Belles lettres and bell ringers


The romance that emanates from what would seem a prosaic business, that of cattle raising on the range, has never been dispelled. Even such a carefully documented treatise on the subject as Dr Dale's is redolent of the Old West's glamor. His study of the rise and decline of the range cattle industry, work of a scholar though it is, is quite as fresh and absorbing as any fiction.

Much of this, of course, is due to the historian's treatment of a fascinating subject. But the richness of the original material is apparent in every line. The very footnotes, usually dry and forbidding, in the present work form a rich substrata of anecdote and information.

Beginning in Texas at the close of the Civil War, Dr Dale traces the development of an industry that was to exercise a profound influence on the economic condition of the nation as a whole. He tells of the epic northern drives, the moving of great herds to the northern and central plains. A procedure which has left its impress on native folklore he describes vividly and with exactitude. Separate chapters are devoted to ranching in the Southwest, and the industry in Oklahoma.

The invention of barbed wire eventually did for the open range, Dr Dale points out. The ranchers were suspicious of it at first, but when they came around to it and it began to cut up the prairie, the cattle industry was revolutionized, and much of the old devil-may-care manner of the old days vanished. It became possible to build up the long-horns into more profitable breeds. Then the industry came into ascendancy in the corn belt, and today the stodgy state of Iowa has almost as many cattle as Texas.

It was in Oklahoma that the open range ranchers had their last stand. No person who is interested in the social order that preceded the present one in this state should neglect reading Dr Dale's account. It is a source book for information about the cattle industry, but it is a swift-moving narrative as well.

One of the features that will render the book doubly valuable to the general reader in Oklahoma is the reproduction of rare photographs caught in the days when the camera was less ubiquitous than the Colt. The frontispiece, for example, is a scene during the opening of the Cherokee Strip—perhaps the only photographic record in existence. Another, taken in 1870, shows the spoils of a buffalo hunt. Various charts and diagrams, also, are used to enable the reader to follow the verbal account with additional reality. The diagram of a herd on trail, for instance, is easily converted by the imagination into a magnificent procession.

The appropriateness of the book's decorations play an important part in its effect. The end papers, drawn by Dorothy Kirk, have a series of cattle brands worked into a design. And on the front of the book appears a head of the now-extinct long-horn steer.

—GEORGE MILBURN, EX '31

LYNN RIGGS AS POET

The Iron Dish by Lynn Riggs. Garden City. Doubleday Doran, 1930. $2.00.

This first published volume of the poems of Lynn Riggs brings to us pieces that have been printed in the Nation, the Archive, Poetry, "Books" of the Herald-Tribune, Palms, The Laughing Horse, the Sun, the New Republic and the Bookman. Distinguished as is this list of periodicals it is of more importance that these poems bring to us the particular intellectual and emotional complexity that is Lynn Riggs.

Beauty and pain are distilled beauty and pain when Lynn Riggs interprets them. They are shorn of the frayed edges of mediocrity and appear as the splendid essence of these two awful qualities through his intense belief in them and his exquisite ability to express them.

Such fineness of feeling comes only through having lived deeply and sensitively. Such a precision of style evolves only after years of applied study and craftsmanship. That Lynn Riggs has experienced both of these is evidenced in his first collected poems.

"Spring Morning—Santa Fe" gives us a fragment of a line which we like to think describes the poet's methods. "Words grew in the heart—" writes Riggs and we know that he has betrayed the genesis of all of his writing in this phrase.

He is fundamentally a deeply emotional being with a passionate love of living. This emotion has been intellectually directed into an awareness of the futility of surviving things, the beauty of fleeting ones. This futility is treated lightly and is the more telling because of its lightness. In "Shadow on Snow" he sings, "I, a shadow, thinking as I go, Feel the need of a mimicry. To say this in music: how the moon is one With the snow, and the snow warmer than I shall ever be— I, a shadow, moving across the snow. There shall be no more shadows after mine shall go Hissing over ice, cracking the black river glass. There shall still be a moon, but never a sun, Never an earth again with its triumphing grass— Only the moon and the snow."

Such moods do not predominate in the book. If the volume has a predominating note it is one of beauty, worship. Riggs creates images of such exquisite warmth that they live in our vision and with re-reading become a part of us as they are of him. Of all of these poems "The Deer" is perhaps the finest example of imagery.

"It is a pool of shadow close and blue; The slant ray Of the sun is a golden javelin to run it through But not to slay. Three tan deer are nimbly at the cool Grass nibbling. Their sides are thin, Each liquid eye a little pool For javelin."

In "Wonder" Lynn Riggs confesses himself the worshipper and the poet: "This is the wonder of wonders: To be assailed By this sharp incredible beauty, To be nailed By such arrowy barbs to a cross Of my own making, While the chants rise from the harsh hills, And from under The near crags dawn is breaking! This is the wonder. . . ."

Though the volume has no such divisions its genre reveals the two cultures which have nurtured Lynn Riggs's genius. One is New England, the other and most important is Santa Fe, New Mexico. The first has clarified his vision, sharpened his mind, the second is responsible for the rich tapestry of his imagery and for the vitality which infuses it. But these are incidental influences—one must be a Lynn Riggs to absorb and reflect them.

—BETTY KIRK, '29.