

U.S.A. *Of all contemporary writers about the American scene none more nearly deserves the title of Democratic Liberal, bestowed upon him below by Lloyd Morris, than Gerald W. Johnson, who in his truly "Incredible Tale" writes brilliantly about the "immortality of the average man." This omnipotent fellow's course in the past fifty years has been altered by four men of tremendous power: Wilson, Lenin, F. D. Roosevelt, and Stalin. With these Mr. Johnson deals with artistic skill and historic sense—while John Gunther, reporter extraordinary, seeks in "Roosevelt in Retrospect" to simplify the complex personality of the one whom history conceivably may find the most important of them all. Both of these books, having been written with spirit and honesty, contribute immeasurably to our understanding of democratic United States as it has been, not without struggle, during the first chaotic half of the twentieth century.*

Odyssey of John Q. Public

INCREDIBLE TALE. By Gerald W. Johnson. New York: Harper & Bros. 301 pp. \$3.50.

By LLOYD MORRIS

THE SUBTITLE of "Incredible Tale" declares its epic subject. In this vivid, absorbing, enlightening book, Mr. Johnson narrates "the Odyssey of the average American in the last half century." Here, for the first time, the history of our momentous era is interpreted in terms of its impact on the lives, the minds, and emotions of the plain people of this country. The people's leaders—great or otherwise—are mortal and pass from the scene. But the average man is immortal, Mr. Johnson holds. He is always on hand, not individually, but in the mass. Any hope for the future rests upon him. As a democratic liberal, Mr. Johnson believes that the average American will prove equal to the immense responsibilities which confront him now and will continue to afflict him for years to come. This faith rings out vigorously from the pages of "Incredible Tale" and is justified by the tale itself. For it is, obviously, the story of an education; the difficult education to which the plain people of the United States have been subjected during the past half century.

An American born in 1900, Mr. Johnson reminds us, has endured a variety of experiences unique in history. "His life has been attacked by armed enemies, his living has been attacked by impersonal economic forces, his moral certainties have been wrecked by science, art, philosophy, and, above all, by time and change." During his lifetime a world order has disintegrated, and civilization has

been changed beyond recognition. There have been two global wars and five ancient empires have collapsed in ruins. Science has unlocked the basic power of the universe and today we face the dire consequences of that triumph. Meanwhile the course of everyone's existence has been altered by the emergence of four world figures, men of tremendous power:

Wilson, Lenin, Franklin Roosevelt, and Stalin.

Two major themes, always in counterpoint, dominate Mr. Johnson's record of the Odyssey of the average American. One is the growing concern of the plain people with their government; the other, their expanding involvement in world affairs. Over the past fifty years, as Mr. Johnson shows with cumulative impressiveness, the American people have become increasingly determined to make democracy work in the United States and to forge their government into a potent instrument for the advancement of their collective welfare. Their resolution was expressed in the attack on privilege and "invisible government" in the era of Bryan and Theodore Roosevelt. It became articulate and forceful in the great reforms of Woodrow Wilson's first Administration. And since the inauguration of Franklin Roosevelt it has become the overriding issue of our national politics. Mr. Johnson's dramatic account of the gradual evolution of the concept of the "welfare state" in the minds of the American people is genuinely illuminating. As things stand today, he concludes, with democracy engaged in a worldwide contest with Communism, "democracy has won, at most, a chance to prove its ability to furnish the kind of gov-

THE AUTHOR: Gerald W. Johnson says he wrote "Incredible Tale" because "I feel that my generation has a unique position in the world that it is overlooking for the most part. I hope it may reduce somewhat the fears that are sweeping the country, that seem to me wholly unjustified." The book, his seventeenth, represents a distillation of his life's experience—a life that began nearly sixty years ago in Riverton, N. C. (pop. six kin), of which his grandfather was postmaster. Johnson père was a country newspaper editor, who sang Baptist hymns, tenor or bass as required, in a succession of North Carolina parishes. Gerald in footstep established the *Thomasville (N. C.) Davidsonian* at age twenty and three years later became music critic for the *Greensboro Daily News*, where, barring World War I service, he remained until 1924. The next year, then professor of journalism at the University of North Carolina, his first book was published. Other works followed in almost annual succession while he was editorial writer for the *Baltimore Evening Sun* and *Sun*, 1926-43. All are in an historical vein save "A Little Night-Music," the best known being "Roosevelt: Dictator or Democrat?" (translated into German, Portuguese, and [sic] English), "American Heroes and Hero-Worship," and since his retirement to free-lance, "Woodrow Wilson" (with the editors of *Look*) and "An Honorable Titan." No politician, he has continued to comment on critical issues in publications scholarly to slick, and currently finds himself—while collecting material for a book on 1812-61 Baltimore—"rattling about the state" lashing the Ober and Mundt bills. In 1946 Johnson, "a New-Dealer, a Bad-Dealer, but not a Double-Dealer Democrat," defined a liberal as "a man who is aware of perils ahead and therefore alert, but who is convinced that the opportunity is greater than the danger." Today he would amplify: "A liberal is a man who never overlooks the obvious facts and makes his political philosophy conform." —R. G.



ernment that all men desire." It has not yet furnished it, even in the United States, except in a few aspects of life, Mr. Johnson acknowledges; and whether it can or will may depend on the rising generation.

Mr. Johnson is equally illuminating, vivid, and dramatic in presenting his second theme. The story of our rapidly expanding involvement in world affairs is nowhere told with greater clarity than in "Incredible Tale." We see the high purposes of Wilson deliberately wrecked in advance by Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge; we see the "criminal irresponsibility" of the American people during the era of Coolidge and Harding; the ignorance which prevented Americans from reckoning adequately with the potentialities of Lenin. The whole tragic course of failure is admirably explained and the present situation made comprehensible. But in the present situation, Mr. Johnson concludes, the United States has received "something rare in the history of nations—it is given a second chance." The average American, he believes, has glimpsed this opportunity and is now acting with greater wisdom than he possessed thirty years ago.

"Incredible Tale" should prove an invaluable text for the generation of Americans now entering their thirties. It is an eloquent and powerful book, wise, often witty, but above all a work of penetrating insight. No higher praise could be given it than to say that it explains us to ourselves. And this it does.

Lloyd Morris wrote "Not So Long Ago" and other historical works.

The Genuine FDR

ROOSEVELT IN RETROSPECT. By John Gunther. New York: Harper & Bros. 410 pp. \$3.75.

By ERNEST K. LINDLEY

WITH his customary acute eye for engaging detail, pertinent anecdote, and illuminating sidelight, John Gunther has put together a fascinating picture and appraisal of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Of the many who have written on this subject, Gunther is one of the few who did not know the late President well at first hand—he had met him only four or five times. The advantage inherent in this circumstance is objectivity. The inherent handicap for one who is attempting an intimate portrait is lack of a sure touch. Gunther has retained the advantage while surmounting the handicap.

He has drawn on nearly all the authentic Roosevelt literature and is the first to make use of the many post-war memoirs by Roosevelt's associates and of the recently published volumes of Roosevelt's letters in attempting an over-all estimate of the man. In addition, he talked with many other persons who knew Roosevelt or had contacts with him and had access to some unpublished documentary material. This gives the book a freshness which makes it well worth the attention of persons who feel that they already know the subject well. What is more important is that the character who emerges from Gunther's pages is the genuine Roose-

velt in most of his variegated aspects.

Gunther realizes that Roosevelt was too complex to be explained by any simple formula. In trying to answer the central question, "What made Roosevelt what he was?" he contents himself with listing seven "factors which might be mentioned." Among these were that Roosevelt grew up slowly, without fear of authority (his father was an old man), that his social background gave him assurance, and that his triumph over infantile paralysis steeled his self-confidence.

Roosevelt's worst quality, in Gunther's opinion—and in the opinion of many who knew Roosevelt—was deviousness. He was, at times, vindictive. He sometimes broke promises. He could be flagrantly ungrateful and he had certain tendencies towards grandioseness. Gunther appropriately illustrates these faults, although he errs in implying that Roosevelt broke a promise, made through another Senator, to appoint Joseph T. Robinson, majority leader, to the Supreme Court. Robinson died in July 1937, before Roosevelt gave up his effort to enlarge the Supreme Court and named a successor to Justice Van Devanter. Roosevelt knew he would have to appoint Robinson even if there had been no promises; the Senate would have insisted on it. That was one reason why he still wanted the Court enlarged—so he could offset Robinson, a conservative, with more liberals.

Gunther's account of Roosevelt's attack of infantile paralysis in 1921 and his struggle to overcome its after-effects is the most detailed yet published. It includes, among various new material, the medical records of the case and excerpts from correspondence among the physicians who treated him. One feared Roosevelt was doomed to be bedridden. He wrote:

What I fear more than anything else is that we shall find a much more extensive involvement of the great back muscles than we have suspected . . . I feel so strongly . . . that the psychological factor in his management is paramount. He has such courage, such ambition, and yet at the same time such an extraordinarily sensitive emotional mechanism that it will take all the skill which we can muster to lead him successfully to a recognition of what he really faces without crushing him.

Fortunately, the muscles of his back resumed their normal functions and he recovered the use of his arms. His struggle to regain even partial use of his legs was long and grim. But Gunther, like others who made the search, was unable to find any-



"There are just a few simple questions we would like to ask you."