

Primer for the Race of the Living

NEW WORLD A-COMING. *Inside Black America.* By Roi Ottley. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1943. 364 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by ARTHUR GARFIELD HAYS

DISCONTENT means struggle. Struggle means progress. The illuminating picture of Negro life—particularly in Harlem—which Roi Ottley presents in his book does not lead to the conclusion expressed in the title—a “New World A-Coming.” But the story of life in Harlem does explain the race riots, Garvey’s Back-to-Africa movement, Father Divine, the anti-Semitic antics of Sufi Abdul Hamid, the pro-Japanese propaganda of Jordan, and a host of other bizarre figures and happenings. The constant agitation derives from an inner demand for recognition. The assertion of race leads to a seething, burning, overwhelming resentment. Thus Joe Louis is not merely a prize-fighter, Marion Anderson a singer; they are Negroes—symbols of a people fighting prejudice and injustice.

The Negro problem is not so much a problem of race or color or even of economics as would appear on the surface. Nor is it unique. It is, as the author points out, the same problem of prejudice which in varying degrees affects all groups of whatever color, race, or religion. It is the problem of anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism, or anti-anything. Negroes of one standard of living or another are prejudiced against other Negroes, just as Jews of old-time lineage in the United States are prejudiced against other Jews.

... There are a scattering of organizations whose memberships consist entirely of fair-skinned or mulatto types, and where the black-ball is rigorously employed against any crasher whose coloring is deeper than high yaller. Yet, even within the mulatto clique, class distinctions exist which are based chiefly on property, education, blood, or family.

But as against the “white” race, the problem is particularly intense. To the Negro the consciousness of race or of color is never absent.

On one occasion Clarence Darrow received a deputation from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People who had come to persuade him to defend Dr. Ossian Sweet and others indicted for murder in Detroit. These people, defending their homes against a mob, had killed a white man. Arthur Spingarn, black of hair, dark of color, told Darrow the story. “I know about the troubles of your people,” said Darrow. Spingarn said he was not a colored man. Darrow turned to Charles Studin, also

swarthy and dark. Studin said he was an officer of the Association, as were many other white people. Darrow looked toward Walter White, “I wouldn’t make that mistake with you.” Walter White raised his blonde head, smiled at Darrow out of his blue eyes, and said, “I am a Negro.”

What is a Negro anyhow? The term ethnologically applies only to those with full colored blood. There are few Negroes in the United States. As the author indicates, if you go to a Negro dance in Harlem you see people of every shade and hue. Once, trying a law case where a landlord sought an injunction against occupancy of a house by Negroes, I brought into court a number of dark white people and light colored people and asked the Court to tell which were Negroes. My client was a very light Bahaman. To my question as to whether she was a Negro, she answered, “I don’t know.” My opponent then called my client’s husband to the stand. He was blue black in color. The question was put, “Are you a Negro?” The witness answered, “I don’t know.” The Judge turned to me and inquired, “Isn’t he trifling with the Court, Mr. Hays?” My answer was that I had talked the matter over with the witness and we both agreed that he did not know.

Whether a person with one-sixteenth of Negro blood is a white or Negro depends upon his associations and psychology. Negroes are those who have a consciousness of belonging to a distinct group.

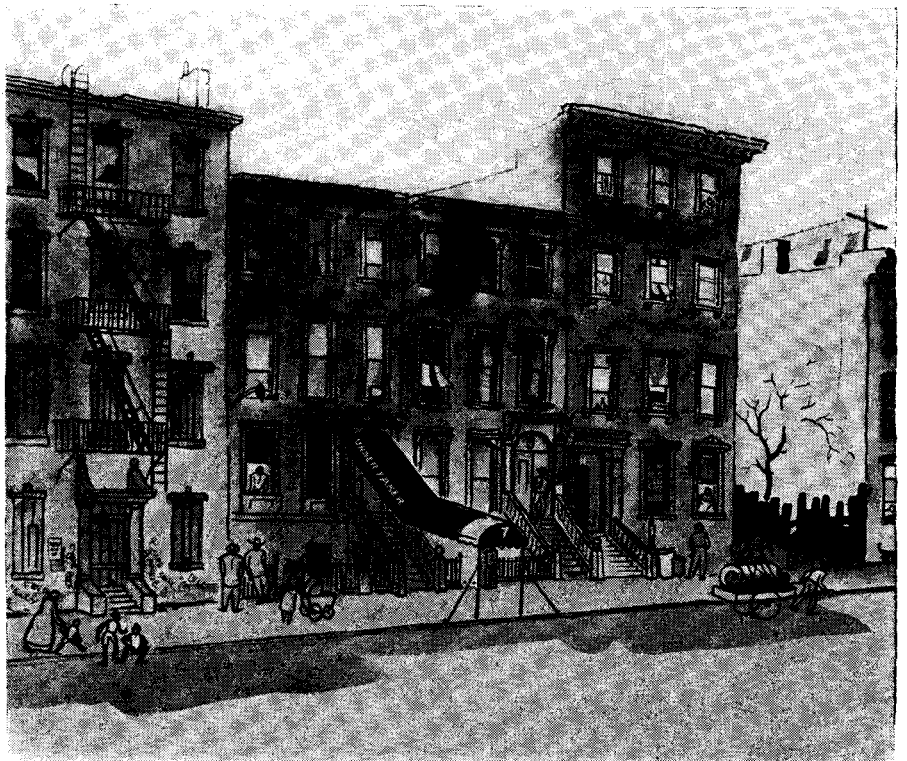
The distinguishing characteristic which I think applies to all of those who have a consciousness of identity with the Negro group is their resentment at the pretensions of democracy. As the author says, “Negroes are no longer in the mood to be placated by pious double-talk. They want some of the gravy of American life.”

Roi Ottley has done a magnificent job in presenting a picture. He writes with eloquence and vision, with restraint, with a sense of humor and with full and complete knowledge of the subject. He pulls no punches.

Ottley’s words, phraseology, picturization, and stories are colorful. Father Divine is a “Baptist Fundamentalist at heart and in precept, he is in his teachings a God in short pants.” He runs religion on the “chain-store plan.”

Ottley shows that progress has been made by the Negroes through acting as a pressure group and he leaves no doubt in the reader’s mind that the Negro is all out in the demand for his rights. He is serious in his view of what democracy should mean.

As stated at the beginning, his story does not lead to the conclusion. There is no “new world” for the Negro nor for anybody else. People are always looking for solutions. There are no solutions until we are dead. People are bound to have prejudices—or prejudgments—so long as they are different one from another. Life would be pretty dull if we were all alike. But there should be equal treatment by the Government and equal protection under the law. This cannot be had through acquiescence to injustice. Life is a fight—for Negroes as for everyone.



—From the drawing in the book, by John O'Hara Cosgrove II.

Sholem Asch's Story of Paul

THE APOSTLE. By Sholem Asch.
New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
1943. 804 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by R. ELLIS ROBERTS

THERE are occasions when it may be impertinent for a critic to mention an author's nation or faith: there are occasions when not to do so is equally impertinent. Mr. Asch is a Jew, a son of Israel conscious of that incomparable heritage which belongs to his people; I do not know whether he is, in matters of a religion, a practising Jew. If he is, he is of the company of that great English scholar, C. G. Montefiore, who did so much to exhibit the unbreakable ties that bind the Christian to Israel, for in this rich, devout, imaginative novel based on the life of Apostle Paul of Tarsus Mr. Asch is concerned with a similar task. And surely it is of good omen for the amity of the world that this novel should emphasize again and again the truth expounded by Pope Pius XI that Christians can never join in anti-Jew vulgarities and vileness because they are "spiritually Semites."

As a tract for the times, "The Apostle" is a superb success: that is, a man could read it and be repelled both by Israel and the Catholic church, but he could not read it and rationally attempt to combine loyalty to Christendom with repugnance to Israel. What about its merits as a novel? as an historical novel? First, "The Apostle" is admirable in its main task—the presentation of the central character. Here is a Saul, a Saint Paul who, in his vivid, human, heroic, exalted character, is not unworthy of the man portrayed by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, by himself in his letters. Mr. Asch's familiarity with the great Rabbinic tradition and the schools of the Pharisees enables him to give a convincing interpretation of the spiritual and theological development of St. Paul. With other characters, especially the gentle Barnabas, the uncompromising John Mark, and St. Peter, the Rock, he is almost as successful. Especially good are his women, Lydia and Priscilla, while the tender portraits of the holy women of Bethany are exquisitely done. I think his St. John is a failure: and I am not satisfied with the portrait he has painted of James, the Lord's brother.

Then the novel is greatly abundant—almost too abundant—in its depiction of the world, Jewish, Christian, Pagan, in which these heroic people had to work and live: the enormous pressure of arrogance, cruelty, lust,

brutality, and intellectual insolence which came down upon that gallant, God-inspired band, sought to break it, and was broken. The novel ends with the martyrdom, in Rome, of Peter and Paul and the prophecy that the Roman power has been shattered by that double execution. Mr. Asch spares us nothing in his accounts of the horror of the slave-world, the degradation of Corinth, of Rome, of Ephesus; and there is a glowing anger in his picture of the diseased and decadent terror against which the Jews always protested, and which the Christians were to overthrow, if slowly.

Many objections could be made against "The Apostle" as an *historical* novel. Mr. Asch hesitates between a modernist and a traditional treatment of Christian origins. For instance, he accepts the modern and to me quite improbable hypothesis that "the Lord's brethren" are younger than Jesus and children of Joseph and Mary—but he keeps to the tradition in accepting St. Peter as head of the Apostles, and even credits St. Paul with the authorship of the letter to the Hebrews. Possibly he over-emphasizes the Judaizing tendency in the apostolic church: he ignores the support given to Gentile Christians by St. John, the only theologian comparable to St. Paul, and I think he might have made



Sholem Asch

a little more of the influence of the mystery religions on St. Paul's thought. A last small point: why in an English translation of a German novel, should we suffer from such pedantry as Bar Naba for Barnabas, Silo for Silas, Rab Istephon for Stephen, Chananyah for Ananias? And if we are to have Yeshua instead of Jesus, why not Yokanaan for John, which is given throughout the book as Jochanan? The translation by Maurice Samuel reads easily, though there are some odd words—e.g., "congregants" for congregation or assembly.

Excursion into Coincidence

THE HERO OF ANTIETAM. By
Eulalie Beffel. New York: E. P.
Dutton & Co. 1943. 255 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by PHILIP VAN DOREN STERN

AFTER the victorious Union troops had marched down Pennsylvania Avenue May 23 and 24, there was very little left for a Major General to do. Matthew Yawn, hero of Antietam, felt at odds with himself, for it was obvious that his glory had departed. Aging, afflicted with an ailing heart and a four-inch piece of shrapnel lodged near his spine, he took refuge in a mediocre Washington hotel expecting nothing but endless boredom for the rest of his life.

When the hotel chambermaid came willingly to his bed, the General thought he ought to marry her. At least there would be someone to take care of him . . . And then he found out that she had a young son—and a compelling desire to live in Athens, Illinois.

When the newly married couple moved there to take over the mansion the General had bought to please his

wife, they met their next-door neighbor, General Latreau, and even kind, stumbling old Matthew Yawn noticed the striking resemblance between his wife's son and that distinguished officer. From that resemblance a complicated tale of human relationships grows. General Yawn soon realizes that he has made a bad bargain in his marriage—and he also finds that General Latreau's wife is the sort of woman he had always wanted to meet.

Told sympathetically and with a great deal of talent, "The Hero of Antietam" is a remarkable first novel. It has nothing to do with the history or the politics of the post-Civil War era, but it is rich with feeling for those times. And Major General Matthew Yawn is an unusual and very honest and likable but unheroic hero. The book is fresh and genuine, a distinct departure from most novels in which the action takes place during the over-romanticized 1860's when war dominated the American scene.

WAR BONDS SAVE LIVES