

review and comment



THE GENTLE BUSH

Barbara Giles' fine novel shows a new spirit breaking through the hard crust of a dead world.

By THOMAS McGRATH

THE GENTLE BUSH, by Barbara Giles. Harcourt, Brace. \$3.50.

THE world of the plantation South has always exercised a powerful influence on the imaginations of American writers. As a complete world in itself it is dead and gone, the conditions for its former existence having disappeared. At the same time, because it was not destroyed once and for all in the Civil War, but was only mortally wounded, it has remained an unburied corpse, poisoning the South and, to a degree, the rest of the country with its putrefaction. Writers dealing with it have used a number of strategies: glorifying it, as did Margaret Mitchell and the post-Civil War Southern novelists; like Faulkner, concentrating on the surface aspects, projecting an irrational violence as a symbol of the world; or attempting to present the progressive degeneration of the plantation world in terms of social forces. This last is the method of Barbara Giles in *The Gentle Bush*.

Yet this is an incomplete description of her method. One of the characters can say at one point that behind all the actions of the people with whom he moves there is "the glint of the dollar," or that they think only of "the land," but this does not define the characters nor the world which the author has created. There is nothing mechanical about their relationship to society; they are not static "examples" cut to fit a historical thesis, but are kept continually in motion. As a result there is nothing didactic about the novel, and the "gentle bush" of social change which, in the course of the story, splits the world of the Durels,

carries the authentic bloom of the best fictional tradition.

The Durel family, the center of the book, is large. The author has obligingly set in the end pages of the book a genealogical table which takes care of the bewildering number of uncles and *tantes* from Charles Durel, the founder of the line, on down. Included also is a map of a section of the land along the Bayou Teche, including the town of Bienville, the plantations of Shadowdown and Des Roses and adjoining areas wherein the Durels move, "swamp aristocrats" who act as if their name might, instead, be God.

Their main props and supports are pride and memory, for the Durels have lost nearly all but their name. The only branch of the family which still has money is that of Agricole, Jr., son of Agricole, the black sheep of the family who had been kicked out of college for belonging to a society which held "improper" ideas and who married his mistress, prospered, became cynical and died. In the world of the Durels there is, besides Agricole, Jr. (the pompous and rather tyrannical father of Michel, Nicole and Alcee), Grandmere, a fine and kindly old woman, a "great lady" in the only way the appellation has any meaning, who practices piety as if she had a special talent for it "such as an ability to write poetry." Although forced to live in a mean house, after the death of her husband and the loss of the land, Grandmere feels free for the first time, but her feelings are not shared by her daughters, the *tantes* Lizette or Theresse, nor by Uncle Adrien, a rather run-down Don Quixote who survives

like a souvenir of the Civil War, dreaming of "honor" and "chivalry." There is also Felicie, daughter of Tante Lizette, who thinks that "they are all alike" and who, even as a child, is in love with Peter Boudreaux, a Cajun. There are the Cajuns themselves, of French extraction like the planters, survivors of the line of Evangeline who had been transported from Canada by the English and who are the sharecroppers and the poor whites of the bayou, despised almost as much as the Negro field workers by the planters.

The story begins with the arrival of Agricole Jr., Michel and his sister Nicole at the Shadowdown plantation on a certain Mardi Gras. At its broadest the story may be said to be that of Michel—who, it is feared, resembles his "terrible" grandfather—and of the things he has to "give up" during the Lenten season of his youth before he arrives at "a little piece of wisdom" gained through the loss of his sister, his birthright, and the death of a friend. He had never loved his domineering father, nor the plantation. Both Michel and his sister, while children, had experienced shocking scenes of violence against Negro plantation workers which, instead of hardening them into acceptance of the land and its "responsibilities," marked them forever. Michel attempts to escape into a law career, but is lured back by an unrealistic notion that he can "reform" the plantation when he inherits half of it at his father's death.

Nicole may be said to escape by dying, although this has a melodramatic sound which does not conform to the actual situation in the novel. Her death is, at any rate, a special case and one to which we will return. When Michel leaves the plantation, he becomes editor of the Bienville paper and political supporter of Peter Boudreaux. Despite the initial and frenzied opposition of the Durels, Peter has married Felicie, with whom Michel was in love. Peter is killed attempting to save an innocent Negro from a lynch mob. It is in the situation surrounding his death that Michel comes to his wisdom.

THIS is a bald and unbeautiful outline of a very fine novel. The only elements omitted in our synopsis are the really crucial ones, the elements which give the book its uncommon depth and satisfying perception. And
(Continued on page 29)

WHAT PRICE MAGIC?

Barrows Dunham's penetrating expose of some superstitions vital to the ruling class.

By HOWARD SELSAM

MAN AGAINST MYTH, by Barrows Dunham. Little, Brown. \$2.50.

NOT since Robert Forsythe, in the pages of the *NEW MASSES* a decade ago, flayed the follies and foibles of the ruling class has there been such a witty and penetrating and satirical dissection of reigning folly as in *Man Against Myth*. Only this time it is not the *mores* but the logic of the exploiters that comes in for pungent analysis; not their personalities and social life, but the intellectual quirks and twists necessary to maintain an irrational society. Professor Dunham uncovers these with a merciless and relentless scalpel, asking no quarter and giving none. He asks: what beliefs and doctrines of social significance are current today which run counter to scientific truth? His answer shows that these are precisely the myths perpetuated by and necessary to the continued existence of an exploiting class which has long since lost any logical reason for being.

Dr. Dunham's starting point is the fact that whereas at the dawn of the modern era it was the natural sciences which challenged the conceptions of the world on which feudalism rested, today it is the social sciences. It is in this field, therefore, that every effort is made, consciously or unconsciously, to deny that we can have a science of society, to distort the findings of such science, and in general to prevent such science from challenging the myths on which capitalist society rests.

Bruno was burned and Galileo was threatened, not because they said true things about the world, but because the saying of true things about the world was incompatible with the lordship of aristocrats. . . . For Galileo to assert that the earth is a sphere rotating upon an axis, when feudal myth held it to be stationary and flat, was as "subversive" as for a sociologist to assert today that wars originate from the nature of capitalism.

Dr. Dunham analyzes the three main characteristics of our society which require myths to conceal or excuse them. They are, briefly, the deliberate denial of the abundance our technology makes possible, the gross inequality in the distribution of what we do produce, and the fact that the people of the United States do not control their national economy. He concludes:

If you carefully examine these three conditions, you will discover that they are such as to make myths necessary. No one in his senses would, for example, deliberately reject a society of abundance, for that would mean rejecting good housing and food and clothing and medical care and education, all of which he now spends his life trying to get for himself and his family. If men are to be prevented from moving into a society of abundance, they must be dissuaded by certain doctrines which undertake to show either (1) that the goal is impossible to attain, or (2) that the goal is undesirable.

This is the function of the reigning myths. They are not mere illusions, out of accord with the facts, but hurting no one. They are dangerous to mankind as a whole but profitable to the ruling class so long as the rest of the community believes them. In fact, the most striking thing about the book as a whole is Dr. Dunham's extraordinarily keen and sensitive awareness of the active role of "unreason and false opinion," to use a classic phrase of the great Epicurus of old who so valiantly attacked the enslaving myths of the Greek world. The myth is not merely negative, as the author so well understands when he says "it assumes absurdities or implies them, and . . . it either paralyzes action toward a better world or stimulates action toward a worse one."

Further, it is not an accident that a professional philosopher writes such a book. The important myths of our

society lie in the field of those wide and basic generalizations that constitute philosophy. Also, as Dr. Dunham expertly shows, they are rooted in time-honored philosophical errors. They are not mere inventions but rather relics found in the attic of human thought and now cleaned, dusted, and brought out into the market-place when their propaganda value is discovered. And because Dunham understands this he is able to throw considerable light both on the myths themselves and on the classic metaphysical traditions which still live on in them.

However, it is here that the book's greatest weakness lies. While the false philosophies behind the myths are skillfully exposed, nothing comparable is done with the true philosophy that expresses and underlies the scientific approach. For whatever reason, Dunham fails to give his reader a positive worldview, something more than simply standing on the side of science and having an orientation toward socialism. The absence of this positive theoretical approach has enabled a critic like Irwin Edman to ask why Dunham did not include "myths" that play into the hands of progressives such as "dialectical materialism" and the conception of religion as the "opium of the people." The only answer to this would have been a genuine analysis of religious beliefs and a serious presentation of modern materialism as that scientific worldview of the labor and socialist movement which alone eliminates all myths from our thinking.

