

# Flashback

TO KNOW NOTHING OF WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE YOU WERE BORN  
IS TO REMAIN EVER A CHILD—*Cicero*

## The Old College—Why?

One of the most annoying lines in contemporary pop music is from Rod Stewart's "Maggie May," in which the wizened Scot sings, "It's late September and I really should be back at school."

To those who loathe college life, Stewart's sentence, with its casual and arrogant assumption of privilege, conjures images of shaggy-haired rich kids tossing Frisbees on the quad as marijuana smoke wafts through an air that is thick with hostility toward the outlying "townies."

For the vast majority of Americans, the superior lyric would be, "It's late September and I really should be playing football/harvesting pumpkins/reading Hawthorne." There are a handful of supple fellows who can live in both worlds—Vernon Parrington, our greatest literary historian, taught English *and* coached football at the University of Oklahoma, but Parrington only proves that the better the Sooner.

It may be unthinkable now—like a day without television—but in years long gone, America's youth had attractive alternatives to the college track. Though we've not had a college-less president since Harry Truman and are unlikely ever to have such again, the oldest callings—parenthood, farming, carpentry, storytelling—still require no parchment, at least not yet. To take one example, many of the most distinctive and iconoclastic American writers of our century fall into two categories: those who hated college, and those who never bothered to go.

The latter group is vast and various: it ranges from H.L. Mencken to Ernest Hemingway to Gore Vidal to Ray Bradbury to William Saroyan. They were joyful participants in what Vidal calls "the worst perversion of all, autodidacticism."

American writers used to be able to serve their apprenticeships on newspapers,

rather than in Masters of Fine Arts programs in soulless multiversities. "If you would learn to write," instructed Ralph Waldo Emerson, "'tis in the street you must learn it.... The people, and not the college, is the writer's home."

The irrepressible Henry L. Mencken recalled, "At a time when the respectable bourgeois youngsters of my generation were college freshmen, oppressed by simian sophomores and affronted with balderdash daily and hourly by chalky pedagogues, I was at large in a wicked seaport of half a million people, with a front seat at every public show...and getting earfuls and eye-fuls of instruction in a hundred giddy arcana, none of them taught in schools."

Mencken as grad student is no more plausible than Bill Clinton as Benedictine. Thomas Wolfe (the first one) found graduate students an "intellectual peasantry—dull, cold, suspicious of any idea they had not been told to approve," and it was the genius of Mencken (and most autodidacts) to think outside the prescribed boundaries. (Rarely will you meet a thoughtful non-college-educated person whose political views conform to the contours of the "liberal" or "conservative" procrustean beds.)

Who would say that Mencken's education, in his and his family's Baltimore, was inferior to the one he'd have received if his old man had shipped him off to Princeton? Could he have majored in "Baltimore" at Princeton? More to the point, can one major in "Baltimore" at Johns Hopkins?

A recent critic of institutional schooling, the Kentucky poet-farmer Wendell Berry, charged that "the child is not educated to return home and be of use to the place and community; he or she is educated to *leave* home and earn money in a provisional future that has nothing to do with place or community."

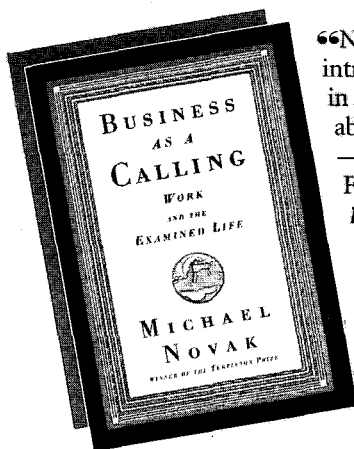
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And so Jennifer College ends up on K Street in Washington. Or Wall Street. Or anywhere beyond Baltimore or Kentucky.

Golden ages turn sere; that was then, and this is now. An H.L. Mencken of 1996, whose only credential was a coruscant prose style, could pound the pavement from dawn to dusk, 365 days a year, and after all that leather his resumes would sit in Gannett and Knight-Ridder wastebaskets from Miami to Puget Sound. "Frankly, Henry," the gatekeeper of the newspaper chain would tell him, "you're not a bad writer—I could see you eventually working your way up to our Style section—but in all candor, corporate policy prohibits me from hiring you without that degree. I can recommend a few good journalism schools...."

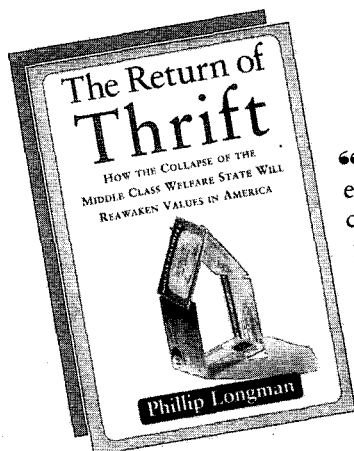
So, undergraduates, September has arrived, and everyone says you really should be back at school. You might give a thought to Henry Adams, who looked back on his Harvard days none too wistfully: "The chief wonder of education is that it does not ruin everybody connected in it, teachers and taught." If you have a subversive soul, then read books that aren't on any reading lists, and give special study to your own Baltimore, wherever that may be.

—Bill Kauffman



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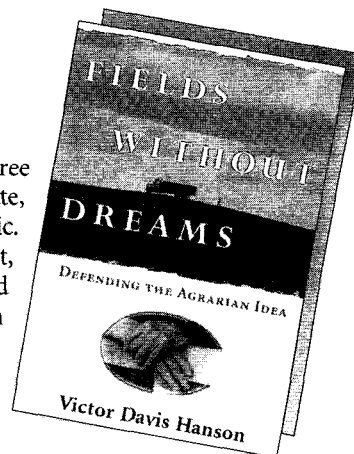
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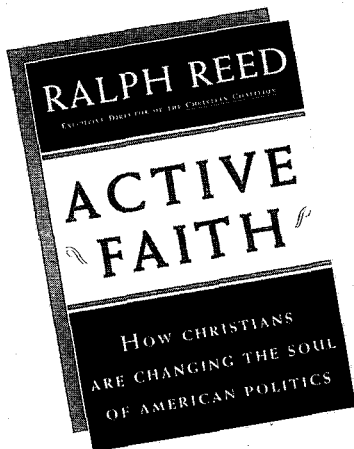
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# BookTalk

## GET THE PICTURE?

By Robert Koch

*George Eastman: A Biography*  
By Elizabeth Brayer; Johns Hopkins  
University Press, 637 pages, \$39.95

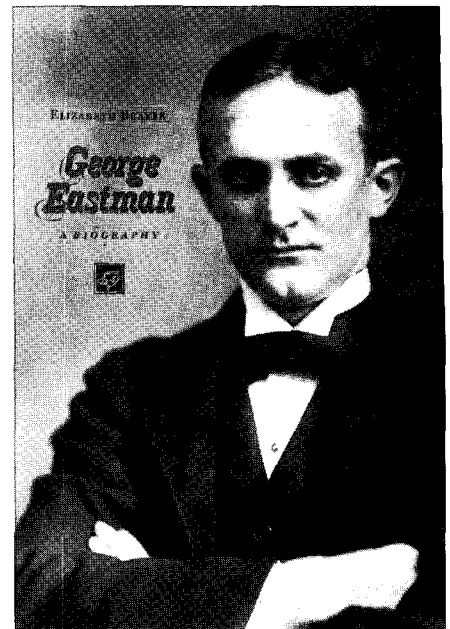
The elderly Thomas A. Edison appears to operate an early motion-picture camera while his less well-known and somewhat dour companion holds a serpentine length of motion-picture film. The 1928 photograph snapped at George Eastman's mansion is an Eastman Kodak icon; it immortalizes the marriage of Eastman's flexible film with Edison's Kinetoscope, which in turn begat the movies. The photograph is among more than five dozen in Elizabeth Brayer's *George Eastman: A Biography*. The first life of the Rochester inventor, industrialist, and philanthropist since 1930, it is also the first that can claim essential independence, while relying on the authority of the immense file of his often-colorful letters. The photo's seemingly dyspeptic 74-year-old Eastman is half a century away from the exacting young bank bookkeeper who found wet-plate photography so cumbersome that he did something about it in his spare time. While not a fecund inventor of Edison's type, he was an entrepreneurial and marketing genius whose film and expensive "Kodak" cameras created an industrial empire and snapshot democracy worldwide.

A 1900 formal photograph of Eastman in his mid-forties still reflects the spiritedness of the 27-year-old who resigned from the bank and sailed to England to improve manufacturing processes and plant financial and mar-

keting roots. He was confident that foreign trade would "distribute our eggs and pad the basket at the same time." Brayer tells well the complex struggles with patent protection, manufacturing quality, business acquisitions, marketing strategies, and, eventually, governmental fears about monopoly. Eastman sometimes worked to exhaustion, despite having energy with which he bounded two steps at a time to his second-floor office. His lifelong habit was to play equally hard during often extensive trips devoted to bicycling, camping, fishing, and hunting. He was, however, never farther than a cablegram away from company decisions at all levels.

As an industrialist he manufactured products that were, literally, volatile. Nitrate film was such a fire hazard that Eastman was nearly obsessed with fire-proof buildings, including his mansion. Photographic materials also demanded unflagging quality control to build in retainable photosensitivity. The tinkerer and amateur chemist soon hired young, technically trained university graduates. Sophisticated research and development produced new film, camera, and chemical products that flowed from the assembly lines and continuous process machines of the highly integrated Eastman Kodak Company. Manufacturing facilities burgeoned in Rochester and abroad, and "Kodak," coined by Eastman for its multilingual clarity, was soon a household term celebrated even by Gilbert & Sullivan.

George Eastman expected as much from employees as he did from himself but rewarded the successful with lifelong jobs and a range of benefits. He began an early corporate suggestion system and is-



sued the company's first employee bonus, from his personal profit, in 1899. Pension plans followed. In 1914 Eastman hired young Marion Folsom, later an architect of Social Security, to centralize the company's "statistics." Witness to his boss's conduct of industrial relations, Folsom later observed that Eastman was "the only man I ever knew who started out conservative and ended up a liberal."

Eastman, the philanthropist, did not establish a foundation: "Men who leave their money to be distributed by others are pie-faced mutts. I want to see the action during my lifetime." On another occasion he added, "A rich man should be given credit for the judgment he uses in distributing his wealth, rather than in the amount he gives away." He did not seek kudos, even though those inevitably followed. He targeted his moves as carefully as he had while developing the photographic giant. Eastman's philanthropies reflected both his industrial needs and personal life. He gave nearly \$20 million to MIT, at first anonymously, in gratitude for quality alumni who contributed to the company's development. But his nearly \$36 million in gifts to the University of