

SPEAKING OF BOOKS

BILLINGS, Mont.

By J. DONALD ADAMS

YESTERDAY, as I came down through the great Judith Basin (one-time stomping ground of Charley Russell, the Montana cowboy artist, many of whose paintings—the most authentic ever done of the old West—enliven the lobby of the Northern Hotel here) I fell to thinking that maybe I shot a bit wide of the mark in what I said two weeks ago about "the homogeneity which, as a nation, we once had, and lost." Have we ever really been a homogeneous people? We were once, to a far greater degree than now, in our racial components, but were we ever fully so in our attitudes and in the values by which we lived?

In America there has always been a frontier (it lies today in Alaska, into which new settlers are pouring steadily)—and there has always been conflict between the frontier and the older settlements. Their ways have never been alike; their values, save for the love of freedom and the belief in American destiny, have never been the same. Until North and South took divergent paths economically (an industrial vs. an agricultural economy), which led them to civil war, they were actually more homogeneous than were their eastern and western divisions. They are becoming so again as the South enters its present phase of industrial expansion, but the cleavage between East and West remains. It was not this cleavage, peculiar to ourselves, that Kipling had in mind when he wrote that never the twain should meet, but one wonders sometimes whether the phrase is not equally applicable to the United States.

CERTAINLY I have been made to believe so on this journey, as I always am whenever I come West again. Another civil war in the United States seems to us unthinkable and, no doubt, lies beyond the margin of probability, but if an eco-

nomic gulf as deep as that which separated North and South should arise, it could be. Our daily press doesn't do enough to bridge the differences by way of mutual understanding, and the writers of our fiction do little more. Out of this deep-seated separation between East and West rises, of course, the question of isolationism and the equally urgent question of the relative importance for our future of Europe or the Far East. As you travel west the importance of Europe diminishes in popular conception; that holds all the way to the West Coast, even though the West Coast cities are not Western in the sense that Spokane, Denver and the smaller communities of Wyoming, Montana and Idaho are. If the West Coast looks back to the Eastern seaboard culturally, economically it has always been conscious of the lands across the Pacific.

ONE of the inevitable reactions of the traveler in the Northwest is a sharpened sense of the fundamental unity underlying not only the states which compose it but embracing also the Canadian provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. The range and direction of their interests are identical; they are parts of a gigantic and rapidly growing whole. They feel with a mounting intensity that their problems and even their attitude toward life are not understood in the East and that the capital of the United States is steadily being moved from Washington to Europe. They are as aware as anyone else of the contracted world we live in and of this continent's unavoidable global involvement, but their ideas of how we should conduct ourselves in this new situation are far from identical with those prevalent on the Eastern seaboard.

We find it hard to understand the Russians (or, more accurately, perhaps, their masters), but it seems to me we are in equally urgent need of understanding one another, and the chief burden of that need, I think, rests on the shoulders of the East. The East simply doesn't know enough about the West and makes insufficient effort to learn. In the same way the Canadians are far better informed about us than we are about them; we forget that the kid brother is getting to be a big boy now. Too many of us are ignorant of the fact that he is handling some of the problems we have in common more fairly and more intelligently than ourselves (as was the case with rationing in World War II and has always been the case in his treatment of that most trampled upon minority of them all, the American Indian).

WHAT I have been saying is, I know, very general in character, much too lacking in specific detail. This column is not the place for the elaboration that is needed. My reason for writing about these matters at all is that I believe the writers of this country, by moving in on a new literary frontier, can do a great deal to spread information and understanding where it is needed. Now and then, regularly as the equinoctial disturbance that has been messing up the weather, some critic in London or New York announces that the novel is on its last legs. Though I'd prefer a somewhat ruder and more vulgar comment, "Stuff and nonsense!" must do. If a few more novelists would get over their green-sickness and stop fiddling with best-seller formulas or figuring out new ways of shocking the daylight hours of a remarkably shock-absorbent generation, and turn their attention to some of the really meaningful phenomena of our time and country, the general falling-off in fiction sales might not be so painfully apparent.

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READERS are accustomed, at this time of year, to lists of recommended books, culled from the season's output. Somewhat tardily, but with the thought of those who may be disappointed in the literary content of their Christmas stockings, this department, which keeps one foot on older ground than the current publishing season, offers today a few not so recent titles as alternative or supplementary fare. The books to which I shall refer do not constitute a list of favorite books, but they are all, to my mind, exceptionally good ones that, for one reason or another, may have been overlooked by readers of this column.

Before I go further back, it occurs to me that many readers who have been enjoying Louis Bromfield's "Pleasant Valley" would find equal pleasure in an earlier book of his called "The Farm." I have never cared greatly for Mr. Bromfield's fiction, but the family history contained in "The Farm," in which Mr. Bromfield sets down his own American inheritance, belongs on the same shelf with Hamlin Garland's "A Son of the Middle Border." He wrote it, as the dedication informs us, for his children and their descendants; "if any one else likes it," he added, "so much the better." It is an honest and deeply felt book, with a very living series of American portraits; and it supplies the background for the return to Ohio which Mr. Bromfield has recorded in "Pleasant Valley."

ONE of the finest of American novels has been out of print for several years. "The Time of Man," by Elizabeth Madox Roberts, is shortly to be republished in an edition illustrated with woodcuts by Clare Leighton. It is my own firm conviction that this story of the tenant farmers of Kentucky, so richly indigenous, so fresh in its folk quality, so deeply perceptive in its handling of basic

human relations, will gradually take its place among the American classics. I gave a copy of this book to Stefan Zweig when he set out on the journey to Brazil which was followed by his tragic death. "I cannot understand," he wrote when he had read it, "why a writer of this caliber is not better known in Europe."

GOOD books about the American Indian are few, particularly those which make it possible for us to see him as a human being. One of the best, written nearly forty years ago, is still in print, though it is not widely known. This is "My Life as an Indian," by James Willard Schultz, author also of a large number of Indian stories for young readers. Mr. Schultz, who is still living, went out from the East to Fort Benton in the Seventies, married a Blackfoot woman, and lived the life of the tribe while the buffalo were still plentiful on the plains. George Bird Grinnell wrote in his foreword to the book, "Such an intimate revelation of the domestic life of the Indians has never before been written," and so far as I know, the same statement could be made with equal truth today. "My Life as an Indian" is one of the most fascinating pieces of American autobiographical writing.

For every five readers who enjoy dipping into Boswell's "Life of Johnson" (it being one of the books most perfectly suited to that method of reading) there is probably but one who knows his "Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides." It has always been a mystery to me how Boswell ever succeeded in persuading Dr. Johnson to make that journey, but make it he did, with surprising relish, and Boswell's record of the trip remains as one of the most entertaining accounts of travel ever written, even though nothing

occurred in the course of the journey to justify the old quip that no eighteenth-century Englishman would set forth for the Highlands without first making his will.

Joseph Conrad is one of those writers of uncommon quality who is suffering a temporary eclipse. His work was uneven, and many readers have had the misfortune of approaching him through the wrong book. Nothing of his, I think, better represents his quality than "Lord Jim," embodying, as it does, the substance of his attitude toward life. It is one of the few novels that strike a truly tragic note on a theme of timeless validity.

IT is the story, essentially, of a man who died in a desperate reaching after an ideal of conduct which had eluded him in life. A responsible officer, he abandoned a disabled ship and its passengers against principles of conduct which were sacred to him. The situation, as Conrad contrived it, presents such a tangle of concrete right and abstract wrong, that it is difficult for any reader to say what he would have done in Lord Jim's place. In a time when the element of moral conflict has been notably absent from our fiction, "Lord Jim," for many who do not know it, should be of exceptional interest.

Readers of "The Education of Henry Adams" are legion; those who know him as a letter writer are considerably fewer. The two volumes of his correspondence are among the best reading of that kind. Not only are they exceptionally readable as letters; they form also an admirable supplement to the "Education," supplying, as they do, a closer knowledge of the man who wrote that most reticent of self-analyses.

This is a random little list, but there is appeal in it, I believe, for a diversity of tastes.

DO NOT FORGET THE NEEDIEST