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A Dreamer's Journey: The Autobiography of Morris Raphael Cohen, by Morris Raphael Cohen

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A DREAMER'S JOURNEY: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MORRIS RAPHAEL COHEN (The Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois, 1949). Pp xiii, 318.

This extraordinary account of an extraordinary life is an American document of first-rate importance. It is American in the fact that nowhere but in the United States could the Russian boy of Minsk who came here at the age of twelve and lived till he was twenty on the East-Side of New York in a poverty that only the devoted labor of his parents made less than squalid, have achieved the distinction of being recognized as one of the foremost philosophers in the country and of exercising an influence which far transcended the group of his immediate pupils.

Morris Cohen tells the story of the things that he did and the things that happened to him from his earliest recollections in Russia to his retirement in 1938 from the College of the City of New York, and he continues thereafter to give us the development of his philosophy and an account of his attempt to integrate his Jewish heritage into the democracy in which he so firmly believed. The last chapters contain fragments of his thoughts and reflections in various subjects.

He broke early with the traditional faith in which he had been reared and he did so without violating filial piety. He shared the Socialist revolt of his generation without becoming a fanatic. He tells simply and directly, the moving story of his "valley of humiliation,"¹ when, ill and hard pressed for money, he was forced into a futile treadmill of teaching large classes of elementary students and saw inferior men preferred to him. He tells this with feeling but without rancor although he had much to suffer at the hands of President Robinson of the City College, who in this, as in so many other instances, seemed eager to demonstrate his moral and intellectual unfitness for the position he held.

Cohen is much more insistent on fully and gratefully acknowledging his debts than on setting forth his grievances. And his principal debt, he tells us, is to the City College in which as student and teacher he spent some forty years, where lay his "valley of humiliation," but where also he experienced his final triumph of recognition.

The City College was often designated as an "anomalous" institution, as though there was something derogatory in that term. The "anomaly" consisted in equipping in five years the students it took fresh from the Manhattan grammar-schools so that they were able to do more than hold their own in graduate studies against those who had had an eight year training in preparatory school and college. It did its work with a rigorous and ruthless discipline and it afforded little academic atmosphere. But to those

1. Pp. 125-143.

who, like Morris Cohen, found an adequate atmosphere in their associates within and without the college it meant an opportunity to acquire the basic academic disciplines. And to poor men's sons, it was the only opportunity, since the College was not merely absolutely free but even provided text-books. The many state-scholarships now available were then non-existent.

The other primary acknowledgment he makes is to Thomas Davidson, who established a school for working-men in New York and gave a name to the Labor School founded by loyal disciples after his death. Davidson is a figure now largely forgotten. Cohen himself wrote a succinct biography of him for the Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. He was a man in whom sweetness of personality and loftiness of soul were more marked than even his certainly exceptional intellectual endowment. He was something of a mystic and his immediate valuation of Cohen's mind was based, we are told, on the fact that the young man's eyes were "far apart." Whatever may be the importance of the correlation of eyes and mind, Davidson, who had close association with many persons, became Cohen's sponsor and faithful friend and, although he died as early as 1900, his direct influence and his memory remained permanent factors in Cohen's life.

Cohen's reputation as a philosopher, especially in the field of logic, stood very high in his life-time. What will interest the readers of this journal especially was his work in legal philosophy. He had a year's experience as a law-student which made the material less foreign to him than it often seems to other philosophers who attempt to deal with the law. He obtained, however, a more complete insight into the problems of the law, through his close association with such men as Holmes and Frankfurter. He opened up new lines of inquiry and above all challenged, by his sharp criticism, many accepted theses.

It is perhaps in the critical faculty there displayed that he excelled. It is doubtful whether any coherent body of philosophic doctrine will bear his name to posterity. He wrote many articles, some of which have been collected into volumes. In collaboration with his pupil, Professor Ernest Nagel of Columbia, he prepared an admirable text-book, "An Introduction to Logic and Scientific Method," in which his share was perhaps larger than he assigns to himself.² But he wrote no book of exposition of his own ideas though he planned and began many. It is understood that his son, Felix, now Visiting Lecturer at the Yale Law School, and an eminent legal thinker in his own right, is preparing some of his father's unfinished manuscripts for publication.

But it is likely that Cohen's reputation will, in any case, remain what it was. We may forego the much abused metaphor of a "catalytic agent" which would be quite inaccurate as applied to him. It was rather as a solvent of

any accepted doctrine that his mind worked. The obvious comparison is with Socrates, who founded no school himself, but gave the impetus to Academics and Peripatetics to Megarians and Cynics. Indeed, Cohen's method of instruction was eminently Socratic, often to the intense irritation of students and disputants whom he forced to render an account of what they maintained as beliefs.

I venture to think that his mind lacked suavity as his style lacked urbanity. If any one had denied him sophistication, he would doubtless have replied that it was a quality to which he attached little value. It is perhaps more serious that he apparently lacked contact with the fine arts, for which his published work indicates little sympathy or feeling. It is quite possible that his moral earnestness and his penetrating intellect were the stronger by compensation.

My association with him was in brief meetings, separated by long intervals. I never left him except with a renewal of the profound respect and strong personal affection which he had inspired in me at the beginning of our acquaintance, more than half a century ago. The reading of the book has a nostalgic quality for me which it must have for all who knew him.

MAX RADIN†

CHIEF JUSTICE JOHN MARSHALL AND THE GROWTH OF THE REPUBLIC.
By David Loth. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1949. Pp. 395. \$5.00.

Although brevity may be the soul of wit, it is the essence of superficiality in history. Three hundred and eighty-two pages is entirely too short a space to tell adequately the story of John Marshall's eighty years. From Valley Forge to Jackson's Bank War, Marshall was an active participant and an ardent partisan in each successive development in American political and legal history. In his long term on the supreme bench he heard 1,215 cases, and personally wrote the court's opinions on 519. He was a leader of the Virginia bar, member of Virginia's ratifying convention, one of the nation's largest land speculators, commissioner to France, Secretary of State, biographer of George Washington, and member of Virginia's constitutional convention of 1829-30. Such a career can hardly be mentioned in 130,000 words—the length of a summer novel.

Mr. Loth's slight sketch makes no pretense of profundity. It is a simple narrative, devoid of analysis and accepting the conventional interpretations. It contains no fresh insight and presents no new material on the career of John Marshall. Its merit—if it be merit—lies in the author's cavalier capacity for condensation. *Marbury v. Madison* gets—case, decision, and reaction—less than 2,000 words; *United States v. Peters* about 750, and *Fletcher v. Peck* 400. The index lists 25 cases, many of which are not identified by name in

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