

THE AMERICAN RECEPTION OF LOUIS ADAMIC'S LAST BOOK ON YUGOSLAVIA

Janja Žitnik

*The Eagle and the Roots*¹ is the last book by Louis Adamic (1898-1951), the Slovene-born U.S. writer whose successful literary career spanned three decades and produced twenty novels and other books, and more than 500 articles. *The Eagle and the Roots* was published posthumously as the author's third book dealing with his native country.² The writer discussed the conditions in Yugoslavia in 1949 and shed light on the causes and consequences of a split between Yugoslavia and the Cominform. In the last part of the book the author took a closer look at the life of Josip Broz Tito from his childhood and youth to 1945, and stressed the great sacrifices and the determination of the Yugoslav people involved in the National Liberation Movement. Adamic started writing the book in 1949, at the time of his second visit to his native land. He jotted down his impressions and took notes of his conversations with the leading Yugoslav political, economic and cultural representatives, former resistance fighters, as well as randomly selected workers and peasants. He supplemented their testimonies with data made available to him by his assistants in Yugoslavia.

The book was published in the U.S.A. on 22 May 1952, that is, nine months after the writer's death, and in an abbreviated form. The final editing of the book was by the author's widow, Stella Adamic, and by the publisher's editor, Timothy Seldes. In their foreword they stated that the editing consisted of cutting about one third of the text, along lines which the author had suggested or which they were certain he would have followed. They cut one long chapter describing the world situation at the time, a chapter on Old Yugoslavia, a final chapter which repeated the ground already covered, and some shorter passages, footnotes, asides, and references which "impeded the flow of the story." The unpublished parts of the text and the corrections, which were made by the two editors, have been discussed elsewhere by the

¹ *The Eagle and the Roots* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1952).

² Adamic's first two books on Yugoslavia were: *The Native's Return: An American Immigrant Visits Yugoslavia and Discovers His Old Country* (New York and London: Harper, 1934) and *My Native Land* (New York and London: Harper, 1943).

present writer.³ Even though Adamic made some arrangements concerning the translation of the book into Slovene as early as 1949, at the time when he was still writing it, the Slovene translation was not finally published until 1970, eighteen years after the U.S. edition.⁴

When it was originally published in 1952, about thirty-five reviews of the book were published in U.S. periodicals. Most of them merely provided information on the book. However, fifteen book reviews dealt with the work at greater length; it is these fifteen which are the subject of what follows.

Two months before the publication of the book, a reviewer of the *Kirkus Reviews* had already published his review of the galley sheets. He describes Adamic's book as exciting but difficult, a book which amply rewards the concentration necessitated on the part of the reader. The reviewer also finds that if Adamic had lived to complete his work on the text, some of the difficulties might have been ironed out. The work is repetitive in places, incoherent, overlong and the names are difficult for the American reader. However, he considers the book to be an important contribution to understanding a country and a people who hold the key to one of the vital aspects of the future of the world.⁵ The *Library Journal* writes, a week before the official publication of the book, that the work is extremely informative and absorbing, sometimes controversial, but a worthy document to the author.⁶ Appearing two days after the publication of the book, the *New Yorker* review discusses the amorphous quality of the story which, it says, can probably be attributed to Adamic's untimely death. Despite its formlessness, this is one of his most interesting documents about the country. The reviewer also adds that Adamic's attitude toward Tito and his regime is friendly but not uncritical, and that his book sounds fair-minded.⁷

The reviews published in the two major magazines, *New York Times Book Review* and *Herald Tribune Book Review*, are much more critical of Adamic's book. In the former, Hal Lehrman contends that the work reveals high mental vigor, phenomenal

³ Janja Žitnik, *Geneza Adamičeve knjige Orel in korenine: Analiza končne redakcije*, Master's thesis, University of Ljubljana, 1988, 255 pp..

⁴ *Orel in korenine*, transl. Mira Mihelič (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1970).

⁵ "Adamic, Louis, The Eagle and the Roots," *Kirkus Reviews* 20 (1 April, 1952) 249-250.

⁶ Kurt Schwerin, "Adamic, Louis, The Eagle and the Roots," *Library Journal* 77 (15 May, 1952) 886.

⁷ "The Eagle and the Roots, by Louis Adamic," *New Yorker* 28 (24 May, 1952) 141.

physical energy and obvious fascination with the theme on the part of the author. He finds the reports amorphous, but in their formlessness vibrant with power and even "a kind of undisciplined grandeur." Lehrman admits that it is distasteful to debate with a man who can no longer answer back, but then continues his criticism of the author. The core of the article is actually criticism of Tito and Yugoslav policy rather than of the book itself. Lehrman goes on to say that Adamic's story, which in any case will for a long time continue to speak for him, contrives behind a simulated objectivity to exonerate Tito, his Communist apparatus and his totalitarian regime of every crime and nearly every error charged against them by the free world. Lehrman concludes that sections of Adamic's book which deal with the personal histories of the Partisan leaders have a unique value entirely apart from the other contents. Knowing him as a friend, men like Kardelj, Kidrič, Djilas and Pijade — usually close-mouthed about themselves — spoke to Adamic freely and he, alert to the journalistic and historical significance of such rare factual material, noted it all down. From Tito he had some thirty hours of intimate reminiscences and apparently uninhibited conversation. In addition, he did monumental research among persons who had been revolutionary intimates of Tito during the Partisan struggle, and his associates during the pre-war decades of underground preparation. Skilfully inserted into the broader survey of Tito's Yugoslavia, the documentation became a book within a book, virtually a full-length biography of Tito himself. Not likely to be seriously outmoded even by the official biography then in progress, says Lehrman, this part of Adamic's account should remain for a long time to come an important sourcebook on Tito's early life and his emergence in public life.⁸

In his review in the *Herald Tribune Book Review*, Philip E. Mosely, a university professor from New York, who had made extended visits to Yugoslavia before and after Second World War, notes that the book is alternately brooding and violent, and that it is effective in its vignettes, its sharp images of things seen and of individuals. It is least effective in its effort to explain the complex unfolding of Yugoslav development since the Cominform expelled Tito's government. Mosely adds that Adamic has also vividly reported numerous conversations with leading men of the new regime. His sketches of their lives, their conversions to Communism and their outlook on world affairs, are important, for they explain human and individual traits which influence their use of power. Moving among leaders of the new regime, traveling with them, Adamic also adopted — possibly even more than they —

⁸ Hal Lehrman, "A Friendly Portrait," *New York Times Book Review* (25 May, 1952) 7, 32.

the habit of seeing everything in black and white. In Mosely's opinion, Adamic sees nothing between "heroes" and "villains." But in general, his book is an accurate reflection of the dominant mood of the ruling group in the first half of 1949. Mosely contends that *The Eagle and the Roots* is rather a romanticized and not unrevealing introduction to the psychology of post-Cominform Yugoslavia. It is also a memorial to Adamic, himself a romantic torn by contradictory political faiths.⁹

The review in *Newsweek*, published two weeks after the publication of the book, is quite inadequate. The anonymous reviewer contends that Adamic's reception in Yugoslavia was equally cool as his reception at the Soviet Embassy in Washington when he applied for his visa, which is totally untrue. He believes that Adamic's report does not always carry conviction because of a recurring note of false naivete. In his conclusion, on the other hand, the reviewer paradoxically appraises the book as Adamic's best work and adds that it is indeed so superior that it could almost have been written by another author.¹⁰

A different tone is set by the concise yet in-depth appraisal published two days later in *The Christian Science Monitor*. The reviewer stresses that Adamic's account of Marshal Tito's life, the history of Communist Party, the War of Liberation and the subsequent stages of the revolution should be read with a highly critical eye. Not that Adamic deliberately arranged the facts to suit his ideas; but there were many facts he failed to see and many others of quite questionable character which he accepted without examination. Where Adamic went wrong was in his dividing the Yugoslavs into two groups - the "King's men," all of whom are corrupt and grabbing individuals, and the "people's men," all of whom are heroes without any personal interests or shortcomings. Yet despite these serious flaws, stresses the reviewer, the book is full of magnificent passages. The story of Tito's childhood, youth and early political activities is a brilliant piece of biography, and there are scores of pen-portraits of peasants and workers in the book that make the reader understand why the writer so fervently believed in Yugoslavia's mission.¹¹

Booklist published a short and generally favorable review of Adamic's book, concluding that there is much repetition in the book probably because the author was working on the manuscript

⁹ Philip Mosely, "A Romantic Picture of Tito's Yugoslavia," *Herald Tribune Book Review* (1 June, 1952) 6.

¹⁰ "The Eagle and the Roots," *Newsweek* (9 June) 1952.

¹¹ Ernest S. Pisko, "Under the Spell of Titoism," *The Christian Science Monitor* (11 June, 1952) 13.

at the time of his death.¹² A short while later *The Commonweal*'s review completely censures the book, and condemns the communist regime in Yugoslavia. The reviewer claims that Adamic sought to disguise the apologetic character of his work by making it a "book of questions and hesitations about his book." Because of excessively free recasting of the materials and the obvious "partisanship in dealing with a complex tragedy" the book is, in the opinion of the critic, utterly undependable in major outlines and in detail. The last half of the book gives an interesting account of Tito's life; but, notes the reviewer, even here the Communist rewriting of history to be consonant with its own philosophy is obvious.¹³

The review published in the *New Republic* assumes a rather neutral tone. The reviewer mentions the many repetitions and the excessive length of the book: "As one ploughs through its 531 pages, many of them repetitious, one is more and more at a loss to determine what point Adamic was trying to make, what his personal position has come to be in the struggle that is going on in the world today." This is a book of disillusionment and despair, contends the reviewer. Only when he writes of the heroism of the Yugoslav people does Adamic seem at ease, as though it was here that he found his deepest comfort and a renewal of his faith. The reviewer believes that those who think Adamic was a communist or — as Tito's friend — an enemy of the Soviet Union are wrong. Adamic, rather, balances a belief in the good of collective action by societies and a belief in the fierce individualism of the Western democratic world. Adamic's picture is one of a man deeply concerned with human values, deeply moved by the struggle of people everywhere to achieve political, social and economic free-dom, and is by no means a doctrinaire picture based on political theory.¹⁴

Shaemas O'Sheel wrote a very favourable view of *The Eagle and the Roots* in *The Saturday Review*, a weekly which had published many reviews of Adamic's works. This is not a genuine literary critique, although O'Sheel was a man of letters. He admits: "From early 1946 Louis Adamic published nothing without asking, paying for, and seldom taking, my advice. I am told he called me his closest friend; certainly he was mine." He goes on to describe Adamic's character: honest as sunlight, wholly selfless, contemptuous of wealth and fame, a hater of cruelty, exploitation and sham, a lover of reason and justice and, beyond O'Sheel's

¹² "Adamic, Louis, *The Eagle and the Roots*," *Booklist* 48 (15 June 1952) 335.

¹³ M. A. Fitzsimons, "Apologia for Tito's Yugoslavia," *The Commonweal* (27 June, 1952) 298-299.

¹⁴ Alexander H. Uhl, "His Renewal of Faith," *New Republic* (21 June, 1952) 21.

own capacity, as he says, of humanity. O'Sheel reveals how Adamic collected his materials for his last work, what he was most interested in, what his political views were, while for the book itself he finds only a few laudatory remarks.¹⁵

In its September 20, 1952 issue, *The Nation* published an extensive review of Adamic's book. In the opinion of Mark Gayn, the reviewer, *The Eagle and the Roots* can not be designated as a historical document partly because the author could not keep notes of his interviews and his impressions as they occurred, but did so only weeks later, and partly because of the reluctance of Tito and his aides to disclose all the facts.¹⁶ Furthermore, notes Gayn, the author was casual with his sources, so that it is often unclear whether some major facts — especially from Tito's pre-war activities — were related by the president himself, by some of his aides, or are perhaps the author's own surmises. Despite these shortcomings the wealth of material gathered in the book is enormous. Adamic's presentation of Tito's life is, according to Gayn, often much more exciting than Tito's own biography, which had been published in the U.S.A. shortly before this book.¹⁷ Gayn believes that if Adamic had lived, he would certainly have more thoroughly edited the text, which was still too long and confusing, even after the editors deleted a third of it. And yet the book remains an important document for our times, because it is a passionate and troubled chronicle by a distinguished U.S. liberal in a new climate to which he could not possibly adapt himself. As Gayn notes in the conclusion, Adamic loved the U.S.A. and he loved freedom. When he felt that he was losing something precious in his adopted land, namely freedom, he sought to rediscover it in his native country. His death, says Gayn, represents a loss to liberalism and to the U.S.A..¹⁸

The review published at the end of the year in *The Antioch Review* shows a remarkable lack of sympathy for the writer and

¹⁵ Shaemas O'Sheel, "Louis Adamic's Yugoslavia," *The Saturday Review* (16 August, 1952) 9.

¹⁶ This fact was also admitted by Vladimir Dedijer in an interview with the author of this paper, which is available in: "Intervjuji z nekaterimi Adamičevimi sodobniki. Priloga k Doktorski disertaciji," *Filozofska fakulteta Univerze v Ljubljani*, 1991, p. 78. The interviews are expected to be published in a book entitled *Pogovori o Louisu Adamiču* in Ljubljana by the end of 1994.

¹⁷ Vladimir Dedijer, *Tito* (New York NY: Simon and Shuster, 1953), parts of which were published in *Life* during 1952. Gayn refers to the book as "Tito's own biography" because Dedijer used Tito's personal reminiscences as his main source.

¹⁸ Mark Gayn, "Documents for Our Times," *The Nation* 175 (20 September, 1952) 234-235.

his last work. In his introduction, the reviewer, Louis Filler, refers to other critics who praise Adamic's book as a valuable addition to the reader's knowledge of Yugoslavia and its possibilities. He, however, disagrees with such approach and believes that any judgement of the writer should take into account Bogdan Raditsa's article¹⁹ which brings to public attention Adamic's selection of data, his disturbed temperament, and less than impartial aims. The same objection, namely that the author of the book is less than impartial, is raised here in connection with Adamic's last work. Adamic's judgements of the events and circumstances which he relates in his book coincide with the official views of the Yugoslav leadership. The writer, says the reviewer, was not allowed to write what he had actually seen. He compares Adamic's blinded view of new Yugoslavia with the much more objective piece of writing entitled *Titoism and the Cominform* by Adam B. Ulam,²⁰ who, in his opinion, uses an exemplary scientific approach in his analysis of historical documents. According to Filler, Ulam gives judicious attention to the documents to determine their substance rather than to confirm presupposed positions, which is what Adamic had done.²¹

Two U.S. journals assessed Adamic's work in review articles that contrasted it with two other books, the first being Adam Ulam's book, just mentioned, and the other, Hodgkinson's work *West and East of Tito*,²² whose publication in London practically coincided with the publication of Adamic's and Ulam's works in the U.S.A.. The *Journal of Central European Affairs* finds Adamic's work much less critical of Yugoslav policy than the other two; Hodgkinson's book is a skilful analysis of the impact of Titoism upon Stalinism and Western thought; Ulam's book, however, is a veritable scientific treatise. In the opinion of the reviewer, Adamic knew well his métier as reporter-novelist. He thus describes "a tree" in great detail, but overlooks the infinite "forest" of cruel injustice which was inflicted upon the Yugoslav people by Tito's regime.²³ The reviewer in *Journal of International Affairs* agrees that Adamic's work — unlike Ulam's which is a conscientiously and impartially researched work — is merely a Titoist version of the Yugoslav-Soviet conflict. Like most

¹⁹ "My Memories of Louis Adamic," *American Mercury* (December 1951).

²⁰ Adam B. Ulam, *Titoism and the Cominform* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1952).

²¹ Louis Filler, "Books," *The Antioch Review* 12/4 (December 1952) 505-506.

²² Harry Hodgkinson, *West and East of Tito* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1952).

²³ "Adamic, Louis, *The Eagle and the Roots*; Hodgkinson, Harry, *West and East of Tito*; Ulam, Adam B., *Titoism and the Cominform*," *Journal of Central European Affairs* 12(April 1952 — January 1953) 399-400.

other reviewers, he too, is shocked at Adamic's critique of U.S. policy, that is, that it endangers world peace.²⁴

Even David Mitrany, the reviewer for *The American Historical Review*, agrees with other U.S. reviewers when he contends that Adamic's work is completely one-sided, uncritical and "genially naive." Mitrany is likewise shocked at the writer's "bitter and irresponsible" critique of the policy of the West. When he speaks of the leading U.S. or British politicians, Adamic shows supreme aggressiveness and pessimism. Equally one-sided is the picture he paints of Tito, which is "without single shadows." The story is, in Mitrany's opinion, not developed systematically; it is rather a collection of episodes which move to and fro in space and in time, as they occur in Adamic's conversations with his interlocutors. The book is highly skilled and effective reportage and it provides the best picture so far of the rise and philosophy of the Yugoslav Communist movement, even though it contains nothing new. Mitrany contends that the story is not very enlightening even with respect to the break with Russia. In the conclusion of his review he quotes some of the more controversial issues in the book, adding that the editors, by leaving such passages intact, have done a great disservice to the work and the professional reputation of the author. He winds up his article by stressing that no reviewer wants to write such an unfavourable critique of a man who throughout his career approached his work with the heart of a good humanist.²⁵

The present author's thorough investigation of the reception in the U.S.A. of Adamic's last book, which can not possibly be fully presented in this article, has revealed that the majority of the reviews published in U.S. journals and literary reviews were actually more or less unfavourable, though they did not fail to underscore some good points of the work. Most of these reviews concede that Adamic succeeded in writing an attractive biography of Tito and that he provided some original sources for his book. The critics also concur in their appraisal that many dramatic life-stories of Yugoslav leaders, and most of all of workers and peasants, which make up the fabric of the book and which reflect the writer's empathy for and admiration of their plight, are rendered convincingly and with a great deal of sympathy. However, Adamic's criticism of U.S. domestic and foreign policy, which he believed was destroying the traditional democracy of the U.S.A. and endangering world peace, is unanimously rejected.

²⁴ Budimir Sreckovich, "Titoism and the Cominform; The Eagle and the Roots," *Journal of International Affairs* 7,1 (1953) 107.

²⁵ David Mitrany, "The Eagle and the Roots," *The American Historical Review* 58 (October 1952 — July 1953) 376-377.

And yet, in fact, one can find only a few cursory instances of criticism directed at the U.S. administration in the published chapters of *The Eagle and the Roots*. Obviously, Adamic's reviewers were much more "loyal" to their government than was the writer himself. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the politically charged atmosphere of the early 1950s the editors, Stella Adamic and Timothy Seldes, deleted the longest chapter, consisting of 439 manuscript pages, devoted entirely to a complex criticism of U.S. domestic and foreign policy and containing a profusion of specific sources.

The most common objection to the book which appears in the great majority of the U.S. reviews is with respect to Adamic's incorrect "objective" critical stance, and the resulting black-and-white presentation of events and persons. The reviewers also point out the numerous repetitions, the excessive length of the book and the incoherent structure of the story, which stems from the many chronological and spatial digressions, unnecessarily complicating the reading.

Quite different are the Slovene reviews of *The Eagle and the Roots* published after the book was finally translated into Slovene in 1970. The first commentaries were contributed by Ivan Bratko, in his introduction to the translation,²⁶ and in a review by Denis Poniž,²⁷ while Mira Mihelič²⁸ and Vlado Vodopivec²⁹ published short biographic accounts of the author's life, adding a commentary on the content of the book and some information on how the work had been conceived and carried out. The Slovene literary criticism of 1970 differed radically from the U.S. criticism of 1952. In the former, the Slovene translation of Adamic's book was quite uncritically lauded in every respect. Most of the shortcomings of the work were either overlooked or purposefully suppressed in an attempt to make up for the fact that the publication of the translation in Slovenia had been delayed by almost two decades after its first publication in the United States.³⁰

²⁶ Ivan Bratko, "Naši izdaji na pot (Predgovor k prvi izdaji)," *Orel in korenine*, 2nd ed., 589-595.

²⁷ Denis Poniž, "O knjigi in njeni usodi. Louis Adamič: Orel in korenine," *Zbornik občine Grosuplje* 3 (Grosuplje, 1971) 183-185.

²⁸ Mira Mihelič, "Podoba Louisa Adamiča," *Zbornik občine Grosuplje* 3 (Grosuplje, 1971) 196-175.

²⁹ Vlado Vodopivec, "Novi Louis Adamič," *Slovenski izseljenski koledar* 1971 (Ljubljana: Slovenska izseljenska matica, 1970) 220-222.

³⁰ An analysis of Slovene reviews of *Orel in korenine* is published in: J. Žitnik, *Pero in politika: Zadnja leta Louisa Adamiča* (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 1993) 147-150. — Note that no translations were published in the other Yugoslav republics.

With regard to Adamic's last book, in the present writer's view, we can not speak of an objective description of the Yugoslav revolution, Tito's life and the situation in Yugoslavia in 1949. After all, it must be admitted that in Slovenia to this day no one has offered a totally impartial treatment of this still very sensitive issue. Like many other writers, regardless of their personal experience and conception of life, Adamic too wrote about certain facts in the light of the ideas that he believed in. In his enthusiasm for the new image of his home country, which, in any case, provided him with hope, and in his wish not to bring harm to his compatriots on their path to independence, Adamic refrained from mentioning some of the unfavorable facts of which he was at least partially aware; these were facts which, on the other hand, he had never hesitated to point out to leading Yugoslav politicians in his personal contacts and in his correspondence with them, facts by virtue of which the Yugoslav authorities compromised their reputation forever in the eyes of almost the whole world. His romanticized illustration of Yugoslavia is prejudiced but certainly not wholly uncritical. The author's prejudice undoubtedly limits the historical credibility of the book but in no way diminishes its sometimes quite persuasive literary value, especially in his vivid portrayals of persons and in his depiction of a number of dramatic events.

To sum up these contrastive comments: Adamic's last work invited contradictory reactions. In the U.S.A. the book was to a great extent rejected because of what were considered its unjustified criticism of domestic policy and its subjective, idealized presentation of conditions in Yugoslavia; in Yugoslavia, on the other hand, it was ignored on account of its lack of criticism of U.S. conditions and its unacceptable criticisms of Yugoslav political life. Today, more than four decades after the initial publication of *The Eagle and the Roots*, the judgments of some U.S. and Slovene experts on Adamic have, in the opinion of this author, come much closer together. It is understandable that the true significance of a literary work can only be objectively evaluated with the passage of time.

Inštitut za Slovensko Izsledjeinstvo ZRC SAZU, Ljubljana

POVZETEK

AMERIŠKA RECEPCIJA ZADNJE ADAMIČEVE
KNJIGE O JUGOSLAVIJI

Iz pregleda recenzij Adamičevega zadnjega dela v ZDA je razvidno, da so bile ameriške ocene po večini sorazmerno neugodne, čeprav so delu priznavale tudi določene odlike. Skupno je ameriškim ocenjevalcem odklanjanje Adamičeve kritike ameriške politike, ki ji je očital, da na domačih tleh ruši že tradicionalno ameriško demokracijo, na mednarodnem prizorišču pa ogroža svetovni mir. Domala vsi Adamičevi ocenjevalci v ZDA omenjajo njegovo ponarejeno "objektivno" kritičnost, ki je v resnici popolna pristranost, njen rezultat pa je črno-belo slikanje dogodkov in oseb. Očitajo mu tudi številna ponavljanja in nekoherentnost zgodbe z mnogimi vsebinskimi digresijami ter časovnimi in prostorskimi preskoki. V celoti gledano je Adamičevo zadnje delo resnično naletelo na protisloven odmev: v ZDA so ga odklanjali zaradi "neupravičene" kritike ameriške politike in zaradi nekritičnega prikazovanja jugoslovanskih razmer, v Jugoslaviji pa so ga ignorirali zaradi premile kritike ameriških razmer in nesprejemljivih očitkov jugoslovanski politiki. Danes, dobra štiri desetletja po izidu Adamičeve knjige Orel in korenine, se po mnenju avtorice tega prispevka sodbe ameriških in slovenskih adamičeslovcev o tem delu mnogo manj razhajajo kot nekoč. Razumljivo je namreč, da brez časovne distance ni mogoče docela objektivno oceniti pomena nekega literarnega dela.