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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

Feliciana—Stark Young—Scribner's, New York, 1935—\$2.50

"They say"—so reads the prefatory quotation in Stark Young's new volume, *Feliciana*—"that when he comes into the parishes of Feliciana, a man, without forgetting to please others, may act to please himself most variously. We may conjecture, perhaps idly, . . . what part in this the verdure, the sun, the great river flowing past might take."

Feliciana, the happy lands, here is the true Stark Young country, whether in *Heaven Trees* or *So Red the Rose* or *Feliciana*. The happy lands are sometimes along the banks of the Mississippi and sometimes in South Texas and sometimes even in Italy. Sunny and spacious they are, and their felicity lies in the way of life they nourish. They are regions where it is the custom for the best people to live tolerantly and joyously and intelligently, without undue competition or unkindness. Any country where such a life is possible would seem praiseworthy to Stark Young; but it is clear that nowhere has he found existence so rich as in the Deep South along the Mississippi, the homeland of his forefathers and of his own childhood. Therefore, although he is a sophisticate, a cosmopolite, a modern, he takes his place among contemporary American fiction writers as the laureate of Southern leisure.

It must not be thought, however, that he writes elegies or apologies for the antebellum South as did the local colorists of a half century ago. He is one who believes wholeheartedly in the ordered plantation life, both antebellum and present day, as a still vital culture. He is concerned with showing in his stories that strong characters develop best within a great tradition; and that otherwise life becomes rootless and trivial. The interplay between vigorous individuals who demand freedom of choice, and the powerful loyalties they feel to blood and soil—this interplay is the heart of any Stark Young book.

The tradition which motivates conduct in such a novel as *So Red the Rose* is more easily felt than defined. What was it, precisely, we may ask, for which the McGehees and the Bedfords, most of whom deplored slavery as a system, gave their lives and fortunes in the war? It was, Stark Young tells us, for the high privilege of living their own lives; of solving their economic and ethical problems according to the needs of their own region; above all, for the right to refuse to be drawn into the competition and regimentation of the industrial North. Thus he aligns himself with all regionalists, whether in Santa Fe or in South Carolina or in Oklahoma.

Feliciano is a collection of sketches much like the author's *The Street of the Islands*, but richer. One group of the stories relates to the McGehees and their kin whom we have met in *So Red the Rose*. There is Cousin Micajah, who "forgot death and made death forget him" because he was loyal to something larger than himself; and there are Cousin Cad Dandridge of Parlange Plantation, and many others, all dwellers in the happy lands. These studio sketches are related to *So Red the Rose* as Galsworthy's interludes are to the *Forsyte Saga*. Done in Mr. Young's best style, they are pretty surely the best pieces in the volume.

In addition, the volume contains some portraits with Italian settings, notably "Setti Frati," subtle studies in the frustration of restless, modern people. There are several whimsical memories of Southern negroes, in a vein almost too much like Thomas Nelson Page. And, finally, some colorful sketches of South Texas: "Chile Queens," and "The Trail Driver," and "The Angelus," for example. These are brilliant, objective, a little journalistic.

Feliciano will delight Stark Young fans, although it will hardly become a best-seller. Its significance lies in a quiet reiteration of its author's faith in the tradition of individualism.

Fort Worth, Texas.

REBECCA W. SMITH.

Redder Than the Rose—Robert Forsythe—Covici Friede—\$2.00.

Redder than the Rose is a collection of essays, mostly humorous and satirical, by Robert Forsythe. Many of the essays appeared in *New Masses*, a fact which more or less establishes their tone and point of view. The only unity in the book is gained by the consistently Marxian tenor of the thought. There is no exposition of Communist dogma, but every subject touched upon is finally made to reveal, directly or by implication, what a thorough-going Marxist is forced to think about that subject.

The proletarian movement in American letters today is, in the eyes of many people, not really proletarian. The proletarian novel, for instance, is said not to be proletarian when it is a good novel, and not a good novel when it is only proletarian. But this argument always ends in a quibbling over terms. In fact, there is a growing Communist literature of great strength and vigor in the United States today, whether or not it is narrowly proletarian. Communist literature is at present chiefly concerned, not with life as it should be in a Sovietized United States, but with the frazzled, bewildered, brutalized life of the United States at present under a decaying capitalism. This revolutionary literature may not be proletarian in the strict sense, but it is thoroughly informed by the Marxian points of view even when, as in James T. Farrell's *Judgment Day*, these points of view are subtly suggested and never openly intruded upon the reader.

Mr. Forsythe belongs, then, with the converted bourgeoisie who are bent upon portraying the spiritual and cultural decadence of a capitalistic civilization. He is no proletarian. He has evidently, in his time, sat in a raccoon coat in the Yale Bowl, been behind the scenes in the Broadway theater, talked informally with politicians and capitalists, and lied about his golf score. He is not yet so much interested in the detailed and complex annals of the poor as in the disgusting antics of the upper class and the smart bourgeoisie. In "Tragedy in the Bowl" he speaks of his "re-

searches into the semi-cultural manifestations of the upper-classes." There, I think, is the key to the majority of the essays. Most of the essays are an hilarious commentary upon the vulgarity, stupidity, barbarity, of our "leaders"—a quite satisfactory answer to those would-be Bourbons who hold that a society needs leaders to set standards and give tone to society. The tawdry goings-on of our "aristocracy" are evidence enough that a *civilization* can get along without them—or better, can never get along until a very much greater intelligence and taste are allowed to set standards and give the tone.

This commentary upon decadence is sometimes seriously bitter but oftener ironically amusing. Summaries, extracts, or quotations can give no idea of the sharply-stabbing intelligence behind these sentences, or of the richness of critical ideas which the author can bring to bear upon a football game, a Beaux Arts Ball, the marriage of a Woolworth heiress, or any contemporary event that happens to show any amusing incongruity. And to Mr. Forsythe, almost any event does show either an amusing or a tragic incongruity. One need not be a Communist to laugh at the raptures and the posing of the slick-shirt-front crowd when Mlle. Boyer or Mlle. Printemps plays to New York's élite. "I am reporting this at length to show that fashion is not dead and manners are not dead and that wealth will carry on the banner of culture," Mr. Forsythe says ("Speak to Me of Love"). Even Mr. Herbert Hoover could appreciate the irony of this: "Leading the procession [at the D.A.R. Convention in Washington] was Countess Cantacuzène-Grant . . ." ("The Whites of Their Eyes"). Any self-respecting citizen will be amused by the charge in court that one of the very flowers of our aristocracy was not fit to rear her little Gloria because she locked Gloria in the attic with the rats ("The Vanderbilts and the Rats"). Any misguided soul who believes that life is real and life is earnest will agree with Mr. Forsythe about the decline in the art of the Lunts, the decadence of Noel Coward, and the fiddling-while-Rome-

burns air about the Beaux Arts Ball ("First-Act Intermission"). One may not agree that all this futile splendor offers an exact parallel to Rome on the brink of ruin, but one will be appalled at the length to which our "cultural leaders" will go to try to keep from being bored. Whose heart will not bleed for Mr. J. P. Morgan, who has had to sell six paintings, thirty-one acres of his Long Island estate, and one of his yachts ("Fare Thee Well, Annabelle")? This essay is a masterpiece of ironic understatement and not a soap-box tirade. Even if it did have a soap-box flavor, one should recognize the frequent need for a simplified appeal to humanity's sense of justice, if it has any. A writer, however, should not deal so boldly in blacks and whites. Everybody knows that Mr. Morgan has the self-sacrificing spirit of the true aristocrat, for did he not give his time to speak over radio in behalf of Al Smith's "block-aid" plan for unemployment relief? The "block-aid" plan was one whereby the inhabitants of any one city block were to assume responsibility for the support of all the unemployed in that same block! A lovely plan, based upon the idea of local self-responsibility, and in the true American tradition! Only a member of our altruistic aristocracy could ever have thought of it. So, be careful of your overdrawn statements, Mr. Forsythe; we need the fine leadership of our upper-crust.

The silly spectacle goes on. Other persons than Communists have noted the ludicrous situation of ermined dowagers with lorgnettes appealing to *hoi polloi* to come to the rescue of Mr. Otto Kahn's Metropolitan Opera ("Land of Sweet Lorgnettes"). These aristocrats, by the way, are supposed to have a sense of humor, while a Communist is so deadly serious as never to appreciate how screamingly funny he is with his long whiskers, tattered clothes, and dull, serious opinions. F. P. A., court-jester to the coupon-clippers, who read Mrs. Ogden Reid's *New York Herald Tribune*, no longer can get even a Liberal very much excited over his crusades against dry-sweeping and noisy trucks

and in favor of visible house numbers. Mr. Forsythe is right. A great talent is going to waste, as it did in the case of Ring Lardner, who with an acid tongue and keen mind never turned his great powers to any end ("Aged Bard Takes His Stand"). Let the bourgeoisie bury their heads in shame if this statement be true: The "sadism, morbidity, and bestiality" of the Hauptmann trial are symptomatic of capitalistic society trying "to spew from itself all the pent-up venom from which it is dying" ("Five-Star Final").

At least two essays represent personal attacks. Mr. H. L. Mencken gets a good scorching in a Menckenesque style ("In Defense of Mr. Mencken"). Mr. Forsythe's attitude toward Mencken, Nathan, and Lewis is, I believe, the usual Communist's scorn for these apostates to the cause of revolution. "Alex—the Pooh" (Alexander Woolcott) is our little friend Winnie, grown up to be pudgy and forty-five but still oh! so winsome and whimsical. The method in these two essays is simply to range the victim in a list with one's other aversions (a trick very well known to Mencken himself) in the hope that the malodorous association will thoroughly damn him. Thus: "... seldom in history has there been a greater triumvirate than the one to which Mr. Mencken now belongs: Nietzsche, Mencken, and Bernarr Macfadden." Or thus: "The place of inanity in our national life also lacks proper statistical foundation. It is generally agreed that we rank well among the nations of the world in this respect but in the absence of complete figures on the audiences addressed by Arthur Brisbane, Mr. Woolcott, and John B. Kennedy, we have nothing but conjecture on which to base our claims. When we have added those who consider Will Rogers a philosopher to those who consider Walter Lippmann a thinker, we have a basis upon which to start, but we shall have to tabulate the females who have swooned over Mr. Clark Gable before we can be certain that our calculations are not out of line." That, I submit, is the good old stick-out-your-tongue, call-'em-names method of Mencken himself. It is too facile a method, too loose in its

workmanship, to be finally effective. It disposes of its victims in a hurly-burly way, by brusquely pushing them aside instead of puncturing and deflating them. But that title, "Alex—the Pooh" is very near genius.

What some people call the intransigence of the Communists, but what the Communists themselves no doubt call their strict adherence to principle, is plainly revealed in this book. I refer to their contempt for Liberals, Socialists, and other tender humanitarians who can see the evils of the present order but who shudder at the thought of any real change. In short, all non-Marxian radicals are on the wrong track. *Redder than the Rose* is very severe upon Stuart Chase, the Technocrats, and the followers of Veblen—the "social evolution" radicals who believe that some day presto! we'll all hand ourselves over to the engineers who will run us efficiently for use and not for profit. This argument must sound as silly to a class-struggle Marxian as the cooings of Walter Lippmann about a "benevolent capitalism." "The Little King" has to do with the evolution of Fiorello La Guardia, present mayor of New York, former white hope of the Liberals, from a supposedly militant reformer to a compromiser to an ally of the bankers. The essay is a little lesson in how hopeless an undertaking it is to try to change the *system* from the inside. The bankers always win and the Liberals are always being jilted and disillusioned but always coming back for more. It is the same conclusion that Lincoln Steffens' *Autobiography* comes to. If, as a famous English Liberal, H. J. Laski, has said, Communism is a complete religion; and if, as Kenneth Burke says, only a movement that has the fervor of a religion can save the world; then the Communists are right in their intransigence towards mild reformists, for a religion has its dogma and its closed membership, and those who are not for it (however closely to it they may stand) are against it. And this is the lesson that Heywood Broun has learned, I believe, after years of wrangling and quibbling. It is perhaps more true than it is comfortable for a Liberal to admit,

that when the real breakdown and the real crisis come, only the thorough-going Marxists will be left to stand against Fascism.

Let no one get the idea that *Redder than the Rose* is only for Communists. Any reader at all with any sense for incongruity or any love of satire can enjoy the book. There is, after all, on the surface, nothing that intelligent Bourbon critics have not been saying for a long time relative to the breakdown of culture as reflected in our press, our movies, our radio, our mob hysteria—in short, the way in which all our activities get their color and tone from our sordid commercialism. The reader will find much that is familiar, little that is new or strange, in this book. But he will find one thing that is more or less new—a solidifying and congealing of belief which gives the satire simplicity and, consequently, effectiveness. Satire flourishes when a norm of belief is held, when departures from the norm can be excoriated sharply and tellingly. Confused Liberals can portray incongruity only against a background of vague ideas as to what is intelligent, civilized, proper, in good taste. The Communist can portray incongruity against a background of solidly formulated beliefs.

Redder than the Rose is not all satire. At the end are three essays, "The Long View," "All Hectic on the Potomac," and "Gangway for the Future," which are not in the bantering vein, but which are an eloquent appeal to all humanitarians to open their eyes, see the major evil of modern society, and set it right. Many a reader, of course, will balk at Mr. Forsythe's assumption that all evils are reducible to the Marxian formulas; but any reader who is still capable of responding to an appeal to his sense of justice and right will heartily admire the passion and the conviction with which Forsythe takes his stand.

DUDLEY WYNN.

Albuquerque.

Navajo Winter Nights—Dorothy Childs Hogner—Nelson, Pub.—\$1.50.

If you are an adult and still remember with pleasure the days when you pored over Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit, you will be delighted with these animal stories drawn from Navajo Indian folk lore. If you are fortunate enough to have a child of about nine, you may share with him your pleasure. Here is Reynard the Fox re-incarnated in the person of Coyote; here are giants and magic enough to enchant any imaginative child.

It is not because Dorothy Hogner is my friend, nor that I had the pleasure of seeing these tales in manuscript, that I am so enthusiastic about them, but because I feel that they open up for children a new, strange, and fascinating world of magic lore, stories told, withal, with such a masterful simplicity that they cannot fail to attract children.

Forty-three stories, none of them too long. Creation myths, tales of Long Man, but, above all, stories of the rascal, Coyote, and his tricks. Fascinating, all of them, their charm enhanced by the striking illustrations of Nils Hogner, fine artist, with a thorough knowledge of the Indians of the Southwest, gained at first hand. In all, a beautiful book and one to buy for the children.

GEORGE ST. CLAIR.

Albuquerque.

My Life on the Frontier—Miguel Otero—Press of the Pioneers, 1935.

Hon. Miguel Antonio Otero, former Governor of New Mexico, has written a valuable autobiography concerning his eventful life on the frontier from 1864 to 1882, which might well serve as a model authentic historical biography—a sort of lifelike heroic classic—neither too tame nor too wild and wooly but impressive with its great truths and its intelligent handling of important facts which grip the readers' attention as no fiction could.

I, for one critic, can readily understand why such a forceful writer prefers to deal in facts instead of colorful

Western fiction, for Mr. Otero, like O. Henry, could truthfully say, "My own life is far more exciting and thrilling than any fiction I could imagine."

The book, *My Life on the Frontier*, is one of a series the distinguished New Mexican author intends to write for the enjoyment and enlightenment of posterity, and the present volume is artistically printed by The Press of the Pioneers, Inc., New York, in a limited edition of seven hundred and fifty copies, all autographed by Miguel A. Otero, thus enhancing their intrinsic value. This first volume appropriately ends with the account of the death of the author's illustrious father, Don Miguel A. Otero I, which occurred in Las Vegas, on Decoration Day, May 30, 1882.

After reading the first volume, a host of appreciative readers will determine to read the second volume which will deal with facts in connection with Mr. Otero's three terms as Governor of New Mexico.—The daring author promises to "Let the chips fall where they may."

The author knew Uncle Dick Wooten, of Raton Pass fame; Wild Bill Hickock, Buffalo Bill, Kit Carson, Clay Allison, and other western characters of which he writes in a manner that throws new light on their colorful careers. It seems that he always saw some of the best traits of character in even the outlaws and killers. Of Uncle Dick Wooten he writes: "Uncle Dick was a fine old man, always kind and gentle, and as hospitable as a Southern colonel. He was in no sense a bad man, as the term was understood in the West. As a frontiersman, Uncle Dick was much on the order of Kit Carson though their means of livelihood was quite different, Carson being a noted scout and Uncle Dick a trapper, hunter, road builder, and Indian trader."

The book abounds in intriguing episodes and incidents of the real Old West and demonstrates beyond a doubt that the Oteros were builders without a peer—true pioneers. Many of the amusing incidents are "too good to keep" as the editor of Satire magazine once wrote an aspiring young author while returning a would-be contribution, but I pre-

fer that the reader get them first hand. However, in closing, I wish to quote Mr. Otero's description of George Thompson, operator of a monte layout in Las Vegas:

"During Christmas Day many years before the railroad reached the state, Sam Kaiser and Charlie Kitchen broke the bank and laid Uncle George on the shelf for the time being. He caught his second wind the next day, however; borrowed a bank roll from somebody; reopened business at the old stand and before the midnight bells sounded at Father Pinal's cathedral up the street, (calling the Faithful to Midnight Mass,) George Thompson had not only got all his money back, but had made a profit of \$22,000 on the play of the day. It was like picking up shining nuggets on the golden streets, and Thompson was wise enough to know when to quit, for the next morning Jim Olney hauled him out on the Barlow & Sanderson Stage Coach for Trinidad. There he married the widow of Colonel George Bent, got a start in the cattle business, reared a family and became rich—all because he knew when to quit and what to do at the right time."

Even a book review critic of an authentic Western should get the above point and know when to quit, so *adios*.

CLAY VADEN.

Quemado, N. M.

Puro Mexicano—Edited by J. Frank Dobie—Texas Folk-Lore Society Publications, Number XII, 1935.

The evaluation of such a book as *Puro Mexicano* calls for two types of criticism: one dealing with the book as a whole, and the other a more specific comment of each contribution. As the title implies, the content is supposed to be purely Mexican, but unfortunately, however, not all contributions are Mexican, and because of this lack of uniformity, the book suffers somewhat. The highly imaginary legend of Holy Ghost Canyon and the inaccurate account of a metamorphosis which does not occur are hardly in conformity

with a book so excellently written. Neither of these two essays are Mexican, and the Spanish story collected in Taos, while it is interesting from a dialectal viewpoint, lacks evidence and treatment of a theory that it purports to evince.

Mr. Aiken made a fortunate decision in translating the folk tales into English. The translations have not lost the spirit and content of the original but have made the material accessible to a larger reading public. The phonetic transcriptions that some folklorists insist on are of interest only to phoneticians, and it is a bit selfish to insist that folk material be written for only a few technicians whose works have no public interest. The essential part of folk tales is the content, and Mr. Aiken has wisely scrapped the facetiousness of erudition in order to propagate a good story that speaks more eloquently of the folk than do a few phonetic nuances.

It is about time that our folk material is presented in popular fashion in order to reach the very folk from which it emanates. A library shelf is hardly a place for material of this sort.

The stories of Messrs. Dobie and Woodhull indicate the thorough understanding that they have of the Mexican. There is a certain roguishness in Mr. Woodhull's *Juan Goes to Heaven* that is the very essence of popular Spanish literature. The Spanish phrases interspersed throughout the narrative add color to the story and at the same time indicate that the author has not lost the flavor of the tale. The tale of *The Bullet Swallower* by Miss Gonzalez, on the other hand, has lost a good deal of the flavor of the soil. In an effort to be literary, Miss Gonzales has struck a compromise which borders closely on the dime novel. Had she given the story in a straightforward manner like the others in the book, she might have maintained the true Mexican element. Her story leaves us with the impression that it might have been a good tale had not the collector been so intrusive.

The old time usages that Miss Crook offers are rather commonplace and are treated in a very unscholarly fashion. There are any number of customs in New Mexico that would have been of greater interest. Her collection of material does not show an extensive knowledge of her subject.

The stories of Messrs. Aiken, Dobie, Woodhull, as well as Mr. Taylor's collection of songs are excellent enough to justify the entire book. As a whole, it is one of the most interesting and best prepared along this line. Frank Dobie merits our congratulations for his publication.

ARTHUR CAMPA.

Albuquerque.

Adobe in Sunlight—Farona Konopak—The Galleon Press—\$2.50.

There is art and there is poetry in the air in New Mexico. Those who come here catch the vibrations of one or the other or both. Farona Wendling Konopak felt its beauties and rhythms so deeply that she has expressed her reactions in poems, recently published in a volume called *Adobe in Sunlight*, by the Galleon Press. The publication came as a reward for Mrs. Konopak's having won first prize in The American States Anthology Competition in 1934. The volume was given the title of this prize winning poem:

"Squatting low beneath the brooding sky
The little houses, spawned from the sun-soaked soil,
Hug the scarred earth from which they sprung.
Shoulder to shoulder they huddle around the plaza
Or stagger tipsily along the humpy road.
Through endless days the beaten sun pounds down
Soaking them in light,—spreading a golden glaze
Over the hand-patted walls. Adobes in sunlight are not
Houses of mud—they are native hearts reflecting
The throbbing life of the land from which they sprung."

In her poem *New Mexico*, she declares this hold that New Mexico grips upon those who come to her:

"Unconquered,
New Mexico stamps her brand
On her people—
Rico, paisano, alike.

Lightning rips at her mountains' peaks;
 Thunder rocks her valleys;
 The sun sucks rivers
 And burns the mesas' grasses.
 To God alone New Mexico
 Bows her head.

But the people?
 They are never the same!
 Though they leave the land,
 To which they came,
 They bear forever the strange tattoo
 That land can do."

Especially savoring of the country are "Penitente Hermanos," "In Chimayo," and "El Santuario." One finds in these poems the real essence of the land. All through the volume one feels that Mrs. Konopak truly loves this state of her partial adoption. As a whole the poems are the expressions of a true poet. Here and there one will find a line amateurish in feeling, a strained rhyme like *tattoo* and *can do*, or an unusual word making itself conspicuous among a group of others, simple and easy-flowing.

Mrs. Konopak is happiest when writing about New Mexico; for the few poems in the volume that do not deal expressly with things of this land do not reach the standard of those that do treat of New Mexico.

Adobe in Sunlight is a worthy addition to New Mexico verse.

ELIZABETH WILLIS DEHUFF.

Santa Fe.