familiar enough but much of it new—to me anyway—and has made all of it come alive.

Jealously I read it, as one confronting a rival lover; for this particular river is a part of me. A major element in my blood is Hudson River water; I was born with my toes in it. I have traversed almost every mile of it and most of its tributaries, from source to sea. Seventy-odd years never out of sight of it without homesickness, I have loved it all my life, even though thrice it tried to drown me and once nearly killed me with the ever-endemic typhoid in the bad old days (to which Carmer alludes, hopeful for a clean river as of old) when the city of Albany, like other Hudson River towns, used to drink its

own sewage, diluted with that of the communities up-stream. In that river I learned to swim, on it I rowed and paddled and sailed, skated, and watched them dynamiting the towering ice-jams downstream that back the water far up into city streets, incidentally enriching the lowlands as does the flooding Nile. On summer evenings I have made love on it in the moonlight turning the water over-side into glittering silver.

Of that jealousy . . . Carmer never lived on, to say nothing of in, the river; he was born way back in Cortland County, moving thence upstate to the Mohawk and the Erie Canal, both of which he knows like the back of his hand—as witness his "Listen for a Lonesome Drum." He never trudged down in the spring dawnlight to chaffer for silver-backed shad for breakfast, out of the sailing-sloops just in on the morning tide. He never tasted or even smelled, I would guess, the famous smoked "Albany beef," sturgeon caught within sight down Castleton way and hanging in four-foot pink carcasses outside the redolent fish-shops down State Street by the docks. Nevertheless I find that he has hereditary right to love this river as I see he does. He told Franklin Roosevelt of his grandfather's great-grandfather, Isaac Carmer, born along the Hudson in 1750, who used to sing Dutch cradle-songs, fought in the Revolution, and popped off untimely at age 102. One Abraham Carmer, a great-great-great uncle or something, was one of the signers of the "Coxsackie Declaration of Independence," which, two months before the Mecklenburg Declaration and more than a year before the decisive one at Philadelphia, told the world that Americans intended to

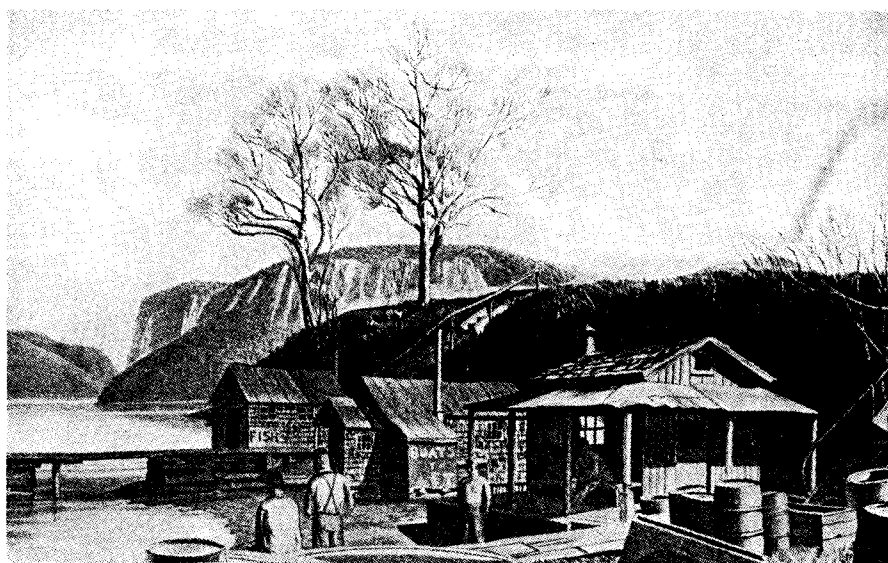
govern themselves. Others of his ancestry lived along the Hudson; so maybe after all he too has in his blood the Hudson River water, from days way back before "modern civilization" enriched it.

Boats, large and small, paddling, sailing and steam, cross almost every page—Carmer has a passion for them—from Giovanni da Verrazano's *Dauphin* and Henry Hudson's *Half Moon* to the lamented river princess *Mary Powell* and today's *Alexander Hamilton*. Even the deep-sea whalers upon whose vicissitudes once depended the prosperity of Hudson and Poughkeepsie. He goes unnecessarily far afield, I think, in the tall tales of the seafarers, though I admit the temptation was almost irresistible. But with all his keen interest in the Erie Canal which he marries to the River, and in people of whose human nature this book reeks, I can't understand his giving so little hint of the teeming life on the canal-boats which in immense "tows" used to pass incessantly up and downstream; populated by a peculiar folk, men, women, and children who had no other homes.

With what success Mr. Carmer has captured for the rank outsider the soul of the Hudson, as Mark Twain captured the soul of the Mississippi, as Emil Ludwig captured that of the Nile, I'm blest if I can tell; for how may I distinguish what I read *in* this book from what I read *into* it, with my heart in my throat and my boyhood throbbing behind my eyes?

It's my Hudson River flowing through it. The fine illustrations by Stow Wengenroth enrich it substantially. It's worth anybody's money and time, whether or not he can read into it all that we honest-to-god Hudson River boys do.

John Palmer Gavit was for many years managing editor of the old New York Evening Post.



From the jacket of "The Hudson," by Stow Wengenroth

What Wilson Fought For

WOODROW WILSON: LIFE AND LETTERS. Vol. VIII: *Armistice, March 1-November 11, 1918.* By Ray Stannard Baker. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1939. 626 pp., with index. \$5.

Reviewed by RAYMOND J. SONTAG

THE official biography of Woodrow Wilson is now complete in eleven volumes. The eight volumes of "Life and Letters" carry the story to the Armistice; "Woodrow Wilson and the World Settlement" was published in 1923. Because it is the last to appear, this volume on the months from March to November 1918 ends on a note of triumph. "Everything for which America fought has been accomplished," Wilson assured the American people. "It will now be our fortunate duty to assist by example, by sober, friendly counsel and by material aid in the establishment of just democracy throughout the world."

The events of 1919 and 1920 need not be fresh in one's mind to make this seem a hollow boast. Indeed, pushing through a Commencement crowd in Princeton this June of 1939, the doubt arises, was anything for which Woodrow Wilson ever fought really accomplished? At one end of Princeton, undergraduate life still centers in the clubs which he sought to destroy in the name of democracy. At the other end of the town the Graduate College rises proudly aloof from the undergraduates with whom Wilson believed graduate students should remain in intimate contact. From failure at Princeton, Wilson was rescued by the governorship of New Jersey. At Trenton he fought to break boss rule; mention of the Hague-Hoffman machine is sufficient to indicate the result of that battle. Then came the presidency and the New Freedom; the monopoly hearings in 1939 are a commentary on the hopes of 1913. Finally, the greatest battle of all, the battle for a new world order, for democracy, self-determination, and a League of Nations. Beneš would not be in Princeton today if everything for which America, and Wilson, fought had been accomplished.

Despite embarrassed eulogies, this is the record which sticks in the popular memory. A people which is willing to scatter monuments to Will Rogers over a continent has yet decently to honor the memory of Woodrow Wilson. The world loves a winner, and it is painfully obvious that Wilson was a loser.

He was a loser just as Erasmus lost in an earlier age of violent readjustment. Like Erasmus, he fore-

saw and prepared the way for a revolution which, when it came, he was unable to control; like Erasmus, from the most loved and feared of men, he became an object of ridicule almost overnight. Whether, like Erasmus, his fame will in later generations overtop the idols of our day, it is too soon to say; but it is not entirely an act of faith to believe that it will.

Wilson's diagnosis of the sickness of American society, and his cure, can be seen in miniature by a study of his career at Princeton. He saw a college without living contact with the state, and even the nation, which it was created to serve. He saw faculty, undergraduates, and graduate



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students separated, one from the others. He saw the undergraduates divided by social barriers of which the clubs were the expression. He pointed out that, as things stood, the college was likely to become a parasite on the community, and to earn the opprobrium visited on parasites. He pointed out also that the college could not fruitfully serve American life until it was itself a democracy. The barriers separating student from student, and students from faculty, must be demolished.

Unhesitatingly he began the work of demolition and reconstruction. In the fight which followed he showed the defects of personality which were to handicap his whole career. Thinskin himself, his barbed words pierced the thickest skin. Quick to see the connection between details and the problem as a whole, he was impatient with men whose vision was more restricted. Excessively dependent

on the affection and consideration of others, he persistently ignored the necessity of adapting a logically workable plan to the weaknesses of illogical men. Above all, he refused to compromise, even when by the sacrifice of a little he could have saved much. Possibly these defects cost him victory. More probably he was defeated because he asked men to sacrifice their long-established interests, prejudices, and traditions before events had made obvious the necessity for sacrifice.

To Wilson—and here his break with nineteenth-century liberalism was sharpest—college, state, and nation were more than descriptive labels for chance aggregations of men; they were living spiritual communities. He saw clearly that the bonds uniting men in these communities could not be merely the prospect of material advantage. The group must demand service, be a compelling, prohibiting, coercive force; but if coercion was not to be tyranny, citizens must be conscious of their membership in, no less than their responsibility to, the community. In the state and the nation, as in the college, that consciousness could be but fitful while real democracy was absent. Therefore he attacked the barriers separating American citizens. In the eyes of his enemies, Wilson stood for a collective society, and wished to destroy the individualism which had made America great. Wilson saw that the kind of individualism prized by earlier liberals was dead. For effective action, men were already mobilized into groups; they were farmers, or industrial workers, or agents of corporate industry, even suffragettes or prohibitionists. The problem was to make these groups the servants, and to prevent them from becoming the masters, of the national will. That problem he tried to solve, and failed.

In the sixteenth century there were men who remained loyal to the humanism of Erasmus throughout the violence of the religious wars, and in the end the very violence of the wars pounded home the lessons which Erasmus had expounded before the storm broke. Just so, the recent history of Europe, and particularly of Germany, has reinforced Wilson's arguments. In the academic field he has already been vindicated by the collapse of higher education in Germany. There, the universities did cut themselves off from the national life in the years before 1933; in German universities the internal barriers were highest. And in Germany the universities became an especial object of hatred and contempt. Undoubtedly fear alone does not explain the changed temper of American academic life, but certainly there does