

Bookshelf By GERTRUDE MARTIN

"WITNESSES FOR FREEDOM"

THIS unusual book is a thoughtful study of Negro autobiographies during the last half century. The author, Rebecca Chalmers Barton, shows here the infinite variety of Negro personality as well as the way in which Negroes have reacted to the prejudiced world around them. She has grouped a number of the autobiographies together under general headings which again demonstrate the vast differences among them. Beginning with Booker T. Washington and coming down through Richard Wright, Mrs. Barton has caught the spirit of each remarkably well.

The author has divided her twenty-three subjects into four headings: The Accommodators, The Achievers, The Experimenters and the Protestors for a New Freedom. With Booker T. Washington in the first group are James D. Corrothers, William Pickens, and Jane Hunter, all of whom sought "peace at the 'white' price." Mrs. Barton probes psychologically into the pages of these autobiographies to discover why each man or woman became what he was. Her understanding of the backgrounds of the people she discusses and of the whole field of race relations is great. The analysis of Booker T. Washington and his theories of racial accommodation is especially keen. The following lines are a good example of Mrs. Barton's sensitive writing which goes to the heart

of a particular subject, in this case Booker T. Washington:

"Cloaked in an armor of personal immunity, he passes serenely along the path of racial plagues. His capacity to interpret the favorable acceptance of himself as a change for the better in American race relations suggests psychological explanations ranging from wishful thinking to struggle for status. His failure to analyze reasons for his personal triumph which nestle in the pages of his own life history suggests an 'ostrich in the sand' technique. Whether inspired by fear, naivete, or deliberate strategy, the result is satisfying to him. He is a master of accommodation to his environment. In this process the race problem becomes both the sword and the shining plume."

Included among the five Achievers are Marshall W. "Major" Taylor, the fastest bicycle rider in the world; Matthew W. Henson, North Pole explorer, and W. C. Handy, father of the blues. These writers won recognition on the basis of their own achievements in competition with whites.

The Experimenters include William Stanley Braithwaite, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay and Era Bell Thompson. Each of these is a strong individualist who seeks happiness relatively undaunted by the discrimination they have met. Most

of them grew up in white communities.

The Protestors for a New Freedom are described by Mrs. Barton as those Negroes who although they "have fully as much claim to be regarded and to regard themselves as distinct individuals in spite of societal ills, they voluntarily subordinate their individualism to the larger race problem." Among them are W. E. B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, J. Saunders Redding, and Richard Wright. The author has included a discussion of Frederick Douglass' story of his life here although it belongs to the 19th rather than the 20th century. However, he is the spiritual precursor of this last group as Mrs. Barton points out and a look at his autobiography makes this clear.

"Witnesses for Freedom" is not a re-working of familiar material; it is a new approach to the development of the Negro through an analysis of twenty-three men and women who rose to the top in their respective fields. As Alain Locke states in his introduction the book "affords an unsentimental and therefore sobering and enlightening journey into the psychological heart of the American race problem. Yet primarily, the book is a study of progressively rising Negro self-interpretation."