

BOOK REVIEW

Pioneer's Progress. An autobiography by Alvin Johnson. (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1960. Pp. xviii, 413. Index. \$1.85.)

This is a Bison Book, one of a series of paperbacks inaugurated by the University of Nebraska Press in 1960. Some titles of the series are originals, but *Pioneer's Progress* is a reprint of a volume first issued by the Viking Press in 1952. Incidentally, reprints planned for the spring of 1961 include such classics as *Populist Revolt* by Hicks, *Crazy Horse* by Sandoz, and *Voice of the Coyote* by Dobie.

Perhaps a confession is in order at this point. It was the original intention to give this book a lick and a promise, not a thorough reading, and then to attempt a perfunctory statement larded with a quote or two. But Alvin Johnson writes with an insidious style, "Middlewestern crossed with the classics" as he himself described it, which will not brook such cavalier treatment from the reader. So *Pioneer's Progress* was read completely and with gusto and some passages were read several times and will be read again.

Pioneer's Progress is the Odyssey of a native American scholar born in eastern Nebraska of an immigrant Danish father. It is the authentic autobiography of an American egghead, a "liberal" in the finest sense of that much abused word. Johnson always considered himself a Democrat. The influence of his early Populist environment was an important factor in attaching him to the liberal wing of the Democratic party during most of his adult life, except for his support of Theodore Roosevelt in 1912 and Herbert Hoover in 1928.

A leisurely account of an active life, *Pioneer's Progress* has manifold digressions from the main chronological path to lure the reader into inviting byways of informative fact and conjecture, as Johnson figuratively climbs convenient hills and trees along the way to take a look forward, or back, or around generally. These digressions furnish illuminating side lights, touched with gentle humor, and give the reader a better understanding of the problems of our time as distilled in the mind of Alvin Johnson.

Johnson found his place in life after several changes of direction. He loved the land and early dreamed of becoming a farmer; other influences, that of his mother very strongly, turned him toward a life of scholarship. He entered the Uni-

versity of Nebraska with the intention of studying medicine, but soon changed to a major in the classics. His experience with epidemic disease in a camp of volunteers at Chickamauga during the Spanish-American War led him to enrol at Columbia, determined to prepare himself in economics so that he could take his place "in the struggle for justice, for the restoration of the democratic ideal, badly battered by a generation of monopolistic greed and political chicanery."

Several years of restless wandering as a professor of economics at Bryn Mawr, Columbia, Texas, Chicago, Stanford, and Cornell, and as an editor of the *New Republic* failed to satisfy the gnawing drive inside him. Not until 1923, when he became director of the New School for Social Research, "an adult education institution which combines lay with academic education," could Johnson begin to feel at peace with himself. The "New School," founded by James Harvey Robinson, Charles A. Beard, and Thorstein Veblen, was inevitably labeled by some as socialistic; to Johnson from the beginning it was "what the Marxians call 'bourgeois.'"

Here he was happy as he planned and extended the curriculum ("Anything that lives can get into the curriculum"), wrestled with financial problems, aided fugitive European scholars with his "University in Exile," planned his new building, dubbed "Aladdin's Lecture Palace" by those unhappy with its modern functional architecture, and generally fulfilled his dream of an institution of higher learning where a "teacher with a mission" could teach, untrammelled by the restrictions to be found elsewhere.

Max Lerner writes in the foreword: "And if the function of an autobiography, like that of a teacher, is best fulfilled by holding up to the reader the image of a man, then this autobiography fulfills that function."

—James D. Morrison

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