THE DEVOTION OF JOHN G. NEIHARDT

By Frank Luther Mott

IN a little village out in the Ozarks, John G. Neihardt is engaged in writing an epic cycle of the American frontier. The task is one calling for the highest powers; yet Neihardt is a very unostentatious sort of man, a lover of informality, disciple of the simple and the real. Short in stature, he would not be noticed in a crowd; but let him take off his slouch hat and look you in the eyes, and you realize he is Somebody. Another Zacchean, David Lloyd George, once said that in Wales, where he came from, they measure a man's height from his ears up. That is the way to measure John Neihardt, for he has a fine brow: he has the head of a thinker. After that first square look at him, you never lose the impression that he is an intellectual; but as you talk with him you perceive that he is also the man of action, of virility. And when you begin to realize the degree to which these two sets of characteristics are developed, you have come under the spell of an unusual personality.

It was an unusual thing Mr. Neihardt did eleven years ago when he gave up writing the only kind of poetry that appears to have much chance of becoming popular in this age of periodicals — the short lyric. He had reached a high and certain place as a lyricist, but he has written no lyrics for eleven years now. His short stories, too, were bringing him easy returns, with a constant demand from the publishers, but he left off doing short stories and lyrics at the same time. He gave up these literary forms because he had decided he would have no time for them if he was to fulfill his destiny. Destiny is not too strong a word; Mr. Neihardt's sense of his purpose in the world was so strong that he decided with perfect definiteness to devote his life to one object — the writing of an epic cycle founded on the early pioneering of the west. He has given himself over to his purpose with the simple directness of religious devotion. He has made no heroics about his sacrifice of the ways that seemed to lie smooth and easy before him. It is true that he had worked very hard for the success he had won, that he had no resources to carry his growing family over the lean years, and that the eventual rewards in the new *métier* were problematical. These facts, however, weighed little with him; he had seen the vision, or heard the voice, or received whatever message is communicated to the soul of a devotee.

This, probably, is too hifalutin. Mr. Neihardt himself expresses it more simply: "Twenty-eight years ago", he wrote in December, 1920, "I began to write verse. I had the epic cycle of the west in mind for some years before I felt that I had developed sufficiently to undertake the task. Seven years ago I felt that I had at last completed my apprenticeship and might well begin the work with which I hope to justify the use of what society has unconsciously given me. My scheme is a large one and will require the best of me for at least fifteen years more. I will be getting a bit old when the task is finished. What shall I 'get out of it', to use the current phrase in its usual sordid sense? Hard work, days and

nights of trying strain, brief moments of glory, some acclaim in the end perhaps, and my living. . . . The simple fact is that I am not working for myself and am not trying to 'get' anything. I have undertaken to preserve a great heroic race mood which might otherwise be lost. Someone must do this, and I seem to be the one."

This note of impersonalism is the prevailing idea in his philosophy of life. He regards himself as "a momentary whorl in the stream of the racial consciousness". This belief is at least a part of the reason for such a devotion to his task as seems veritably religious; for this whorl has a function, and its function is its excuse for existence.

But John Neihardt is a man before he is either a poet or a philosopher. Almost any summer afternoon you may find him hoeing in his garden. If you seek him out between the rows of beans and onions, you will find him ready to discuss problems of life and letters with you; but let persons of the "simple bungalow type" upon whom President Wilson once animadverted, i.e., those who have no upper story — let them beware, for Mr. Neihardt has a towering contempt for people without ideas. With others he proves a good companion, a *raconteur*, a hunter and fisherman, a good fellow.

Signs of the growing success of his big work begin to multiply. Three of the six poems are now in print. The organization of Neihardt clubs in New England, the middle west, and the Pacific west is a remarkable manifestation of the enthusiasm of that growing body of admirers who call themselves Neihardtians. "The Song of Hugh Glass" and "The Song of Three Friends" have happily supplanted "The Lady of the Lake" and "Evangeline" in many schools, especially in the middle west. The new poem in the cycle, "The Song of the Indian Wars", has been rather generally received as the greatest work Mr. Neihardt has yet done. His "Collected Poems" are being brought out by his publishers this fall.

In the new poem, the history of the Indian wars in the west during the decade following the Civil War is detailed in verse which is always competent and sometimes brilliant and powerful. The moods of the times — in the Indian village, in the soldiers' camp, and in the pioneer's cabin — are poignantly distinct; and the human note, as always in Neihardt's work, rises clear and plain. Here is the greatest Indian fighting, without a doubt, in American poetry, as well as veridic and memorable Indian oratory, rough and desperate heroism of troopers, and pictures of the plains in all seasons of the year. The story of the death of Crazy Horse, with which the poem ends, is a very effective narrative poem by itself.

The case of John G. Neihardt, doing a big task so well and with so much clear sighted idealism, gives one about as much pride in America and hope for American literature as anything else on the horizon.

The Song of the Indian Wars. By John G. Neihardt. Macmillan Company.