

# Ben Burns

## Off The Book Shelf

### North to Freedom

**W**ORLD HISTORY is rich with the stirring saga of peoples on the move. Ever since Moses led his persecuted flock out of Egypt history has been filled with the exciting accounts of mass migration by entire races and nations to newer and better lands.

America was built entirely by pioneers escaping from oppression and hunger in Europe. From Plymouth Rock to the Gold Rush, U. S. history is the story of men escaping from a dismal past in search of fame and fortune.

Although virtually shunned and ignored by historians, Negroes went through their own great hegira in this country.

As part of the traditional portrait of the Negro as a doltish, sulking, meek, submissive character, few if any of the leading chroniclers of history ever mention at all the significant revolt by colored Americans against Dixie rule and their escape from the South. The extent of this "Grapes of Wrath" exodus to the North has never been recorded in history.

### Epoch of Migration

**J**UST AS Howard Fast replied to one phase of anti-Negro slanders by showing in "Freedom Road" the militancy and intelligence of Negroes in their fight for freedom, a new book by Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy has finally told the important story of the Negro flight to freedom. In "They Seek A City" (Doubleday, Doran and Co., N. Y., \$2.75), the two authors, one Negro and the other white, have done a magnificent, timely job of gathering thousands of loose ends in the manifold epoch of Negro migration and weaving them into a thrilling and fact-filled work.

With a volume-full of weighty evidence, they have laid to rest once and for all the canard about the docility and lack of lust for equal rights by the Negro.

Bontemps, librarian at Fisk university, and Conroy, a Chicago Sun book reviewer, gathered much of their material while on WPA writers projects or on Guggenheim fellowships. They

struck a rich lode of information and have set down their remarkable tale in jaunty, easy-to-read chapters which are built around the men and women pioneers who led the mass movement out of the South.

For Chicagoans particularly, "They Seek A City" will be a delight for its pages are well-stocked with characters and anecdotes about the first Negroes to come to the Windy City. Beginning with Jean Baptiste Point DuSable, about whom the Indians would say: "The first white man in Chicago was a Negro," the book comes right up to the present day with its stories of men like Jelly Roll Morton, Robert S. Abbott and Ida B. Wells.

### Spotlight on Defender

**C**OMING IN for a good share of the spotlight is the Chicago Defender with a chapter on "The Exodus Train," telling how the newspaper crusaded during the last war in bringing thousands of migrants out of the South to Chicago. A short history of the Defender from its founding up to the present day concludes with this tribute: "The militance fostered by Robert Sengstacke Abbott is little diminished . . . The Defender has broadened its outlook and now vigorously attacks all forms of racial intolerance, including anti-Semitism. Its avowed policy, of course, always dictated such a course, but for a long time the emphasis was solely upon anti-Negro manifestations."

"They Seek A City" on publication becomes a priceless supplement to the growing Negro literature that is adding immensely to the much-needed inventory of facts about Negro America and giving potent rebuttal to the pure fiction of the "Yassuh Boss" school of writing. Few people have as wonderful a tradition of militancy and struggle in American history as the darker brother. Up to now, unfortunately, it has too often been snowed under by phony, sham portraits in prose designed to picture the Negro as less than a full man.

Bontemps and Conroy have done a beautiful job in putting straight the record and implementing the library of books that are virtually weapons in the war against race hate.