

HISTORY

causes of the Revolution; to give attention to the way less privileged classes lived and worked.

To treat all these complex themes adequately, Dr. Wright would have had to produce a far longer book than "The Atlantic Frontier." But if he was unwilling to write at the length necessary for a well-rounded history, he might have given us another kind of volume for which there is equally great need. He could have omitted most of the detailed political narrative (which has been told fully and well many times before), and concentrated on a single theme—that Old World traditions and institutions were transported across the Atlantic, only to be modified by conditions on the new frontier. He mentions it a number of times, but fails to develop it systematically. The analytical sections of "The Atlantic Frontier" make it clear that he is capable of an excellent volume on this theme.

Moral Pivot

FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM: A History of American Negroes. By John Hope Franklin. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947. 622 pp. \$5.

Reviewed by ALAIN LOCKE

WITH this significant volume, John Hope Franklin has made several constructive and timely contributions to the history of the American Negro. One, the most welcome and important, is to have integrated the story of this minority group with the general context of American history, of which it then becomes a vital and by no means insignificant part. Another is to have achieved, more definitely than any previous general narrative in this field, that objectivity which the best historical scholarship requires. A third is to have been successfully comprehensive in carrying the story from early African origins through to the present day, and even to have included, though necessarily in sketchy outline, not only the story of the Negro in the United States but in Canada, the West Indies, and South America as well. These merits will undoubtedly combine to make "From Slavery to Freedom" the most useful and enlightening historical handbook available on the American Negro.

The history of any minority group entails difficulties and pitfalls comparable to those the minority itself faces. Initially it must offset the neglect and disparagement stemming from its exclusion from standard history, and so has inevitable roots in polemic and counterpropaganda. Only gradually can it work its way



from partisan defense and from catering to minority pride and self-respect to a broader perspective and to more objective and balanced judgment. With this in view, what is surprising is not the large amount of Negro historical scholarship that has been unduly counterbiased, but the considerable amount that has succeeded in making noteworthy and generally acceptable contributions. From the time of J. W. C. Pennington's "Textbook of the Origin and History of the Colored People" (1841) and Wm. C. Nell's "Services of Colored Americans in the Wars of 1776 and 1812" (1853) there have been notable instances. But even in such indisputably scholarly works as George W. Williams's "History of the Negro from 1619 to 1880," Dr. William E. B. DuBois's "The Suppression of the Slave Trade" (1896) and his subsequent more popular volumes, "The Negro" (1916) and "Black Folk: Now and Then" (1934), and Carter G. Woodson's pioneering and influential school text, "The Negro in Our History" (1919), there have been unavoidable elements of counterpolemic and occasional alloys of racial chauvinism. In more detailed monographic studies Negro scholars have perforce maintained historical objectivity, nowhere more notably than in the annals of *The Journal of Negro History*, which has appeared quarterly now for some thirty-one years. In the volume here under review, one finds, happily and at last, the same regard for documented fact and similarly desirable restraint and sense of balance and perspective.

When minority history is incisively interpreted, it invariably throws new light on the history of the majority group. In this case, the American Negro's story, past and contemporary, adds important chapters to the social history of our land and, in addition, accents the moral theme in American history. For at all stages, the status of the Negro is at or near the center of the issues and dilemmas of political, economic, and cultural democracy. In succession, as we read the record, we find the Negro the crux of the issue of human rights and freedom, of truly universal suffrage, of the federal control and guarantee of civil rights,

of the extension of economic democracy and labor union democratization, and finally of the nation's external reputation for the consistent practice of democracy. In this moral dimension, in fact, Negro history assumes both the dignity and the seriousness of first principles and major issues, to an extent that will be a revelation to those readers who, either through ignorance or bias, have regarded the history of the Negro as a matter of secondary or parochial import. Quite to the contrary, American history itself appears in deeper and more challenging perspective from this angle. On this score many will judge that Professor Franklin has made a worth-while contribution both to general American history and to liberalized social understanding.

Throughout, the documentation and the bibliography add to the usefulness of the book to students. Fortunately, too, a good balance is held between the political, the industrial, and the cultural lines of development special emphasis, with very adequate chapters on the Negro's important contribution in the arts, scholarship, and letters. "From Slavery to Freedom" has before it a path of constructive public serviceableness; it will be a long while until another book in this field supersedes it.

Free Topsoil

HEAVEN'S TABLELAND: The Dust Bowl Story. By Vance Johnson. New York: Farrar, Straus & Co. 1947. 288 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by STANLEY VESTAL

THIS able book is a history of the Dust Bowl and the conditions and men who periodically create it. The author knows what he is talking about, having spent the full period of the last great drouth in various capacities on the staff of the *Amarillo Daily News*, in the heart of the Dust Bowl country. It was his job to report the farmers' fight against the weather, and he drove some thirty thousand miles a year to get the story.

The book is authoritative, factual, intelligent, and readable, holding one's keen interest from start to finish. Though the author makes one or two slight fumbles in the early Indian history of the region, his chronicle as a whole is very sound and well documented. He always approaches us with an idea in one hand and an example or lively anecdote in the other. His story never falters.

The Dust Bowl, of course, is not a place but a recurring condition, caused partly by weather but (according to
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Fiction. *The world seems grim enough as it is revealed in five of the seven books of fiction reviewed this week. There are two outstanding but bitter novels of rural life, Jan Valtin's story of the harsh treatment suffered by two aliens who have illegally fled to America for refuge and Fynette Rowe's account of a family's persecution in upper New York State. The brilliant English novelist Elizabeth Taylor reveals the drab and furtive lives of the people who inhabit a seaside resort. A collection of four French stories that emerged from France during the occupation adds a touch of glamor and heroism to universal tragedy and inhumanity. The necessary relief is furnished by Simeon Strunsky's gentle and entertaining evaluation of some of the calmer aspects of American life and by C. F. Ramuz's epic of love and endurance in the Swiss mountains two centuries ago. However the best-seller lists indicate the public still prefers historical novels thick enough to sit on.*

Shades of Hamilton and Jefferson

TWO CAME TO TOWN. By Simeon Strunsky. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1947. 219 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

PEOPLE commonly say that whatever liberties the Russians lack in the Soviet system, they retain the right of self-criticism. Reporters say further that this right is fully exercised, and strongly imply that self-criticism is something peculiar to the Russian state. They even hint that other countries — for example, the United States—might well afford to take a leaf from the Soviet book.

As nobody knows how much self-criticism is healthy in a given culture, argument that Americans ought to practise more self-criticism may go on forever. But the assumption that self-criticism—and rather savage self-criticism—is a unique possession of the Communist state is an assumption contrary to fact. Nothing is more characteristic of American literature than the amount of self-criticism, and rather savage self-criticism, it contains. To go no farther back than the early years of the Republic, Brackenridge's "Modern Chivalry" is about as severe on the democratic state as any Tory could be. Cooper's "social" novels are often diatribes. Emerson and Thoreau are quite as biting about their own country as is any Russian about his; and the tone of comment from Poe to H. L. Mencken is not flattering to republican self-esteem. The vogue of Henry Adams among young intellectuals implies a quality of dissatisfaction with the republican state and with a democratic culture that ought to alarm self-anointed guardians of political purity. The total impact upon the

European imagination of such American writers as Upton Sinclair, Jack London, Thomas Wolfe, Ernest Hemingway, Erskine Caldwell, William Faulkner, and James T. Farrell is to create a most extraordinary cartoon, compounded of Uncle Sam, Uncle Shylock, Li'l Abner, Tarzan, and the creepy creations of Mr. Charles Addams. Amid all this uproar the voice of reasonableness seems lost.

Or would be lost if it were not for Simeon Strunsky. Mr. Strunsky has no profound theories of the state. I do not know whether he is a Keynesian economist. I suppose he has read Toynbee and Spengler, and for aught I know, Schopenhauer, von Hartmann, and Max Nordau. But while *The Nation* voices dismay and *The New Republic* views with alarm, while *The New Masses* thunders on the left and Merwin K. Hart threatens on



Simeon Strunsky freshly states the obvious.

the right, Mr. Strunsky has been off observing the habits of Americans with regard to traffic signals. Americans seem to respect traffic signals. They seem to feel that they are intelligent inventions which do a great deal of good in the way of preserving life and property and preventing traffic jams and profanity. I do not know that the regulation of traffic in the United States proves anything for the left or anything for the right, but I am attracted by Mr. Strunsky's calm assumption that it does prove something about the center. It indicates, amid the general uproar, that there may be some good things even about the United States. For example, even when two empty roads cross, a single car waits until the green light comes on—without a policeman in sight.

A traffic episode happens near the opening, of Mr. Strunsky's latest book, "Two Came to Town," in which the shades of Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson return to New York as delegates to the United Nations from Hyperia, or the United States as it used to be. Mr. Hamilton, or as Mr. Strunsky calls him, Mr. Alexander, is much struck by the self-regulating patterns of the Republic. He also finds the traffic cop polite, which I rarely do, but we will let that pass. The point is that obedience to traffic signals, a commonplace in America, is one of those obvious things always getting overlooked in heated controversy about the future of civilization in these states.

As Mr. Strunsky, a modest man, would be the first to deprecate any talk that "Two Came to Town" is a literary masterpiece, I shall imitate him and say it is not. It is perhaps a shade too amiable in its evocation of Messrs. Jefferson and Hamilton, and a touch too arch in regard to the family life of taxicab drivers and the pleasures of getting lost in subways. But when I contemplate the patience and persistence with which Mr. Strunsky in a series of books has courteously reminded his fellow countrymen that, after a couple of centuries, they have perhaps evolved a few comforts and acquired a few virtues, I feel that Mr. Strunsky has for years been saying something that needs to be said. I do not mean to imply with Howells that the smiling aspects of life are necessarily the more American, but I do mean to say that in a volume like "The Living Tradition," which he brought out in 1939, and in other articles and volumes like this present one, he has done that most extraordinary thing, he has freshly stated the obvious—the kind of obvious thing that everybody forgets or doesn't weigh or fails to evaluate. I suspect historians are