

In the fall of 1933, at the end of my first year as editor of the book page of the Daily Oklahoman, I began a custom which I have maintained ever since, that of compiling a list of books published by Oklahomans during the preceding twelve months. I was surprised to find that the year had brought forth a harvest of about thirty-six books. Strangely enough, every succeeding year has produced almost exactly the same number.

It may safely be taken for granted that this young state, thought by our eastern friends to be inhabited chiefly by oil millionaires and blanket Indians, has a steady literary output of three books each month. Most of these are published by the standard publishing houses of the east, and since these people are most certainly not in business for their health, their willingness to gamble fifty to seventy-five thousand dollars a year on the work of Oklahoma authors has a significance which cannot be denied.

A second indication of the value of the Oklahoma literary output may be found in the reviews given these books by the leading book review publications of the United States. Almost without exception books by Oklahomans receive what is called a good press. Oklahoma has produced one Pulitzer Prize winner, and Lynn Rigg's latest play was a runner-up in the last selection. Such magazines as the New York Times, the New York Herald-Tribune, the Saturday Tribune of Literature, the Chicago Tribune, and the Christian Science Monitor are not chary of applying to Oklahoma books such phrases as "a fine performance, unique in its class, entertaining and readable, he speaks as one having authority." And Oklahoma has produced at least one Book of the Month choice, the only such distinction ever to be achieved by a resident of our part of the Southwest, and the only such distinction ever to be bestowed on a book published by a university press.

But sporadic excellence might be taken for granted; almost every state produces an occasional good writer. The amazing thing about Oklahoma is the uniformly high level of achievement, the fecundity, and the vitality of Oklahoma literary movements. How is it possible for a state as young as this one, as admittedly crude and unformed as this one to write and to write so well and to write so much? It is not an uncommon thing for Eastern cities to voice such sentiments as these, "Some day the Easterners will have to wake up to the fact that Oklahomans are creating a literature of their own." (This from the Philadelphia Public Ledger).

I do not know the answer to this puzzle, but I do know that admittedly Oklahoma is just emerging from the pioneer chrysalis; admittedly it is absorbed in the struggle for life and the community as a whole has telescoped the good and the bad of a hundred years of American experi-

Literary trends in Oklahoma

(Condensed from a public lecture)

By KENNETH C. KAUFMAN

menting with democracy into a generation. Because we are struggling for existence as a political entity, change is the very essence of our political being. We are unsettled, volatile characters, quick on the trigger; we are likely to try anything once. We are engaged in a constant battle and are likely to be so engaged for some time to come over the question of whether we shall maintain our identity as a social unit or transform it into something else. But isn't this, in some sense, a good sign? Isn't it an evidence of vitality, of inexhaustible strength, of fertile fancy, of resilience, of a spiritual heritage as deep and inexhaustible as our soil, that we are capable of imagining so many foolish and absurd experiments, of withstanding them, of going through periodical cyclones in our political and economic structure, and emerging almost as good as new from all of them, better than ever from most of them. But why not?

What is the chief characteristic of the pioneer? Is it not above all things else a perpetual urge to seek new horizons, to see greener fields beyond his own fences, to go and find them? That is what brought us Oklahomans to this new country. We are of many races, of all creeds, we range in cultural equipment from the products of the world's greatest universities to the rankly illiterate. But the one lode that draws us all on is the magic of the untried; the one characteristic common to us all is the unshaken conviction that nothing is impossible. Our very cosmopolitanism, the fact that we are a melting-pot even beyond the rest of the United States, the clash and process of adjustment of the European with the American Indian, the Yankee and the Southerner, the New Yorker and the Arkansawyer, the Kansas and the Texan has tended to bring out those very qualities in our social life which make for tension, drama, color, contrast—in a word, the ingredients of nervous, sinewy, bold writing.

And finally it must inevitably be true that any pioneer has in him some of the bones of the poet. To be sure, the pioneers were actuated by the hope of gain, and many of them felt an irresistible impulse to be where the sheriff was not; but no

less surely were they actuated by an articulate love of beauty; they were drawn on by the mysteries of unlimited blue distance, by the poetry and the majesty of mountain and forest, by the opportunity of reckless daring for its own sake. The Oklahomans of today have not quite recovered from that feeling of wonder and joy which goes with the birth of all new and strange and magnificent things, the poetry of being in the beginning of things.

And there is a final significance in the literary harvest of Oklahoma: it wells up from what we are, but it also wells up from where we are. We write not only of the hills and valleys of the human heart, but we also write of the red-banked canyons, of the desolate sand hills, of the endless sweep of grassy plains, of timbered mountain slopes, and black-jack ridges.

Passing over the bulky and extremely important body of technical and semi-technical writings produced by Oklahomans which are important in their fields, we have left the following classes of literature which may properly be called inventive or creative: romantic or fictional biography, the novel, the drama, short story and poetry.

I am not making any attempt to be comprehensive, but I should like to call attention to two biographers who have set a high mark in the type of biography which does not merely dig up and record facts, but which rather attempts to recreate an epoch—John Joseph Mathews and Stanley Vestal. Mathews' book "Wah-Kon-Tah," is on the surface the biography of Major Laban Miles, but in reality it is a long prose poem, an attempt to understand the best of two races, the Osage Indians and the American Pioneer. It includes passages that are the essence of lyric grief and high tragedy.

Mr. Vestal has on the other hand what I should call the heroic type of mind rather than the lyrical. By this I mean not that he is braver either physically or morally than another man but that he has a large, elemental, objective view of the world and of life. His *Kit Carson*, *Sitting Bull*, *Warpath*, are histories which, perhaps for the first time in the entire course of American literature, have given the Indian his true definition, not as a ferocious savage or a super-man as painted by James Fenimore Cooper, nor yet, an abandoned degenerate as modern realism pictures him, but as a normal, likeable, respectable human being, living a normal, respectable, human sort of life. Now heroism consists not entirely in the things we do, but in the way we speak and think of them, and Mr. Vestal has, more than anyone else I know, the power of casting the glamor of heroism about heroic deeds. There are not many biographies in American literature which have such a combination of heroic stature, charm, accuracy and colorfulness as Mr. Vestal's books.

The drama, the novel, and the short

story in Oklahoma are in what I should call the embryonic stage. I suppose our two foremost representatives of the short story are Jennie Harris Oliver and George Milburn, two writers as far apart as the poles in temperament and approach to life. Mrs. Oliver is one of the best of her class, but the type of story in which she excels, the type which appears in the popular women's magazines, dealing altogether with the problems of middle class family life and romantic love, and demanding necessarily a happy ending, has its inevitable and obvious limitations.

George Milburn, on the other hand, belongs to what has been facetiously referred to as the bad-boy school of realism. He is one of five or six foremost short story writers in America. His incisive portraits of small-town types, usually unpleasant, are masterpieces of their kind, but they also have their limitations and these limitations are especially apparent in his novel, "Catalogue," just released from the press. It seems to me that the chief defect of this novel, also the chief defect of his short stories, lies in a refusal to recognize that there are people, even in small towns, who have adjusted their human relationships and have lived normal and decent lives.

In the novel, oddly enough, the palm must go to what is perhaps the most sophisticated form of fiction, the most highly developed technically, the detective story. There are four Oklahomans who have written eminently successful detective novels that I know of: Todd Downing has published his fifth mystery with a Mexican background; Newton Gayle, the alias of a well-known Oklahoma poet, has published three, all with a setting in the Caribbean Islands; Stanley Vestal has done one excellent mystery; and Dorothy Cameron Disney, of Muskogee, has just published a yarn called "Death in the Back Seat," which seems to me to bid fair to place her in the front rank of American mystery story writers.

The novel proper has been unfortunately a sporadic affair in Oklahoma. It seems to me that our most serious novelist and probably the most successful, is John Skiskison. His earlier novels, "Blackjack Davy" and "Wild Harvest" were immature, but his "Brothers Three" issued last year is a well balanced, satisfactory picture of a certain section and a certain period in Oklahoma, and it is written from the cosmopolitan point of view.

Our output of novels is altogether too small, and our novelists have too frequently written about every place but Oklahoma, and when they have written about Oklahoma, they have fallen into the error of Miss Edna Ferber, they have confused facts with the truth. Now it is a fact that we have had in our past some ingenious lady politicians, some wild-eyed gun-toting lawyers and some cowboys who turned bandit, but that is not the truth of Oklahoma. The truth of Oklahoma lies in the million or two sane normal

people who came here to make their homes and not to make asses of themselves, to build schools, to educate their children, to lay deep broad foundations of a lasting civilization.

The rich and deep raw material of Oklahoma needs to be exploited in about twenty novels and a hundred short stories every year for several years to come.

As far as the drama is concerned, Lynn Riggs is doing for his native state what our novelists and short story writers ought to be doing in their fields. As he himself says in *Green Grow the Lilacs*: "The intent has been to recapture in a kind of nostalgic glow the great range of mood which characterized the old folk songs and ballads I used to hear in my Oklahoma childhood—their quaintness, their sadness, their robustness, their simplicity, their hearty or bawdy humors, their sentimentalities, their melodrama, their touching sweetness."

He is our only dramatist to reach Broadway, but he has proved to be too delicate, too fairy-like to please Broadway except in his latest play, "The Russet Mantle," which was prominently mentioned for the Pulitzer Prize last year. Mr. Barrett Clark classes him among the four major living dramatists.

We come finally to poetry, and here, surprisingly enough, we find a greater output and a higher level than we do in prose, this in spite of the fact that today nobody reads poetry; or at least nobody buys it. There are four or five Oklahoma poets whose work has reached a level which will compare with that of any poets in America, with the exceptions of Edna St. Vincent Millay, Robert Frost, A. E. Robinson and Carl Sandburg.

Lynn Riggs has a singularly pure lyrical gift; he has published, in addition to his plays, one volume of verse, *The Iron Dish*. Muna Lee's *Sea Change* contains some of the finest love lyrics ever written; John McClure is a poet of pure music whose *Airs and Ballads* is now a collectors' item, and Stanley Vestal's *Fandango* is a collection of the most stirring ballads of modern times.

There are dozens of other people who write creditable verse; it would be better for them, of course, if they wrote something else, but if they must write poetry, they ought to write on terms near at hand, not that they should attempt to embalm local color, but that they should write what lies nearest their hand and nearest their heart. Like Montaigne, they should be able to find the whole world in their door-yards.

I have not even attempted to cover the whole field of creative writing in Oklahoma, but merely to indicate some of the directions which it seems to me to be taking. Our literary accomplishment is not inconsiderable; the National Association of Book Publishers recently issued a statement to the effect that Oklahoma produces more good literature in proportion

to population than any other state except New York. Our literary achievements would be the envy of many an older state. But if our young writers will consistently and earnestly exploit our cultural heritage, our literary future will be far more brilliant than our literary past.



With the faculty

Thirty University faculty members are listed in the 1936-37 edition of "Who's Who in America." Three new faculty names listed in the book are Dr. Charles E. Decker, professor of paleontology; Dr. Charles M. Perry, head of the department of philosophy; and Dr. Floyd L. Vaughan, professor of business administration. Joseph Bentonelli, opera star, and Josh Lee, United States senator-elect, are two Sooner graduates who were placed in the volume this year for the first time.

A group of faculty members who participated in Gov. E. W. Marland's conference on the farm tenantry problem in Oklahoma included Dr. W. B. Bizzell, Dr. A. B. Adams, Dr. Leonard Logan, Dr. John B. Ewing, Dr. Cortez A. M. Ewing, Dr. J. J. Rhyne, Dr. Frederick L. Ryan and Edward C. Petty.

A University Opera association—believed the first of its kind in America—has been organized. President W. B. Bizzell is chairman of the council which will act as the governing body for all activities connected with production of opera at the University. Other members are Lewis S. Salter, Oscar B. Jacobson, Rupel J. Jones, C. F. Giard, Paul S. Carpenter, Barre Hill and Spencer Norton.

Salaries of University professors have not kept pace with the rise in living costs during the last few years, according to reports made at a meeting of the University chapter of the American Association of University Professors. It was brought out in the discussion that salaries paid professors had remained almost stationary, while living costs recently had risen 15 to 20 percent.

The University R.O.T.C. has a lieutenant colonel on its staff for the first time in its history. Major Reese M. Howell, who came to Norman in July, 1935, from Atlanta, Ga., to become commandant of the Sooner military unit, recently received word of his promotion to rank of lieutenant colonel.

A bill providing for unemployment insurance for Oklahoma under the new federal social security act has been prepared by Dr. John B. Ewing, assistant professor of economics, at the request of a group of legislators interested in introducing such a bill at the next session of the legislature.

Dr. R. L. Huntington, associate professor of petroleum engineering, has been appointed vice-chairman of the research committee for the petroleum division of the American Institute of Mining and Metallurgical Engineers.