BOOK REVIEWS


This recent publication contains a minimum of direct information about western Pennsylvania. But there are several good reasons for its review in this magazine. The author is, by undergraduate education, a Pennsylvanian, and by position in Grove City College, a western Pennsylvanian. His subject is directly related to the emphasis now being given to the centennial of the great Civil War, and his work adds light to one or more articles and documents in the volumes of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine.

The Liberty Line is based upon extensive research. Time and distance are obvious features of the author's extended preparation. With the small exception of some minor repetition the volume is not only well organized but artistically handled. And mastery of format in historical paraphernalia is everywhere seen. The publisher is to be congratulated also, though a gentle criticism might suggest that one or more maps and several pictures would have added to the value as well as to the cost of the publication.

Like much of the best historiographical scholarship of this century, this work of Mr. Gara is Alexandrian rather than Attic, that is to say, critical and interpretative rather than creative.

As the subtitle indicates, it is partly the history of legend about a thing rather than the history of the thing itself. Its purport is undoubtedly corrective but it falls somewhat clearly into the anti-myth and anti-tradition category. And this prevalent category is none too distantly removed from earlier debunking.

The author is seemingly very confident of his findings and presentation. In eight chapters dealing with half-a-dozen aspects of the subject, he presents fairly definite points of view and conclusions. Among these may be observed very important items which may be thus summarized: the Underground Railroad was never well organized. That it was so organized is a legend, a myth, almost folklore. The role of abolitionists in this work was sporadic and minor. Quaker participation in this activity has been exaggerated. Free Negroes and runaways themselves played heroic roles. The extent of the fugitive slavery was slight. The famous Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 was mainly political and constitutional
rather than regulatory. But as an emotional matter the so-called Underground Railroad promoted the irresistible conflict, the Civil War.

Some readers may reject the conclusions of this book, but no one will find it uninteresting or unimportant.

The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania  ALFRED P. JAMES

*From Trail Dust to Star Dust.* By MARGARET GREER. (Danbury, Conn.: Danbury Printing Co., 1960. 120 pp. Illustrations, including a pictorial map of Johnstown. Index. $3.00. A six-color pictorial map, 30 by 23 inches, is available at $2.00.)

The hand-lettered title of this book will undoubtedly be read "from frail dust to stov dust" without inspiring the reader to open it and find that it is a history of Johnstown, Pennsylvania. Clarity and legibility are also sacrificed to fancy script on a reduced "Pictorial Map" used as a frontispiece which is otherwise helpful to non-residents to understand many references in the text. If truth be told, some of the word pictures within are also not too clear. These and other criticisms should not discourage the reader who will find that this book will give an over-all history of a dynamic little city which deserves recognition in its own right, aside from its distinction as the site of one of the country's greatest disasters.

Johnstown, situated in the center of western Pennsylvania, lies in the foothills of the Allegheny Mountains on the line of passage through the Appalachians, which offered least resistance to those who would traverse them on foot, horse, water, or wheeled vehicle, going east or west. By reason of proximity to wood, coal and iron ore which the ingenuity of its early residents used to advantage on a water way developed by the state, it attained national prominence.

The author did extensive research to present an interesting story which is not readily found in any other single book and she does this with the enthusiasm of a "booster." Had she lived to supervise publication, the book would undoubtedly have profited by editorial revision.

The chapters, which set Johnstown apart from cities of similar size, relate to (1) the rise of its iron and steel industry; (2) its strategical position on the system known as the Pennsylvania Canal, which eventually became the general route of the Pennsylvania