Winesburg, Ohio

A GROUP OF TALES
OF OHIO
SMALL-TOWN LIFE

by Sherwood Anderson

INTRODUCTION BY
ERNEST BOYD

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TO THE MEMORY OF MY MOTHER

EMMA SMITH ANDERSON

Whose keen observations on the life about her first awoke in me the hunger to see beneath the surface of lives, this book is dedicated.

SOME OF THE EPISODES IN THIS BOOK WERE PRINTED IN THE SEVEN ARTS, THE MASSES AND THE LITTLE REVIEW TO WHICH MAGAZINES THE AUTHOR MAKES DUE ACKNOWLEDGMENT.

INTRODUCTION

By ERNEST BOYD

Sherwood Anderson was born at Clyde, Ohio, in 1876, and it was not until his fortieth year that his first book, *Windy McPherson's Son*, was published. When that novel appeared its author was scarcely known beyond the small circle of readers who had seen his powerful stories in the little reviews which can afford out of their poverty to have the courage of their convictions. He was a contributor from the outset to *The Little Review*, whose files contain so many of the names which now give contemporary American literature a quality and a significance that are truly national. It is noteworthy that many of the chapters in *Winesburg, Ohio*, the book which made his name, are reprinted from that and other periodicals of his experimental years. The legend is that Sherwood Anderson had "a trunkful" of fiction when he made his bid for fame with *Windy McPherson's Son* in 1916, and the following year he issued *Marching Men*, followed in 1918 by a volume of poems, excellently entitled *Mid-American Chants*. That was the sum of Sherwood Anderson's work when he published the book which now receives the consecration of being included in a library of the world's modern classics.

Just as the growth and development of America are rapid, so literary history moves quickly in this country, and in the space of five years the writer who was an innovator, an isolated figure, is now counted as one of a school of what is called the new American fiction. When Sherwood Anderson began there was only one novelist who could be seriously regarded as an original figure in modern American realistic fiction, and that was Theodore Dreiser. The latter was still the subject of vituperation and dispute, the single hope of those who believed that the purveyors of cheerful sentimentalities and of red-blooded adventures, were not the beginning and end of the national impulse towards a native American literature Then there were but a few places in which such writers could obtain a hearing; now the weekly and monthly reviews of the adult type in New York can easily stand comparison with those of London. These years of destruction in Europe, by some law of compensation, have been years of creation and development in this country. The rise of a serious periodical literature, whose virtue is neither the eternal negation of conservatism nor the mere success of immense circulation, is part of what seems to be a genuine literary renascence in America.

Sherwood Anderson's work is typical of this renascence, this expression of America to-day in a literature which is no longer provincial but has its roots in the soil. In fiction this movement of independence has taken the form of realism, a resolute insistence upon the fundamentals of life,

upon the facts so strenuously denied, or ignored, by the conventional imitators of British orthodoxy. It is essentially a literature of revolt against the great illusion of American civilization, the illusion of optimism, with all its childish evasion of harsh facts, its puerile cheerfulness, whose inevitable culmination is the school of " glad " books, which have reduced American literature to the lowest terms of sentimentality. A generation of poets, novelists and critics has arisen to repudiate these old idols of the literary market-place. The tentative and lonely efforts of such pioneers as Ambrose Bierce, Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser have opened up the way for a new literature. The speed at which American history moves, whether it be literary, political or social history, does not, of course, deprive history of the traditional privilege of repeating itself. Thus America to-day is witnessing such a conflict as was fought out in France during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when Flaubert and Maupassant, the Goncourt brothers and Zola, threw off the yoke of Romanticism. They were accused, as the younger Americans of to-day are accused, of various crimes, literary and intellectual. Their books were suppressed for moral reasons; they were denounced for their constant preoccupation with the ugly, the drab and the uninspiring; in many cases they were dismissed by the critical mandarins because of their lack of style, their indifference to form. If they more frequently resisted their opponents successfully, as when Flaubert defeated the moral

censors of *Madame Bovary*, it must be remembered that their fight was more specifically restricted to the domain of literature. In other words, the Romanticism which they had to conquer was a literary doctrine, not a national philosophy. The American realists have to contend with both, since this is the country in which life itself is viewed in terms of romantic fiction.

Indeed, so long as American realism did not seem to embody any profound challenge to the national philosophy of romantic optimism, it was allowed to proceed unhindered. Hence the early regionalism of such writers as Sara Orne Jewett, whose notations of real life were in a minor key, barely audible in the student din of the popular fictioneers, each with a message of hope and gladness, and a considerable mechanical skill in translating the platitudes of the mob soothsayers into terms of machine-made romance. When the author of *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt* came forward with his dispassionate querying of all the assumptions of his contemporaries, it was easy to cloak moral indignation in aesthetic criticism, to perform the same ritual of excommunication as was attempted in France in the case of Zola, and even of Balzac, to some extent. But, in time, the influence of Dreiser triumphed over defects of form which are incredible only to those who have not submitted, as the true critic and sensitive reader must submit, to the compelling power of the creative genius. Chaotic, formless, at times banal, Theodore Dreiser has nevertheless, imposed a tradition of freedom, of

sincerity, of objective documentation, which has given a new impulse to American fiction. His influence may be compared to the displacement effected by the pressure of the sheer weight of some elemental natural force.

In his first two novels, *Windy McPherson's Son* and *Marching Men*, as in his last, *Poor White*, Sherwood Anderson shows himself no mere imitator of Dreiser. Sam McPherson's boyhood and youth in Canton, Iowa, where he is moulded by the influence of that shiftless, braggart Windy McPherson, provides the occasion for a remarkable study of that mid-American life of which the author has become the interpreter. It is a projection of reality into the pages of a novel which immediately revealed the power and the potentialities of Sherwood Anderson After his struggle for success in Chicago Sam McPherson sets off upon a vague pilgrimage, abandoning his wife, and seeking some tangible answer to the riddle of an existence which cannot be satisfied, as every right-thinking citizen was taught to be, by mere success as defined by the prospectuses of the correspondence schools. The last portion of the book lacks the continuity of interest which gives its power to the earlier narrative portion, but what is a literary weakness serves only to emphasise the difference which separates such literature from the commonplace waves of the old school.

It seems perverse to extend the story, not only beyond the point where the national philosophy receives its glow of warm satisfaction, but beyond the point

where craftsmanship is capable of its literary task. When one has nothing to say, but knows how to say it, no such dilemma can present itself. But that is just what makes these writers of the younger generation: they have so much to say that content is often unrestrained by mere form, much to the supercilious delight of the mandarins and the slick business-men of letters. What are they to think, for example, of a novel like *Marching Men*, whose title raises expectations of conventional military glories? It is the curious story of Beaut McGregor, the miner's son, whose groping adventure through life leads him to the idea of physical union in disciplined ranks as the means of creative solidarity amongst the laboring masses. Obviously Sherwood Anderson is as independent of the shibboleths of class-conscious radical fiction as of the no more unreal conventions of the circulationist novel.

In *Poor White*, which followed *Winesburg, Ohio*, there are evident signs of the author's increasing technical skill as a novelist. It is a fine study of the invasion of the pioneer American civilization by modern machinery and industrialism, as well as a superb analysis of the evolution of a human being from the decadent, rather than the primitive, barbarism of a poor white group. The book was slightly overshadowed at the moment of its appearance, by the more sensational eruption of the newcomers into this no longer fallow field of American literature, but it has qualities of a more profound character than its rivals of a season. Yet, in the last analysis, it is the stories of Sherwood Anderson

which are his best achievement hitherto, and to that *genre* he has returned in his new book, *The Triumph of the Egg*. The present collection of Winesburg stories gives the measure of his genius. In their unpremeditated narrative art they have a power of suggestion and revelation which we are accustomed to find in the great Russians, in Chekhov more than in Dostoyevsky, for there one admires the same economy of means, the same rich synthesis of life.

Winesburg, Ohio is like that wheel of many colors, of which Anatole France writes, which had only to revolve to give a harmony of all the parts, which becomes the truth. These separate fragments of mid-American society combine to make a picture of American life which carries the inescapable conviction of reality. The stories are written out of the depths of imagination and intuition, out of a prolonged brooding over the fascinating spectacle of existence, but they combine that quality with a marvelous faculty of precise observation. Thus, the impression of surface realism is reinforced by that deeper realism which sees beyond and beneath the exterior world to the hidden reality which is the essence of things. Did not Schopenhauer, interpreting Goethe's own confessions, point out that this is precisely the quality of the artist: that it is given to him alone to perceive the metaphysically Real—*das Ding an sich?*

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