

New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 20 | Issue 3

Article 19

1950

Conrad Righter

T. M. Pearce

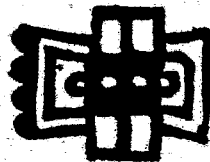
Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Pearce, T. M.. "Conrad Righter." *New Mexico Quarterly* 20, 3 (1950). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol20/iss3/19>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Quarterly* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

BOOKS and COMMENT



T. M. Pearce

CONRAD RICHTER

MY COMPLAINT over some of the tremendous tomes which have been produced by modern novelists is that few of the heroes or heroines have been worth the amount of reader time they have consumed. The authors have worked hard to provide reader interest (and have frequently succeeded) but the art of arousing interest and the art of re-creating a way of life in a past forgotten day are not the same thing. Few of these modern literary behemoths of history and romance have yielded the end product I demand in fiction, which is to bring me the philosophy of an age, the moral and ethical pattern in the period, the motivation and incentives for people to live as they did. When one carries away from a book the knowledge of why people worked to build the civilization of their era, what goals they set (over and above the need for procreation and self-preservation), what ideals were in their minds, what incentives lay in their hearts—then as a reader he feels rewarded. Some of the same substance that shapes our daily thinking and acting lies in that book. As literature the book becomes one with living; in fact, it may be more real than living itself.

Conrad Richter has been ten years writing three books which deal with pioneer America. The latest is *The Town*,* published in March of the present year. *The Trees* appeared in the spring of

* Alfred A. Knopf, 1950.

1940. *The Fields* appeared in 1945. Three other short novels were written by the same author in this decade, but never did he forget the Pennsylvania-Ohio scene of the Lockett and Wheeler families, typical of the people who were clearing a wilderness there in the eighteenth century and laying the foundations of contemporary America. Worth and Jary Lockett, in *The Trees*, are the fore-runners of the clan: woods-folk, hunting-folk, cabin builders. Chauncey Wheeler, in *The Town* is the latest and ripest fruit of the vine: city-bred, school-taught, radical champion of lost causes. Linking the pioneer to the parlor pink is Sayward ("Saird") Lockett Wheeler, the staunch daughter who raised the younger Locketts after their mother had died and their father had abandoned them all, and who stood by the renegade New England aristocrat who married her, guided him to his career as a judge, brought up their children, one son to be governor, a daughter to be titled Englishwoman. The story of *The Town* is the story of Sayward Wheeler, but so is the story of the two novels which were *The Town's* predecessors.

Although the books form a trilogy, each is complete in itself. Reading any one of them is likely to send the reader off to read the other two, but that is the highest tribute to each. I believe *The Town* is the finest of three fine achievements, for it brings to the reader the gist of Conrad Richter's meaning in writing the other books. Sayward Wheeler has seen the mother, Jary, die in the dark woods of Ohio. With her husband she has cleared a space for farming, and made the earth productive. She has lost one sister to the Indians, one brother to the frontier, and has built the rest of her family into the fabric which makes a city. Her youngest and favorite child repudiates her, as reactionary and cloddish. Yet she never releases him from the strength of her affection nor from the support which her material means can give him. To all—to her unfaithful husband, her undutiful children, her patronizing kin—she remains loyal, tolerant and kindly, appraising each in her own terms of value, which have been fairly constant from her

youth, but which are not incapable of change, as witness her attitude toward the trees. She grew up hating them because they shut out the sun and were jealous of the earth men wanted to plow. Before Saird dies, she looks upon the trees as one with herself, something that grips the earth, shelters, houses, and nourishes. She replants trees in the square where once she had helped to clear them away.

It is clear that Mr. Richter intends Saird Wheeler to serve as a symbol of the main stream of American life. Her quiet, steady strength, her conservative thrift and her practical common sense, her sane religious faith, her loyalty to her family even when the cost was cruel—these sum up the virtues of the aristocratic middle class of America, unabashed by more elite cultures but not impervious to their values. Saird does move with the times, but deep down she remains the unpretentious shrewd soul she was as a child. I believe Conrad Richter's trilogy is his greatest achievement, and *The Town* the most engrossing of the three novels. In the light of two of his other notable works, *The Sea of Grass* and *The Free Man*, this is high praise indeed.

Edward F. Castetter

PIMA ETHNOBOTANY

BY WAY OF explanation of the deceptive title—*By the Prophet of the Earth**—it should be pointed out that this book is a miscellaneous topical treatise on Pima ethnobotany, arts and industries, games, legends and beliefs. The work purports to be a treatise on ethnobotany but actually only sixty-

* L. S. M. Curtin, *By The Prophet of the Earth*, San Vicente Foundation, Inc. Santa Fe, 1949. (A note on the San Vicente Foundation was given in our Winter, 1949, issue.)