

LOUIS ADAMIC AND THE BOOK-OF-THE-MONTH CLUB

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Abstract

To Slovene readers the honoring of Louis Adamic's book *The Native's Return* as the Book-of-the-Month Club selection for February 1934 came as a surprise. This article, however, provides an overview of events and actions that culminated in the decision of the Club's judges in order to show that the whole success story had been carefully planned by Louis Adamic who had put an enormous amount of effort into making his book a bestseller, and succeeded.

Slovene readers knew little if anything about book clubs in the United States until Louis Adamic's work came under scrutiny pending the celebrations at home and in the U.S. to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the author's death in 1981. A dual symposium was organized, in Minneapolis, MN, and in Ljubljana, Slovenia, to honor the man who, between 1920 and 1951, succeeded in placing one of his books on the bestseller charts, winning a Guggenheim Fellowship and an Anisfield Award, and even getting invited to the White House. But the pinnacle of his career was the day his book *The Native's Return* was pronounced the Book-of-the-Month for February 1934.

To begin with, the *Oxford Companion to American Literature* explains American book clubs as follows,

Book clubs select books issued by regular publishers for release to their members, at retail prices or less, and with dividends of extra books. The first U.S. organization, the Book-of-the-Month Club, was founded in 1926 with 4,750 subscribers, and in 1946 had nearly 1,000,000 members. In 20 years it distributed some 70,000,000 volumes, and set the pattern for most book clubs. Its board of judges selects a newly issued book (or a dual selection of two short books) for the members who guarantee to accept four selections a year. Members receive a dividend upon joining, another for every two books purchased, and a monthly literary review /.../ In 1946, at the height of the plan, there were some 25 clubs distributing some 75,000,000 books annually and grossing one-sixth of all U.S. book sales /.../ The effect of these organizations on literary taste has been much discussed" (Hart 89).

A quarter of a century ago, as a young student, I was leafing through Louis Adamic's papers in search of pertinent material for my M.A. thesis on Adamic as a literary critic. I was not particularly interested in Adamic's relationship with the Book-of-the-Month Club at that time. What astonished me most in those days was the simple fact that Adamic apparently knew – it seemed to me — like half of the population of the U.S. personally. Name after name popped up, many of them were mentioned with a casual sort of attitude, many reappeared. Names like Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Henry Seidel Canby or Maurice Hindus. I did not pay much attention to them then but have not forgotten them either. Mark J. Madigan, visiting Fulbright Professor at the English Department of Ljubljana University in spring of 2004 and connoisseur of Dorothy Canfield Fisher's work (see bibliography), revived my interest in half forgotten matters. I returned to investigate Adamic; indeed, a closer inspection of his career and work reveals why the above people were important to him and how they influenced his career. As they were all, in one way or another, connected with the Book-of-the-Month Club, the purpose of my paper will be to explore the nature of Adamic's relationship with them as well as the resulting consequences. I will begin with a minor diversion.

Adamic's fellow immigrant, lifelong admirer and friend Janko N. Rogelj, who had established himself as a Slovene American author, actor, theater director and public personality,¹ dedicated a good number of pages of his then unpublished memoir *Spomini* to his interaction with Adamic. Rogelj was editor of the Slovene language newspaper *Nova Doba (New Era)* that announced in January of 1934² the honoring of Adamic through the Book-of-the-Month Club: "The Book-of-the-Month Club, America's largest book club, selected the above-mentioned book as the best out of almost 1,000 books"³ (Rogelj II, 326). Rogelj hastens to add that the board of judges consisting of Henry Seidel Canby, William Allen White, Christopher Morley and Dorothy Canfield Fisher voted unanimously in favor of Adamic's book. The latter will be published on February 1 in 55,000 copies all of which will immediately be sent to the Club members nationwide. Additional 50,000 copies will be printed for sale in bookstores and the publisher plans an English edition as well as translations into Russian, French, Spanish and Czech (Ibid.). Later on, on p. 330 of his memoirs, Rogelj confirms the realization of the above plans: Adamic's book did appear in all of the languages mentioned plus additionally in Danish. The English edition was published in the U.S., Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia and South America (!).⁴ Rogelj's article goes on to mention the January, 1934 issue of the *Book-of-the-Month Club News* that contained two important articles: one, written by Henry Seidel Canby⁵ titled "The

¹ More on Rogelj in J.Petrič. "Janko N.Rogelj". *Slovenska izseljenska književnost 2. Severna Amerika*. Janja Žitnik and Helga Glušič, Eds. Ljubljana: Rokus and ZRC SAZU, 1999, 196-201, 437-8.

² Rogelj wrongly dates the paper as December 1934.

³ My translation.

⁴ Adamic's letter to I.F. Lupis Vukić dated February 25, 1934 contains the following: "Rec'd a cable from Stockholm for Swedish rights to my book. That's the ninth translation. Am I dreaming?" (Nacionalna i sveučilišna biblioteka Zagreb)

⁵ Henry Seidel Canby (1870-1961), former Yale professor of literature and editor of *The Saturday Review of Literature*. He published a number of books of literary and social criticism as well as newspaper articles.

Native's Return" and another, written by Maurice Hindus⁶, titled "Louis Adamic". Both articles were translated into Slovene and published by the Slovene language newspaper *Prosveta* in two installments⁷, however, Rogelj deemed it necessary to translate the articles himself "so as to be able to include them in my memoir" (Ibid.).

Canby's article begins on an enthusiastic note: he names the reasons that made him decide in favor of Adamic's book, the main one being the novelty of Adamic's endeavor. According to Canby Adamic was the first immigrant author who returned to his homeland to take a look with new, American eyes. Adamic, Canby says, has described his homeland the way no European nor American has done so far. Canby's laudatory article recommends *The Native's Return* to prospective readers as one of the finest books in its genre. He constantly extols Adamic's power of narration, the richness of topics, the mix of tragedy and comedy, Adamic's humor and his style (334).

Rogelj was right in stating that Canby's article represented a piece of extremely good criticism that added its bit to the overwhelming market success of Adamic's new book. According to Rogelj, his position within the Book-of-the-Month board of judges gave Canby's enthusiastic appraisal very significant weight. Maurice Hindus' in-depth report on Adamic's life and career as well as his very sympathetic portrait of Adamic as a human being⁸ rounded the promotion of Adamic's new book off perfectly. It would be interesting to know whether Dorothy Canfield Fisher touched upon the issue of honoring Adamic's book in her correspondence. *Keeping Fires Night and Day: Selected Letters of Dorothy Canfield Fisher* by Mark J. Madigan contains 189 letters written by Canfield Fisher, however, there are no letters between October 5, 1933⁹ and (presumably) August 1934,¹⁰ which means that the time when the board of judges took its decision concerning Adamic's book is not covered in the book.

On the other hand, Adamic's ties with the Book-of-the-Month Club were strong; he even wrote *The Native's Return* with the purpose of making it the Club's selection. In a letter to Henry Hoyns and Cass Canfield, respectively Chairman of Board and President of Harper and Brothers, dated February 13, 1934, Adamic claims to be absolutely positive his book was selected because it had been written with a clear purpose in mind:

You may not know it, but it so happens that I started to work on the Book-of-the-Month idea more than a year ago, and I am certain the book

⁶ Maurice Gerschon Hindus (1891-1969), Russian born-author, came to the U.S. in 1905, graduated from Colgate and often revisited Russia. Author of non-fiction and fiction as well as criticism. He was a good acquaintance of Louis Adamic if not a friend. In 1961 he visited Slovenia and came to see Rogelj at his birthplace; he also came to see Adamic's brothers.

⁷ No title. *Prosveta*, January 10, 1934, 8. "Kaj pravijo ameriški kritiki o novi Adamičevi knjigi", *Prosveta*, January 17, 1934, 3.

⁸ Relatively little is known about Adamic as a private person. Hindus portrays Adamic as a social person, a good listener who never interrupted the speaker, a very matter-of-fact and dignified man, at times as witty and simple as a Slovene peasant. It did not bother him to live with his mother-in-law. He could eat everything (except cucumbers) and sleep anywhere. He hated barbers, such that Stella, his wife, had to trick him into having a haircut. He loved football, going to the movies, a good book and a long walk in the country.

⁹ Letter to Alfred Harcourt.

¹⁰ Undated letter to Harry and Bernardine K. Sherman.

was selected mainly, if not solely, because I've been working on the thing all this time. Last fall I was nearly 100% sure that the Book-of-the-Month would take it (ask Miss Herdman) (Princeton University Library).¹¹

Adamic and Henry Seidel Canby were personal friends. When he learned that Canby and his wife were planning to go to Europe he gave them a letter of reference for a friend of his, the Croatian Ivo Frano Lupis Vukić.¹² The Canbys were the first in a line of individuals and groups sent by Adamic to see his friend at his home in Split, people like Harry Sherman, President of the Book-of-the-Month Club (sic!) and his wife, New York *Herald Tribune* literary critic Lewis Gannett and wife and others. The Shermans were supposed to visit Lupis Vukić in the summer of 1934 but the visit never took place due to their son's sudden illness.

Adamic's letter introduces the Canbys as good friends of himself and Stella. Dr Canby, the editor-in-chief of the prestigious American literary review *The Saturday Review of Literature* was on his way to an international congress of the P.E.N. club. Adamic suggested a sightseeing plan for their short visit in Split (Ibid.).

The Canbys did meet with Lupis Vukić who showed him Solun, Trogir and Šibenik. Mrs Canby sent a postcard to Adamic to thank him for his mediation (225). In a further letter to Lupis Vukić Adamic mentions a dinner he and Stella had with the Canbys after Adamic's return from his one-year ship to Yugoslavia: "They remember you with deep affection" (Nacionalna i sveučilišna biblioteka Zagreb).

The most interesting among Adamic's letters to Lupis Vukić is the one dated December 19, 1933. It was written in New York to report the most wonderful news to his friend – the Book-of-the-Month Club's selection of his book *The Native's Return* for the month of February 1934. Adamic explained to his friend the consequences of the above decision:

That means that in February this organization will send to its subscribers 55,000 copies of the book. The subscribers are scattered all over the U. S. These 55,000 are apart from the regular sales which will be handled by Harper & Brothers, my publishers. The regular sales are found to be over 20,000, but may go past 50,000. The book will be reviewed in a big way in about 800 of the largest American newspapers and magazines. In other words, next February Yugoslavia will be put on the map so far as the Americans are concerned (Nacionalna i sveučilišna biblioteka Zagreb).

Adamic also informed Lupis Vukić about the forthcoming translations. He believed that his book would prompt 10,000 Americans to visit Yugoslavia in 1934. But he also prophesied that the book would be banned there (as it indeed was). Adamic concluded by asking his friend to spread the above news among the Yugoslav press without naming him as a source. He was well aware how dangerous an openly con-

¹¹ Ramona Herdman was a member of the Harper publicity staff (Christian: Typescript 256).

¹² Lupis Vukić lived in Split on the Dalmatian coast. He had been in the U.S. twice and had published a Croatian language newspaper in Chicago, "had toured North and South America to study life and conditions in Croatian "colonies", and had maintained a strong interest in emigrants since resettling in Split" (Christian: Unpublished typescript 197).

fessed friendship with him might be for Lupis Vukić at the time. He even suggested his friend should publicly renounce their friendship for his own safety. In a P.S. Adamic added it was Dr Canby who took much of the credit for the selection of *The Native's Return* (Christian 238). Adamic's next letter to Lupis Vukić was written on 24th January 1934. Still in New York, Adamic confirmed the receipt of two letters by his friend but confessed he could not remember whether he had replied or not. He complained about having to work day and night and informed his friend to expect a package containing *The Native's Return*. Adamic happily reported excellent sales of the book, 6,000 copies having been sold before the book had even appeared in print, and estimated the sales numbers for 1934 at more than 100,000 (239-240).

The Book-of-the-Month Club selection of *The Native's Return* had a marked impact on Adamic's future as a writer. As soon as the decision was made public, the book and its author were advertised nationwide; after the release on February 1, 1934, the papers were overflowing with reviews. Adamic was all of a sudden snowed under heaps of fan mail and his life took a completely new turn. He was thrilled nevertheless: in the above mentioned letter to Lupis Vukić he mentioned having seen a very positive review written by William Soskin to be published in 12 Randolph Hearst papers on February 1 (Ibid.). He did his best to keep his friend updated. First he sent him the book and then press cuttings on several occasions. He further reported on the book's success:

It's three weeks after publication and the book is in the ninth printing. It's selling over 1,000 copies a day in addition to the 55,000 copies which the Book-of-the-Month distributed. It's liable to reach 100,000 or more. (...) Now I understand that *The Native's Return* is in first place as a non-fiction bestseller. Two novels, one by Sinclair Lewis, are ahead of my book. Note also the big ad which appears today (Sunday) in the New York Herald-Tribune BOOKS section and the New York Times Book Review Section. The ad costs over 700 dollars in the Times for one insertion. It's fantastic (Nacionalna i sveučilišna biblioteka Zagreb).

Although he had obviously planned the whole story very carefully, Adamic was nevertheless caught unawares by the booming success and the amount of work he consequently loaded upon himself so as not to let the golden opportunity slip through his fingers. He immediately made plans and arrangements for the future: lecture tours, newspaper interviews, radio speeches, and a new book about the U.S. — a follow-up to *The Native's Return*... As it happened, *My America, 1928-1938* did not appear right away but in 1938 as it was preceded by the novel *Grandsons* (1935) that, much to Adamic's disappointment, failed to become yet another bestseller. The book's reviews were, according to Adamic, "very interesting" and the sales were "very good"; however, in a letter to Lupis Vukić dated April 11, 1935 he mentions 15,000 sold copies and complains about the inability of American readers to fully comprehend his new book:

A great many of them feel a vague resentment against it, and so they cavil over the form which is somewhat casual and unorthodox for a novel.

Mr. Canby's paper, for instance, dismissed it with a paragraph, which was a surprise to me. I had expected him to be broad enough to get it. We met since then, but avoided speaking of it (Ibid.).

In spite of his disappointment and evidently somewhat cooled relationship with Canby, Adamic tried to put on a brave face assuring his friend that his personal relationship with Canby was not affected. "Canby is a fine fellow, but he is an old-time American, slightly (unconsciously) resentful of us foreigners who dare to tell America where to get off; also, his background is academic and classical" (Ibid.).

Adamic remained in touch with the Canbys, notwithstanding their difference of opinion. He helped organize the Canbys' summer trip of 1935 to the island of Korčula where Lupis Vukić was to host them.

Thanks to the Book-of-the-Month Club Louis Adamic became a celebrity; a whole generation of Americans grew up knowing his name. This seemingly overstated idea was confirmed to me years ago by an American professor; it was also confirmed in black and white by Carey McWilliams, a New York lawyer and author as well as Adamic's long-time friend. In 1935 he published a 100-page booklet *Louis Adamic & Shadow America* that begins with the following words:

With increasing frequency during the last few years, I have been asked: What sort of person is Louis Adamic? In truth, I distinctly remember being asked this question years ago by friends who had merely heard that I knew an interesting chap who worked in the pilot commissioner's office in the harbor of San Pedro, California (McWilliams 7).

McWilliams' account attempts to satisfy the curiosity of people like himself – intellectuals – therefore it is not surprising that he mainly probes Louis Adamic's mind, explains his views, ideas and aspirations as a writer. He writes about a man who " /.../ wasn't a native, [who] could stand apart" (22). Williams further speaks about Adamic as being " /.../ instinctively hostile to typically middle-class concepts" (23). He had "a deep feeling for a free and exciting existence, largely racial in origin" (24),

Interestingly though, McWilliams does not touch upon the Book-of-the-Month episode in Adamic's life. However, a remark in Chapter Three of his book is, to my mind, crucial for our understanding of the gradual decline of Adamic's popularity as a writer:

"With a certain feeling for what is sound, simple and charming, Adamic has slight aesthetic sensitivity. He has an inveterate habit of regarding books as documents (and what he thinks about the arts of painting and music, I know not) /.../ If the human significance of a book touches him, he is almost certain to regard it as a masterpiece" (45).

A little further on, McWilliams adds, "Hence I say that Adamic has some of the instincts of an artist, but that he is not primarily an artist" (47).

Although the publication of *The Native's Return* in 1934 brought about challenges, excitements and rewards (also in financial terms), the euphoria lasted only for a couple of months. Adamic was a very highly strung person who lost no time turning

his numerous ideas into actions: "I was nervous, hectic as the devil most of the time", he writes in *Grandsons* (Adamic in McWilliams 27).

Between January of 1934 and the fall of 1936, he published *The Native's Return*, *Struggle*, *Grandsons*, *Lucas*, *King of the Balucas*, *Cradle of Life*, and a number of articles and reviews. He was a true workaholic who continued publishing until his untimely death in 1951. No other book of his became a selection of any book club in the U.S., but the selection of 1934 remains a unique achievement no other Slovene American could ever repeat.

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