

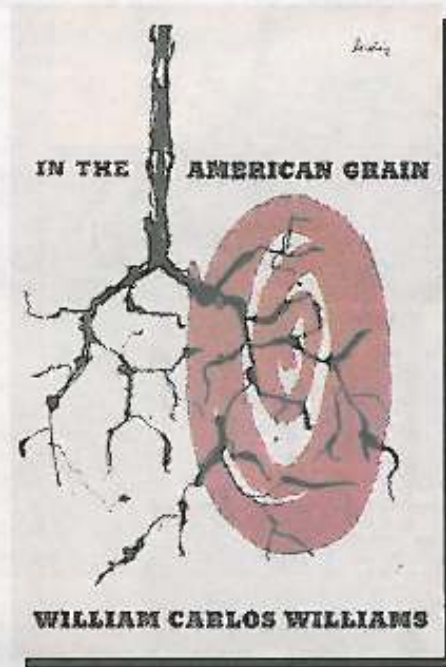
In the American Grain

By William Carlos Williams
(New Directions)

At the time of its first publication, *In the American Grain* was a flop, and plans for a follow-up were scrapped. Only now, eight decades later, has the slow-growing popularity of Williams' prose work gained enough respect and appreciation for a new edition.

In the American Grain is best described as a collection of essays on the birth of America. Williams, the only dominant American poet of his generation who had not turned his back on the US (unlike his contemporaries Eliot and Pound), traces the founding of his country back to the Scandinavian Red Eric, taking in the discoveries of Christopher Columbus, the Mayflower and the influence of the Puritans, George Washington, Edgar Allan Poe and Abraham Lincoln – the selection only loosely following the sequence of history.

None of the essays cover his-



toric events or details, nor academic research into the importance of these disparate characters. Instead, they take a personal form which emulates the voice of the subject – a style without doubt influenced by the modernist thinking to which Williams was exposed during his extensive travels across Europe in the 1920s.

It's certainly a direct and idiosyncratic way to present history, but have we not often experienced that history can be misleading or manipulated for specific purposes? In making history

personal, Williams opens up a multiplicity of discourses and possible influences, foreshadowing the work of Michel Foucault and other 20th century thinkers.

Williams expands the boundaries between genres, inviting the reader to reflect on their own weighting of historic events. In Williams' view, events or figures that would conventionally be seen as dominant seem a lot less important – for example, the essay on Lincoln is the shortest, much shorter than those on puritanism or Poe.

A new forward by Rick Moody (author of *The Ice Storm*) puts the importance of Williams' groundbreaking book into perspective, providing some contextual background.

Shifting boundaries both in its technique as its effect on the reader, *In the American Grain* ultimately asks one big question – What are the factors that constitute a nation's collective consciousness? – and gives much food for thought.



Isabel Roleff has written articles and reviews for various magazines in her native Germany. More information about her work can be found at irishwritersexchange.com