

# Biography of Robert Abbott, Founder of Chicago Defender

By CYRIL BRIGGS

NO BIOGRAPHY of a prominent Negro Editor whose adult life spanned the years between 1905 and World War II could fail to run the gamut of the tumultuous events of the period. "The Lonely Warrior," by Roi Ottley (Henry Regnery Co., \$4.75) is thus not only a biography of the late Robert S. Abbott, founder of The Chicago Defender, but a biography as well of the Negro people in a particular historical context.

That period saw the beginning of the great Negro migrations from the rural South, and the stormy upsurge of the Negro liberation movement under the impetus of the incipient proletarianization of the fugitives from Southern lynch law and the blazing militancy of a sizeable section of the Negro press, inspired in large measure by the Niagara Movement initiated by Dr. W. E. B. DuBois.

In his foreword, Ottley tells us that the idea for this biography was sired by Abbott's nephew and present owner of The Defender, John H. H. Sengstacke. He assures us the latter insisted on a "true and unvarnished" story of his uncle. Unfortunately, Ottley does not adhere to his instructions. He instead attempts to build up Abbott out of all proportion to his actual stature as an eminently successful publisher and leader.

Abbott, he tells us, "revolutionized the Negro press" by being the first to introduce departmentalization (in 1915) on the model of the "white press," blandly assuming that Abbott's Negro contemporaries functioned in a vacuum and were not similarly susceptible to certain environmental influences. (When this reviewer joined the staff of The New York Amsterdam News in 1912 he found departmentalization already well under way on that paper.)

Ottley attempts, moreover, to place Abbott on a par with the two giants of his time—Booker T. Washington and Dr. DuBois, warring protagonists of two conflicting views on Negro policies in the fight for survival. To bolster this position, Ottley credits Abbott with a third event: migration of the Negro from the South, and asserts that "Single-handed, Abbott has set the great migration (of 1919) of the Mississippi Valley in motion."

This is, of course, arrant nonsense. Nearer the truth is the statement, quoted by Ottley, of Dr. Charles S. Johnson, president of Fisk University: "Whether with or without his planning, The Defender became one of the most potent factors in a phenomenal hegira that began to change the character and pattern of race relations in the United States."

The Defender's was indubitably the most strident and aggressive voice denouncing Southern barbarities and urging Negroes to leave the South. In a period in which the more radical Negro publications alternately berated and praised, goaded and coaxed the Negro masses into more active resistance to jimcrow oppression, The Defender played a leading role in firing Negro resentment and arousing that spirit of resistance which was to alarm the FBI and other bastions of white supremacy during the racist-inspired race riots in Chicago, Washington and other cities in 1919.

BUT THE Defender had no monopoly on agitation and denunciation. This is attested by several FBI reports to Congress during the period, in which the entire Negro press was denounced for its "arrogance" in demanding equality of rights and in daring to comment on international affairs.

The influence exerted on the Southern Negro masses by North-



ROI OTTLEY

ern Negro publications was so great that Southern Negroes suspected of reading or promoting their circulation were given savage jail sentences and often lynched. In reporting these reprisals, Ottley is so intent on proving that Abbott was the sole object of Dixiecrat hate that he goes even to the extent of lifting bodily from Frederick G. Detweiler's book, "The Negro Press in the United States" (which Ottley acknowledges to be one of his source materials), a letter from a Southern Negro reprinted on Page 154 from the left-wing Crusader magazine, published in New York, and attributes it to The Defender and a Defender agent.

The incident would be of little importance were it not clearly a part of a pattern designed to minimize the role played during World War I and after by the New Negro radicals, and particularly those who then or later espoused communism.

ALREADY in a previous book, "New Day A-Coming," Ottley had completely ignored the contributions of this latter group, a procedure for which he was sharply criticized by J. A. Rogers, eminent Negro historian and Pittsburgh Courier columnist. In his present book, Ottley carries this technique a step further. The object of his

deletion is now the historic fact of Communist initiation of the successful struggle to save the lives of the nine Scottsboro Boys, of Communist leadership of the mighty unemployed struggles of the Thirties.

While in "New Day A-Coming" he credited the Communists with coming to the aid of the Scottsboro Boys, in his present book it is "the liberals" who took up the brutal challenge of the Scottsboro rape frameup. In "New Day A-Coming" he had also acknowledged that "With the Depression, Negro Communists came forward as the leaders of the unemployed," and that the Communist party "became a force in Negro life." In "The Lonely Warrior" he evades that acknowledgement by practically ignoring the struggles of the unemployed in Chicago during the depression.

IT IS TRUE that he does include some facts on the uncompromising position of the Communist party in its fight for Negro rights and liberation, its relentless struggle to wipe out white chauvinist influences among the working class. But this is incidental to showing Abbott as a man of stubborn, independent character.

The case in point is Abbott's refusal, under pressure by members of his staff, the American Legion, and others, to deny permission to the Young Communist League to march in one of The Defender's annual Bud Billiken parades.

Ottley does not conceal his disapproval of Abbott's wise refusal to kowtow, in this particular instance, to white supremacists' dicta on Negro tactics, strategy and allies in the fight for Negro liberation. He hastens to add that Abbott's "mistake" was "common to liberals during the period . . ." And in his zeal to apologize for Abbott, he relates that the "publisher was distinctly impressed by the vigorous manner in which the Communists fought for the lives" of the Scottsboro Boys, as well as the party's public trials and expulsions of white chauvinists.

Abbott was no consistent warrior. He had all the weaknesses of his class. However, despite his occasional wavering and confusions he made a signal contribution to the cause of Negro liberation and U.S. democracy. A study of his life and times is well worth the effort.

## TODAY'S BEST BETS ON TV, MOVIES, DRAMA

### TV

News (2) 6 p.m.  
Sherlock Holmes (4) 6:45  
Baseball (9) 7:55 Dodgers-Cincinnati  
Baseball (11) 7:55 Giants-Milwaukee  
Burns and Allen (2) 8  
Caesar Presents (4) 8  
Concert (7) 8:30 Robert Merrill  
Medic (4) 9:00  
Montgomery Presents (4) 9:30  
The Diamond Curtain  
Studio One Summer Theatre  
(2) 10 A Terrible Day  
Eddie Cantor (7) 10:30  
Steve Allen (4) 11:15 to 1

### RADIO

News, all stations 6 p.m.  
John Vandercook, CIO WABC 7  
Opera: Verdi's Masked Ball  
WQXR 7:30  
Edd Murrow WCBS 7:45  
Giants-Braves WMCA 7:55  
Dodgers-Cincinnati W M G M  
7:55  
Boston Symphony WRCA 8:15  
Isaac Stern, violinist WRCA 9  
World of Jazz, WQXR 9:05  
Report on Geneva WCBS 10:50

### MOVIES

Marty, Sutton  
Fall of Berlin & Life in Arctic,  
Stanley  
Gate of Hell, 50th St. Guild

Great Adventure, Paris  
One Summer of Happiness,  
World  
Nine Bachelors & Under the  
Paris Sky, Thalia

### DRAMA

Inherit the Wind, National.  
Bus Stop, Music Box Theatre  
Plain and Fancy, Winter Garden

## 'Penny-Ante' Oil, Uranium Shares To Be Probed

WASHINGTON, July 17—The Government moved today to crack down on issues of Penny-Ante Uranium and oil stock floated by fly-by-night or fraudulent promoters.

The Securities & Exchange Commission announced proposals for tightening up its regulations governing "small stock issues" designed to raise money for new, unproven ventures in this country and Canada.

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