

A black sharecropper's perspective on the South

By James Reston, Jr.

I APPROACH this book, winner of this year's National Book Award for contemporary affairs, with more than a little skepticism. A young white historian sets out from Massachusetts to find an old black sharecropper in the wilderness of Alabama's black belt so that he can discover more about the now-defunct Alabama Sharecroppers Union; he stumbles upon Nate Shaw, 84 years old, a marvelous storyteller, and obtains backing from the Ford Foundation to record Shaw's life history; and from 1,500 pages of recorded conversations issues an autobiography told in Nate Shaw's own dialect.

Why skepticism? Because Rosengarten's project has the feel of the early '60's, when Northerners (like me) went South by the thousands to focus on the pitiful, racist region, ignoring their own problems (which blew up in the urban riots of 1967-68) and making the South out to be backward and barbaric in its racial practices—which it was—and returning home shortly thereafter with a sort of metaphysical pride that they, at least, had done their part against the injustice of America. In many cases, this was simply slumming.

And yet, Rosengarten's preface is disarming. He admits his prejudices and shortcomings. Nate Shaw knew why he had come before the purpose of the visit was defined: the investigator was "young, white, polite, frightened, Northern." This honesty is refreshing. But more

**All God's Dangers:
The Life of Nate Shaw,
by Theodore Rosengarten**
Knopf, 556 pages, \$12.50

importantly, Rosengarten asks: "What happens to the history of a people not accustomed to writing things down? To whom poverty and illiteracy make wills, diaries, and letters superfluous?"

This is an important question. Anyone who has driven through the Deep South, looking across vast stretches of tilled soil interrupted only by a board shack (usually abandoned), senses that there is a story there. It is an American story, and who would tell it? Surely not white or even black Southerners, who are just as happy to ignore the sharecropping tradition or to disguise the fact that there are 100,000 sharecroppers still in the country, virtually all of them in the South. The sharecropper muddies the image of the New South.

Probing the Southern Mind

Something else significant is taking place. The South's history has always, quite obviously, been told from the white perspective, and only in the past few years has there been a recognition of the cultural importance of the black perspective. A two-week-long symposium at the University of North Carolina in 1972 entitled *The Mind of the South: the Southern Soul* was the first

major intellectual event in which black intellectuals and artists were given equal voice with whites in probing the Southern mind. "Voice" is the right word, for there is very little written to go on. With Nate Shaw's autobiography, the literature of the South is greatly enriched.

Rosengarten has accomplished his feat by staying out of the story himself. Shaw's dialect is authentic, rich, and believable, because the authority of the tape recorder stands behind it. The transfer from the spoken word to the written is rendered with dignity and sensitivity. Beyond that, Rosengarten as editor and arranger has done a masterful job at giving the narrative a thrust and avoiding repetition, although by the 500th page, some readers may tire of yet another mule story. It was not an easy job, as anyone who has worked with taped interviews knows, especially interviews with uneducated subjects.

Nate Shaw is an unusual character, and he makes a fascinating

"... the sound of the storyteller's voice is the important quality of this book. It transports the reader into the century of limbo for the black man...."

In the words of Nate Shaw...

AND DURIN of the pressure years, a union begin to operate in this country, called it the Sharecroppers Union—that was a nice name, I thought—and my first knowin about this union, this organization, that riot come off at Crane's Ford in '31. I looked deep in that thing, too—I heard more than I seed and I taken that in consideration. And I knowed what was goin on was a turnabout on the southern man, white and colored; it was somethin unusual. And I heard about it bein a organization for the poor class of people—that's just what I wanted to get into, too; I wanted to know the secrets of it enough that I could become in the knowledge of it. Now I heard talk about trucks comin into this country delivering guns to the colored people but I decided all that was talk, tryin to accuse the niggers of gettin into somethin here that maybe they weren't—and maybe they were. But didn't no trucks haul no guns to nobody. Colored people hadn't been armed up for nothin; it was told like that just to agitate the thing further. Of course, some of these colored folks in here had some good guns—you know a Winchester rifle is a pretty good gun itself. But they didn't have nothin above that. It weren't nothin that nobody sent in here for em to use, just their own stuff.

—FROM "ALL GOD'S DANGERS: THE LIFE OF NATE SHAW"

study of the black man's life before anyone ever heard of civil rights. He knew how to "humble-talk" to the white man, but he could stand up to him as well, as he did in 1932 when deputy sheriffs came to confiscate a neighbor's livestock. He knew how to avoid trouble when violence was all around him, and yet he had a breaking point. And his eye on political matters is sometimes sharp and canny. Of the disenfranchisement of the black at the turn of the century, which he watched as a boy, Shaw says:

"I knowed and I thought at all times it was only fair for a man if he goin to vote to vote for who he wanted. But it never came to that; nigger didn't know the difference in one from the other. He was kept out of the knowledge of knowin so that he would want to sell his vote because that was the only advantage he could get from votin...."

"Then they disfranchised him, cut the nigger clean out from votin.... What was that, votin or not votin, either way under them conditions, but keepin the nigger under their thumbs? But takin the vote away was worse: if they couldn't just

slave the nigger back like he used to be, it was pointin the nigger in that direction."

But baldly political passages like this one are few, because politics, overt politics, rarely touched Shaw's life. Rather, the autobiography is filled with rich detail of the commonplace events of the sharecropper's life: hard work, family, occasional violent incidents, death, the boll weevil, prison, "white gentlemen," birth, God, fertilizer, and mules. This may not sound exciting, but the sound of the storyteller's voice is the important quality of this book. It transports the reader into the century of limbo for the black between the end of slavery and the beginning of the civil rights movement and reminds us that, after all, things began to get better only about 10 years ago.

With his qualities of humor, of defiance, of longevity, Nate Shaw comes across as an immensely dignified man living in a basely undignified circumstance.

James Reston, Jr., a novelist, lectures in creative writing at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.