

From the Bookshelf

The 'New Negro' By Saville R. Davis

The New World of Negro Americans, by Harold R. Isaacs. New York: John Day Company. 366 pp. \$7.50.

It can be safely surmised that most everyone concerned—the American Negro and the African, the conservative Southern white and the American liberal on race matters—will be jolted and perhaps angered at some point by Mr. Isaacs's book. And that each one will be well repaid by reading it. So will anyone else.

The writer lays motivations on the page, naked. His object is honesty no matter where it hurts. He has talked at length with significant numbers of American Negroes and Africans as an experienced interviewer, concerned with tracing their thoughts and impulses back to origin. He reports on the impact of world affairs on the race problem in the United States. This material is the main substance of his book. But beyond this is a very considerable contribution by the author himself. He refines his analysis until lucid.

The reaction of the reader is apt to be a series of, "I ought to have known this but I didn't." He will probably recognize, especially if he is American, that his concept of the race problem in the United States was unsophisticated, a collection of notions and fragments, and that he now begins to understand.

Mr. Isaacs does systematically what Americans have learned to expect in flashes from James Baldwin.

He has no mercy in the smaller sense that he will not temper his facts to the shorn lamb. Whether he wounds to heal, so to speak, is his own business. The frequent shock of finding one's own viewpoint, whatever it be, cut open like an overripe banana ought, in this reviewer's opinion, to be salutary.

Some samples of Mr. Isaacs's writing will best suggest the quality of the book:

"Like everyone else, Negroes are having to rearrange the truths and falsities of how they see others and how they see themselves."

"There have been such ['New Negroes'] in every generation and there is nothing really 'new' about them at all. What is new is that today's 'New Negroes' are appearing in a situation where for the first time the odds are with them...."

"What Negroes, like Jews, must now dis-

cover is how much of the cement that holds them together as a group has been pounded out of the stuff of their oppression over the centuries. Will the cracking of their bonds also crack their group ties? . . . These questions . . . suggest only some small part of the complex turmoil that is only beginning now as Negroes in greater and greater numbers shed the burdens of nobodiness and take on the new demands and new burdens of what Martin Luther King calls somebodiness."

"It is only partly true to say that American racism has become more visible to the world; it is perhaps truer to say that more of the world has become more visible to Americans."

"A well known Negro social scientist in a visiting post at a West African university was not invited to the home of a single one of his African colleagues during his first nine months there, and in two years he was invited out in this circle only two or three times. When I saw him, near the end of his stay, he was still pondering the matter in some perplexity, unable to decide what kind of snobbism had been at work—British, academic, conservative or plain African...."

"They [Negroes] have somehow to keep their bearings with the uneven pace of change, some of it coming fast, some of it slow, some coming here, none coming there; and the more things change the more intolerable is the survival of what has not changed. The 'faster' things move, the greater the frustration because they never do move fast enough."

"While Richard Wright wandered over the world holding fast to his outsideriness, Ralph Ellison clung hard to his home ground and began trying to reach for a new sense of Negro insideriness, for a distinctive cultural personality that asserted its legitimacy within the American society and, for that matter, within the total human culture."

"Integration . . . simply means being included in everything that everybody else is included in. The rest would be up to the free interplay of society, group and individual, for this is what the American society ideally offers and must finally offer in fact to all its members: free scope for individuals to develop by their own gifts and for groups to exist within the society by their own vitality and by the needs they serve. This is the open society. . . ."