

VI - 73 C - 20. Smedley, Agnes "Jefferson: Still 50 Years Ahead" - book review -- Jefferson, The Road To Glory by Marie Kimball, Thomas Jefferson by Hendrik Willem Van Loon and Jefferson Himself by Bernard Mayo - The Progressive, Monday, August 23, 1943.

# The Progressive's Bookshelf

## Jefferson: Still 50 Years Ahead

JEFFERSON, *THE ROAD TO GLORY*, by Marie Kimball. Coward-McCann. \$4.  
 THOMAS JEFFERSON, by Hendrik Willem Van Loon. Dodd, Mead. \$2.50.  
 JEFFERSON HIMSELF, by Bernard Mayo. Houghton Mifflin. \$4.

Reviewed by

**Agnes Smedley**

**T**HE SHOCK and soul-probing that comes with war, at least with the present one, sends us scurrying about in search of ideas of justification—and of strength and consolation. At such a moment came the 200th anniversary of the birth of Thomas Jefferson, whom many of us regard as the greatest American that ever lived and one of history's greatest minds and spirits.

We have allowed our money-grabbing ruling class to keep him buried for 150 years, undoubtedly in the hope that the flame of his timeless revolutionary principles might be extinguished forever. To generations of school children, Jefferson has been merely a name, a President who came after Adams and before Madison.

However, on April 13, the anniversary of his birth, the classical monument to his memory was dedicated in Washington. I who write these lines went to Washington in April to see the memorial and to view some of the books from Jefferson's famous library which constituted the nucleus of the Library of Congress. For I also am of a generation that has had to discover Jefferson for itself, and for months have been reading the new books and magazine articles about him.

I had read considerable before, of course, and had been scoffed at by people who had read little or nothing but who laughed at the very name of Jefferson. "Old stuff, out of date," they said, not realizing that Jefferson is still 50 years ahead of the present generation of Americans. The Jefferson Memorial in Washington fails to convey this fact, just as it fails to express the universal genius which was Jefferson's. Perhaps it is impossible for a monument to capture the spirit and personality of one who was a dozen men rolled into one. Only some great poem might express the distilled essence of such a man. Yet the Lincoln Memorial in Washington has captured the grandeur of Lincoln's spirit as have few monuments in the world.



Jefferson

## 50 Years Ahead

The nearest approach to capturing the spirit of Jefferson is Sidney Kingsley's drama *The Patriots* which opened in New York City in April. It covers but 10 years (1790-1800) of his turbulent career, but almost every line uttered by the character representing him was drawn from his actual writings. He emerges from the play as a passionate, tragic figure of unsurpassed grandeur, the militant democrat fighting the rising plutocracy represented by Alexander Hamilton. One leaves that play with a feeling of inspiration, yet with the sad realization that Hamilton plutocracy has ruled our country since the death of Jefferson.

A few months ago, Bernard Mayo wrote his *Jefferson Himself*, a veritable bible of Jefferson democracy. Such books should be brought before the public time and again, for Mayo has compiled an extremely readable and beautiful volume of Jefferson's own writings, every word of which applies to the living present. (*Mayo's book was reviewed in The Progressive by Prof. Max C. Otto in the issue of Apr. 12.*)

Marie Kimball is the author of *Jefferson, The Road to Glory* which might be considered a companion volume to Mayo's *Jefferson Himself*. While Mayo gave us the fruits of Jefferson's mind, Mrs. Kimball has bored down to the springs from which his genius sprang. Her volume covers the first 33 years of his life, ending when he, a young man, wrote the Declaration of Independence.

She has also brought new material to light and refutes the theory that the "Virginia gentleman" and "sage of Monticello" sprang from unlettered backwoodsman. Instead, she maintains, he was the scion of a wealthy family, one branch of which sprang from the British aristocracy. However, we may say with certainty that Jefferson's genius owes nothing to the British aristocracy but, rather, was due to his early habits of study and work and to his rich emotional nature rooted in generations of American life.

What emerges from the books of Mayo and Kimball, and also from the slender children's book by Hendrik Van Loon, is a many-sided man whose mind flamed like a beacon fire for one lifetime. None of his descendants has followed in his footsteps, just as there was no one of similar stature before him.

Jefferson was the great enemy of all theories of an aristocratic class based on family and wealth. He believed, and repeatedly wrote, about the "natural" aristocracy of talent which lies embedded in the common people, provided all opportunities of education and development are opened to the common people. He

spent a lifetime in efforts to make this development possible and one flower of his efforts came in his old age when he founded and directed the University of Virginia.

Mrs. Kimball, Mayo and Van Loon all list the many achievements of Jefferson. Among these were the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, plans for universal free education; our monetary system; the Louisiana Purchase; countless inventions; the importation of plants and animals from the Old World, including upland rice, olive trees, and varieties of grapes, flowers and vegetables.

Marie Kimball lists as his "Four Freedoms" the laws he introduced into Virginia which destroyed every remnant of feudal land ownership—these gave us the freedom of the land. His bills for universal education and a public library system gave freedom to the mind. His struggle against Negro slavery aimed at the freedom of the body. And his statute of Virginia for religious freedom gave freedom to the soul.

Yet when all his achievements are recorded, they remain incomplete. He was a classical scholar, an architect, an inventor, a scientist, a statesman, a musician of sorts, a connoisseur of simple, good living, and a writer of succinct, simple prose that speaks to us so powerfully to the present day that it is impossible to think of him as long since dead.

Van Loon, in his short, beautifully illustrated volume for children, has tried to bring Jefferson as a living person to children from the ages of 10 to 14. It is an inspiring yet sad book—sad because it has taken us two centuries to honor Jefferson's memory and to realize that, had we followed in his footsteps, we would not be a nation of people chasing the eternal dollar and trying to get the better of our fellow men.

Though Van Loon's book should be bought and read by children, still it fails to dramatize the life of Jefferson as it should be dramatized.

Today, while in the midst of the bloodiest war in history, Jefferson should become our guiding star. He laid the basic foundations of militant and ever-changing democracy. The earth, he repeatedly wrote, belongs to the living, not to the dead, and he tried to create such basic principles of guidance that corrupt and self-seeking men could not take advantage of the common people.

He declared "eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man," and in his first inaugural address wrote that should we wander from our democratic principles "in moments of error or alarm, let us hasten to retrace our steps and regain the road which alone leads to peace, liberty and safety."