

A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

A HOMER OF THE LOGGING CAMPS

By Percy MacKaye

THE author of "Paul Bunyan" — our own James Stevens, born in Iowa and raised in the spacious outdoors of the great west — well merits to be known, by this epic work, as the prose Homer of that American mythology which has sprung gigantically into being from the campfires of our vast timberlands during the last half century.

From generations of forest lore, whose dim origins are lost in dateless times and distant lands, from countless minor tales and anecdotes, he has builded a major native epic, through the cloud capped contours of which emerge a few enormous forms, centring in one mythic Colossus — Paul Bunyan, the logger-dreamer of "Real America".

The ancient demigods of the "Iliad" and "Odyssey" — with their battles, intrigues, feasts, and voyages in a still uncharted world — were not more heroically indigenous to the imaginations of the Greeks than these grotesquer titans of forest fairy lore have been to the day dreams of a million American lumberjacks, who are even now but just rubbing their eyes to stare with dumb yearning after their departing heroes — passing away forever before the "evil inventions" of "Ford Fordsen", the genius of modernity.

For Mr. Stevens's acknowledgments to anecdotal sources of his form of the legend, the reader is referred to his introduction. A very worthwhile comparison with this preface and its

cited material may be had in the foreword of Esther Shephard to her own significant volume "Paul Bunyan" — an admirably conscientious setting down, from the lips of lumbermen in their own speech, of those extravagant logging tales, many of which James Stevens has embodied in his work.

A comparison of the two books will reveal Mr. Stevens's method as an artist and the excellence of his style, vitally plastic and fecund with imaginative insight and observation. His epic is told in a fluent and vivid prose, simple, powerful, clear and un-self-conscious, which shows him to be an accomplished master of his medium, a native writer likely to rank very high in future works.

The only regrets of this reviewer are, first, that Mr. Stevens has allowed (in the book's later chapters) certain transient journalistic allusions to invade his folk theme in a work else permanent as true literature; and secondly, that he has not more often permitted his own spirited prose to cite the native speech modes of his woodsmen, of which he shows such imaginative, first hand knowledge as in this volcanic eruption of Paul Bunyan at the outset of his fight with Hels Helsen, the Big Swede:

"By the blazing sands of the hot high hills of hell, and by the stink and steam of the low swamp water, how in the name of the holy old mackinaw, how in the names of the whistling old, roaring old, jumping old, bald-headed, blue-bellied jeem cris and the dod durned dod do you figure you're wearing any shining crown of supreme authority in this man's camp? Say!!"

"Aye tank so", said Hels Helsen calmly. "Suffering old saints and bleary-eyed fathers!"

"Yah, aye tank so."

Volumes might be written (and probably will be) on the ethnic sources of the Paul Bunyan legend. The principle of its childlike humoresques is the dislocation of size values. Here are lineal traces of Gulliver and Gargantua; of Thor's boastings in the Elder Edda; of "Beowulf" and the "Grimm's Tales" giants; of Münchhausen and Hercules.

A wild blend of the Babylonian with the Canuck might be discovered in that preposterous "Babe, the Blue Ox, who measured forty-two axhandles and a plug of chewing tobacco between the horns". An analogous blue cattle beast of other sex and less grandiose dimensions was tracked, though never corralled, by this reviewer, on his travels in the Kentucky Mountains, lured by an old fiddler's snatch, which sang as follows:

I had an old blue cow and her name were
Luck;
Ary time I milked her she run over the cup.
I fed her on coren, oats and hay;
And milked her twenty-five times a day.

But the reader must turn without fail to Mr. Stevens's volume for the delectable wonders of Babe and his master, Paul Bunyan, with their superlative associates, Johnny Inkslinger, Hels Helsen, "The Bull of the Woods", Hot Biscuit Slim, Pea Soup Shorty, Sourdough Sam, Jonah Wiles, "the legless logger", and the impossible others.

In prose narrative Mr. Stevens has written an unforgettable poem: the epic of a vast overgrown dreamer — America — who has laid waste his dominion in the blind exuberance of his own dreams of "Work — Work — Work". In the humorous-pathetic legend of this dreamer of the woods the imaginative folk cultures of the world, which we have darkly stamped out in our immigrant-teeming cities, have interbred

and happily flowered from the wild timberlands to splendid native stature — in this book of James Stevens.

Paul Bunyan. By James Stevens. Alfred A. Knopf.

Paul Bunyan. By Esther Shephard. Seattle: McNeil Press.