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The Home Front

The Black Boys

A COUPLE of weeks ago I was writing about novels as a road to understanding. All around me are groups of people who are different. Different interests, fears. Fear is dangerous. The realistic novel goes beyond peculiarity of speech, dress and manner. It takes in little men and women who may be our neighbors but who are kept alien to us by their words and ways. We begin to see things from their point of view. We realize that inside they are not very different. Because it preys on us to sympathy and understanding a contendingly written work of fiction may be worth a dozen books on social theory.

I was saying things like this in connection with a discussion of Two Solitudes, Hugh MacLennan’s fine novel about the Canadian French. Since that time people in this country have been stirred and shocked by Black Boy, the autobiography of Richard Wright (Harper and Brothers, $3.50). The Negroes are our greatest unalienated and misunderstood group. Through this book — through a number of others published during the past year — we have a window opened straight into their hearts. It is important that white folks take a look through that window and take careful note of what they see.

Our friend, W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, raises a question as to whether this is straight biography or notion in a biographical form. To biographers of Richard Wright the question is important, but not to us. Wright is a talented and successful writer. From the vantage point of his present success and popularity he looks back and — with what were the exact details of his existence — he sees his life as a hard and better time. His pictures of the people, whites and blacks, most epitomize the impression which carried with him into manhood.

In reading Native Son I had my suspicions voiced by the sketch of the Communist leader. The man was too uncertain, too wise, too devoted. Nobody could be as good as that. Having read Black Boy, I can understand how Richard Wright came to draw that picture. He came North bleeding from a hundred wounds suffered by his race. That happened to him later on is to be discussed in a later volume. This one takes him only to the moment when he departed from Negerphia for Chicago. I can easily imagine how the Chicago Communist took possession of him and gave him the recognition for which he yearned. All the world knows from his Atlantic Monthly article how that brief honeymoon ended. Richard Wright is direct, honest, violent. He could not be fooled by anyone.

Lack of Passion?

I NOTICE that Negro writers are more cautious than whites in expressing approval of this book. On the face of it this might strike you as strange. Here is a dynamic and ambitious young writer. He is in his early thirties. Despite all his handicaps, it is seldom that an American author achieves such distinction in so few years. He may go far as a popular writer than any other American Negro has ever gone. You would think that other Negroes would rally round him, boost him, hurry him along to a position from which he can get the ear of the entire reading public. Instead of this, they accept him and his book with reservations.

This attitude is easy to understand. I confess that I blinked when I read this sentence (page 31): “After I had acquired the shocks of childhood, after the habit of reflection had been born in me, I used to wallow over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our friendship, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our tradition.” Absence of real kindness among Negroes? I have known hundreds of them. I would have said that on the average they are more warmly affectionate to relatives and friends than whites. But who am I to argue with a colored man about such a topic?

I can see that a good many Negroes will be suspicious of this book, afraid of the effect which it will have on white readers. For it presents a picture of the deep South which is terrible. Other writers, both white and colored, have tried to play up Negro virtues. That is natural and right. These people, 22,000,000 of them, have been generally played down. Their talents, ambitions, hopes have been disregarded. Our white treatment of them is based on a widely accepted notion of innate inferiority. To counteract this state of affairs it is natural that advocates of equal opportunity should swing the other way. White exclusiveness, especially, tend to overlook every evidence of talent or Milton. Now comes this ruthless Richard Wright. He is a black Erskine Caldwell. To him whole sections of Mississippi and Arkansas are nothing more than an endless Tobacco Road. He defends himself against his masts with a knife and his uncle with a razor-blade. In all his experience in church and school he never makes a friend. The attitude of his relatives is mean, low, sour. The whites are just as inimical as the blacks and more dangerous because of the power and prejudice which give backing even to the kindest of them. To hundreds of Negro men and women this must seem like adding literary insult to centuries of social and economic injury.

Can’t Be a Slave

But I am proud of Richard Wright. America did, after all, produce him, and he is man enough to write out of his own and without regard to what either blacks or whites think about him. He is an authentic artist and he demands the freedom which is necessary to artists. He cannot write as a Negro carefully calculating what will be the effect of his writing on public opinion. That may lies meediness. Conformity he simply cannot stand.

I recall seeing a tall, handsome and dignified Negro walking along a street down in Richmond, Virginia. Suddenly a white man approached from the opposite direction. Instantly the Negro was transformed into an obsequious, quivering nigger. He bent his head and cringed and uttered degrading sounds. The white man strutted on his way. The Negro straightened up and became once more the handsome and self-respecting human being but now, it seemed to me, with infinite sadness added to the lines of his face.

Wright speaks of the “scientific controlling mechanism” which shuts off the minds and emotions and actions of the Negro. From boyhood he objected to it, rebelled against it. “It seemed to me,” he says, “that I was in any way an inferior being.”

The origin of his impulse to rebellion is never indi
cated. There is the continuous implication that it was instinctive. But whatever the spring of experience from which it started, the impulse is overpowering, irresistible. It rages up so hotly that it burns friends as well as foes. Since the form of expression is literature, this man cannot be guided and guided by all of the injunctions that would fledge in a teacher or social worker. He says his way in matter which is hot or hard. Like a dozen other novelists whom we have had during the past two decades, he feels a positive need of hurting. He is vigorously and violently asserting equality. Tired souls are alarmed, but that hardly matters.