

American Literature of Soil
Given Impetus By 'Wild Geese'

Martha Ostenso Hailed
as First Vigorous
Pioneer in Her \$13,-
500 Prize Novel.

WILD GEESE. By Martha Ostenso. Dodd, Mead & Co. \$2.

By ANDREW NELSON LYTLE

Any novel, particularly any first novel, evincing qualifications that capture from over a thousand other novels the \$13,500 prize offered for good literature, oblivious of the "best seller" technique, must at least demand respect and minute examination. The result of this examination is one of concurrence with the judges, for contained within the covers of the book is enough power and sincerity to bloat 50 first novels. However, it is only just to say that it displays the variant postures of a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, containing, as well as finely woven stuff, several disagreeable short-comings.

It is more than coincidence that the only recent literature of the soil worth reading has evolved from the northern countries, that is, Norway, Denmark and Sweden. This does not overlook Thomas Hardy and the Russians. In the first place they are not so recent; nor do they breathe with Hamsun, Bojer and others the pungency of the soil. In Hardy, for example, it hovers in the background, assumes the aspect of a part of the social structure and is subordinated to his despondent philosophy; in the Russians it serves as the setting for the exposition of the Russian temperament, for the uncovering of its melancholy and violent soul. But with Knut Hamsun, Johan Bojer, and now with Miss Ostenso, it is the soil itself that grasps the attention. The characters as they speak, eat, act and think, speak, act and think for the soil. The acrid odor of manure permeates the pages, and when the author digs into the hearts of Amelia, Ellen, Martin and particularly Judge, the analogy to a plow throwing back the rich, black loam is irresistible.

To Caleb the soil is a vicious mistress to be subdued—cruel, tricky, exasperating, but ever alluring and productive of the most luscious gifts when subdued. Having his pride forever offended by the discovery that his wife, Amelia, has had an offspring out of wedlock, he uses this knowledge to brow-beat her and subdue the children to his avaricious desires of exploiting and acquiring more land. One of his daughters, Jude, a magnificent pagan, rebels in the end and flees away with her lover, the sound of the wild geese in her heart, as they honk of stranger, more fascinating life southward.

The language is simple and forceful, carrying unique figures and personalities, exposing graphically the deep, rich, elemental views that course through the meeting hourly the struggle for existence under primal conditions. There are, also, strains that hark back to the harshness and crudity of rural life in Norway and Iceland. These strains are dominant, rather than the lighter colors of American farm life—even in the Northwest where the settlers have scarcely time to become acclimated. There is the feeling that one is in a foreign country.

The first hundred pages devote too much time to atmosphere, this way slowing down the action of the plot; and the means by which Caleb Gare is able to control his family is unconvincing. It is to be doubted whether Amelia would stand for the suppression and partial destruction of the children to keep a dubious disgrace from one she has not seen since babyhood. Disgrace would not change the status of the family extrinsically. It is already dictated by Caleb's will. There is possible explanation psychologically in the accepted truth that there are some people obsessed with the mania to command, and others just as obsessed, to obey. Even with this, however, one feels that the threat is not of sufficient force. This is faulty technique that may be overcome. The stuff she weaves into her story is scriptible, and vibrant. This country has long hungered for a literature of the soil. Miss Ostenso is to be hailed as the first vigorous pioneer. Our eyes shall follow with enthusiasm the paths she blazes.

NASHVILLE TENNESSEAN

NOVEMBER 29, 1925

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