

Negro Folk Song

THE BOOK OF AMERICAN NEGRO SPIRITUALS. Edited by JAMES WELDON JOHNSON. New York: B. W. HUBBARD-KING Press. 1925. \$3.50.

Reviewed by R. EMMET KENNEDY
Author of "Mellows—Negro Work Songs"

IT IS to be hoped that the appearance of this book, with its scholarly and analytical introduction by James Weldon Johnson, will serve to enlighten and convince the dissenting critics inclined to deny the Negro any claim to originality of musical expression. The book is a collection of importance and excellence, likewise a fine commentary on the unique and conspicuous distinction enjoyed by the Negroes of the South in that they are the lone perpetrators and disseminators of folk-song in this country. The musical talent of the uneducated Negro finds its truest expression in religious song, the kind of cantilated prayer which has come to be known as the spiritual. These songs are genuine productions, conceived by unlettered people with insular minds, the immortal hope-songs of inspired souls dreaming in bondage.

The musical arrangements in this collection are by J. Rosamond Johnson and Lawrence Brown. They have succeeded admirably in keeping true to the racial characteristics of rhythm and harmony, the distinctive charms of Negro music, without losing the graceful simplicity inseparable from all folk-song.

The selection is a representative one and shows the Negro's creative musical genius to fine advantage. That these early psalmists appropriated the dramatic fancies, picturesque incidents, and symbolic language gleaned from the Bible stories they heard and the words of the prescribed hymns sung by the Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregational church people with whom they came in contact, cannot be denied. But upon examination of any of the old hymnals used by these various denominations, in comparison with any of the spirituals of old plantation days, practically no melodic similarity can be found that would hint of imitation.



To get a correct idea of the type of songs and ballads sung by the English, Irish, Scottish, and Welsh colonists, plantation owners, and emigrants who settled in the South, we have only to consult Cecil Sharp's "Folk Songs of the Southern Appalachian Mountains," a scientific collection made in the remote and isolated regions of Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee; or the "Some-some Tunes" and "Twenty Kentucky Mountain Songs" of Loraine Wyman and Howard Brockway. If these were among the songs actually sung by the slaves on the plantations and used by the critics have inferred, as models for their imitating moving hymn-songs, it is well worth the attention of the investigator to compare these as productions. It is no difficult matter to identify the English, Irish, Scottish, and Welsh elements of the so-called American ballad of the same type: glance at Cecil Sharp's "English Folk Songs from Somerset and Devon," the Irish of Charles Stanford Villiers or Clarendon, the Scottish collections of Colin Burns or the lay or Helen Hopekirk, and the Welsh of Arthur Somervell. But in the case of the Negro, the line is blurred between those of the American variants and the old plantation Negroes. We have no such guide.

The earliest examples of Negro folk music show the influence of the spiritual, the others having seeds which have been in the quarter tones. The same possibility of the Negro music, likewise declared imitations of those not aware of the fact that it is a common characteristic of all primitive music, besides being purely oriental and thus the Negro's by right of African inheritance. Unlike the songs of the Asiatic people, the native African chants are mostly in the major key; but the American Negro, feeling the minor key more appropriate for the voicing of his songs of sorrow and hymns of hope, enlarged his scale and made the intervals bolder and evolved his inborn fantastic melody which slowly approaches the miraculous.

The BOWLING GREEN

PHILADELPHIA, *urbs alma carissima*, has been conning the sky. It is about to publish *The Philadelphian*. "Our aim," the editor writes, "is to make *The Philadelphian* more or less of a cross between *Vanity Fair* and the *New Yorker*; but much less sophisticated than either. We thought that probably you might have some material on hand that you might wish to submit to us for publication."

How pleasant, one ponders, if a writer always had "material on hand" (carefully classified in various grades of "sophistication"). We regret that we have nothing on hand that assesses less than 30% naïveté.

There is a pleasant theme here for the editor or *The Philadelphian* to expound. The New York theory evidently is to be as sophisticated as one possibly can. The Philadelphia notion, which appears more profoundly cynical, is to pull a King Canute on the beach; to denote beforehand exactly where you will quit being sophomore. Like that determined fellow who always put on his flannels at Thanksgiving, regardless of the weather.



More important news from Philadelphia, which I have not seen much commented, is that Leary's famous old bookstore is established in temporary quarters at 1214 Arch street while its home at 9 South 9th Street is enlarged and rebuilt. Fifty men and five trucks worked a day and a half moving Leary's stock (over a million books) to Arch Street, and what I should like to read would be an essay by Philip Warner, the Santayana of Leary's staff, describing the adventure. It is said that in the new Leary's special ash-trays are going to be attached to the shelves so that customers may safely smoke while they browse.



Doctor Canby has promised that some time early in the New Year the *Saturday Review* will publish an issue giving space to Neglected Books, books that have never really had their day in court, or have been misconceived by the critics. This seems to me an excellent idea, and for my own part I promise to write about a Neglected Book that has been o. p. for many years and which was written neither by Mr. C. E. Montague nor Mr. Pearsall Smith. I want to remind any clients who have an ember of indignation in their souls in regard to any insufficiently appreciated favorite, now is the time to bare their bosoms to Dr. Canby. Bosoms can be adequately bared, I believe, in three or four hundred words.



With regard to some Neglected Books, we do make progress. I believe it would be unlikely now for any critic to be so hardy as to say of Emily Dickinson: "It is becoming clear that she was over-rated. Her eccentric fragments are mere conceits, vague jottings of a brooding mind; they are crudely wrought, colorless and for the most part lifeless. They should have been allowed to perish in their author's intended."

That is from Professor F. L. Pattee's "History of American Literature Since 1870," published in 1917.



Ed. H. writes from Paris:—
I have been reading in the *Bowling Green* about that fellow who called the "average American" in Paris. It seems to me that that simple-minded person is now a little more puzzled. He has seen, in the past six months, the Parisian version of an ancient myth: that Paris was the playground of all Americans and that every Frenchman was anxious to evidence any American at sight. Now, after being waiting for a little weary of the annual indignities our friend, after having been short-changed by various tobacconists, sneered at by head-waiters, and unopposed by music-hall artists, goes to his only real spiritual home—the office of the American Express Company—and confides to compatriots that "they don't love us any more." It would be surprising if they did. Let me give you one example of his ways. There was a young man, lately graduate from an Eastern university, who remarked frequently on the voyage over (his first) that Paris was the only place where a man of delicate sensibility could learn to be a creative artist; there, in Mueganian freedoms, his pent spirit would come to rover. And how did he celebrate his arrival in the city of light? By being honorable to the Chebourg Hotel, a member of a dinner he had with him.

When that official readily discovered twenty more packages of Chesterfields concealed in the young man's golf-bag, it was not pleasant. I know that young man's kind: he has been taught that the adage *Montani semper liberi* applies especially to the mountains of Martre and Parnasse. Some day, having drunk too much, he will accost the wrong lady; and the only thing that will save him from being hauled off by an *agent de police* is that his French is so grotesque she will not even know he is insulting her. I wish it were possible to keep at home until they are reasonably mature some of our citizens who make things difficult for the rest.



Apparently someone in this large office-building had overheard the learned and laborious Editor of this review referred to as Doctor. For the other day there came an agitated telephone call from a neighboring office. "Please send the Doctor up here at once." The *Saturday Review's* mannerly telephone lady was startled. "Havent you got a Doctor there?" repeated the inquirer.

"Only a Doctor of Philosophy," replied our *conscieur*.



A young publisher was regretting that there are no authors nowadays who venture to play with their readers as, for instance, Meredith in the idyllic love-scene in "Feverel," where the penny-whistle provides a mock-Theocritus *motif*. And he went on to say, or was about to when interrupted, that romantic love is rather harshly and grimly handled in current fiction.

This may or may not be so; but thinking about it I was reminded of a chat I had with a bookseller some months ago. He is something of a connoisseur of trees, and was distressed because some pines in his garden were—as he put it—pining away. Some mysterious pox afflicted them, and he called in a forester to consult. The latter told him that the evil was due to his having currant bushes in his garden. (I hope I have this right: I tell it as I remember it.) Apparently the proximity of currants induces some debility in pine trees, and they wither and die.

Perhaps, it occurred to me, a similar botany takes place in literature. Most publishers' gardens have plenty of currant-bushes nowadays; by which I mean a low scrubby or bushy sort of novel with thorny and acid properties; excellent for many nourishing and refreshing flavors, but not timber for sea-going purposes. The charm of a pine-tree is quite other; chiefly in its height and symmetry, its evergreen durability, and the pleasant mournfulness of the wind in its fronds. Perhaps, the conifer novel is, for the moment, pined by some emanation from the currants at its feet.

Or perhaps the analogy is nonsense.

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY

Federalist: 1925 Model

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servatives as he are congenitally incapable of seeing a great principle working out in the disorderly and unlovely movement of American civilization. They smite the inevitable with swords and see disaster in every incident of social evolution. We may be headed for a cliff, but we are not for that reason swine, to be estimated solely as such. Those Gadarene pigs would have equally infuriated the swineherd whether they ran for the sea or the mountains.

The lumbering march of democracy goes on, the mob and masters of the mob and more in control, toward what end who knows? But with each year a little more comfort, a little more power, a little more opportunity to be a fool, or a knave, or a civilized individual comes to the average, commonplace man. Round its columns the light-armed troopers ride, picking off a stupid one now and then, and raining bright darts on unprotected and unconscious backs. They cannot stop the human race; they can only harass; without them we would be more fatuous, more vain, duller; but with or without them we go on where our humanity, not their reason, calls us.

Hamlet is a gruesome tragedy with practically everyone dead in the last act whether they deserve it or not—which is not the approved ending for a play in this country. Shakespeare is almost as bad as Ibsen and it takes a morbid or primitive nature to enjoy a play of that kind.

Eugene (Ore.) Daily Guard

Books of Special Interest

Vignettes

ROMAN CONVERTS. By ARNOLD LUNN.
New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
1925. \$3.50.

Reviewed by T. LAWRASON RIGGS

"THE Unbiased Historian is a Myth. Historians are either readable or unreadable. . . . A writer's religion, irreligion, and politics must color all he writes. The art of history, like other arts, consists of selection, in the choice of a few samples from the unassorted bundles which litter the lumber-rooms of the past; and it is in the choice of samples that the historian reveals his philosophy." Thus Mr. Lunn, apropos of Mr. Strachey. The remarks are highly applicable to the author of "Roman Converts." His philosophy and religion, if any, are indeed too tenuous to be inferred, but his studies of Newman, Manning, Tyrrell Chesterton, and Ronald Knox, are permeated by a bitter and unwearying prejudice against the Catholic Church, whose doctrines he seems incapable of accurately representing.

A significant though harmless little blunder is the misuse of "probabilism" in the essay on Newman. "Probabilism" is the name of a school of moral theology. Newman, as a reference to Ward's "Life" will show, was accused by adverse critics of making religious faith rest on "probabilities." Mr. Lunn has most characteristically picked up the term "probabilism"

without knowing what it means. More important errors can hardly be looked on as unconscious. They would have been easily avoided if there had been any desire to avoid them. Thus, the Catholic presentation of the relationship between natural and revealed religion is flippantly caricatured, and the doctrine of Papal Infallibility receives no better treatment, though the Vatican Council's definition is quoted in full.

An especially outrageous instance of Mr. Lunn's perversity is his treatment of the Catholic doctrine concerning eternal punishment. According to him, "Until the world revolted, the Church continued to teach that God by the fiat of his unchallenged will had called into being unnumbered millions with the foreknowledge, and, therefore, the intention, that they should pass Eternity in excruciating agony. . . . All those who died outside of the Church, the noblest of the ancients, the millions who were born and died in happy ignorance of the peculiar good-tidings proclaimed by the Church, and all babes who died unbaptized were doomed to the same fate." Father Martindale's statement, in "God and the Supernatural," that unbaptized children pass into a state of natural happiness after death, is regarded as a mere watering down of offensive doctrine under the pressure of modern enlightenment.

Now all this is quite demonstrably wrong. That God's foreknowledge involves the condemnation to eternal punishment of anyone without any fault of his own was condemned as heresy in Lucidus in the fifth century, in Gottschalk in the ninth, and in Calvin in the sixteenth. Not that the relations between divine foreknowledge and human freewill are anything but mysterious. But a mystery is not necessarily a contradiction, and if Mr. Lunn's meditations have led him to conclude that God's foreknowledge is incompatible with man's freewill, he should at least know that the Church has insisted on the latter as strenuously as on the former.

As to the salvation of the virtuous pagans, the mediæval scholastics provided for its possibility by their theories of "implicit faith" and "baptism of desire." If these are subterfuges, they are at any rate not modern ones. The luminous eagle in Dante's "Paradiso" declares, "Many cry, 'Christ, 'Christ', who at the judgment shall be far less near to him than such as know not Christ, and such Christians the Ethiopie shall condemn." And Aquinas, in a famous passage, states that "If anyone, brought up in the forests, should follow the lead of natural reason by seeking good and fleeing evil, it must be held as most certain that God would either reveal to him what is necessary by internal inspiration, or would send him a preacher." Throughout the mediæval period the highly complex problems of grace and salvation were consistently treated in the light of an oft repeated axiom, "To him who does what he can, God does not refuse grace."

Nor is the theory of a state of natural happiness for unbaptized infants a modern compromise. In technical theological language "Hell" and "Damnation" could refer to a state of mere exclusion from the direct intuition of God. St. Thomas regards unbaptized children as "damned" in this sense, but says that they "Are joined to God by the sharing of natural goods, and are also able to enjoy Him by natural knowledge and natural love." So Father Martindale is not an innovator after all!

It is easier to make misrepresentations than to disprove them. It is also more entertaining. If Mr. Lunn's book is to be properly appraised, however, the extent of his airily malevolent incompetence needs to be realized.

Apparently it occurred to him that his talents could be divertingly displayed in a study of the five converts (including one tragic apostate), with a rhetorical question as a *leitmotif*—How could such distinguished men voluntarily embrace such a preposterous religion? It is necessary for his effect that the men should be represented neither as fools nor as knaves, as he says in his preface, and he analyzes their motives with a great deal of acumen and considerable fairness. Thus Manning is quite vigorously defended against Mr. Strachey's imputations, Chesterton is given a generous meed of praise, and only Father Knox is treated with well-nigh complete contempt. The preposterousness of Catholicism, however, is emphasized to such an extent and with such cavalier disregard of fact, that the reader who accepts the indictment seems likely to doubt either the sincerity or the sanity of the converts. Studies in moral obliquity or in pathology were not apparently what Mr. Lunn intended to write, and his effort consequently misses fire.

A new translation, accompanied by a learned study, of the "Confessions" of St. Augustine has recently been made by Professor Pierre de Labriolle, of the University of Poitiers, (Société d'Édition des Belles-Lettres). The author examines the question that has been raised as to the absolute sincerity of the "Confessions," and effectively states the case in favor of the great Bishop. Augustine had a high appreciation of the Platonic philosophy, which later he regretted. His "Dialogues"—and it is there his critics find material for their questioning—were written after the "Confessions," and they resume a philosophical tone seemingly incompatible with the ardent Christian conviction of the "Confessions." Professor Labriolle thinks that this period represented a sort of mental suspension after the crisis of emotion in the "Confessions," which is not at all inconsistent with the history of conversions. Professor Labriolle previously published an "Histoire de la Littérature Latine Chrétienne," which is the most complete and successful French work on that subject.



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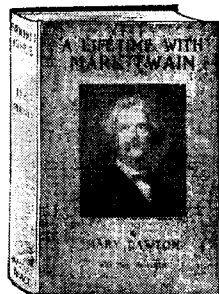


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