

upon by an environment that sought only to make him a clod like his fellows, is a hero precisely to Sandburg's taste. He can understand the harsh, unyielding purposes, half instinctive and half insane, that moved the prairie pioneers. He can grasp and make plain the almost unbelievable difficulties that hedged them in: the bitter face of Nature, the heart-breaking round of cruel toil, the dreadful isolation and helplessness—above all, the handicap of their own incapacities. They were brave men and they were resolute, but not many of them, it seems to me, had any sense: what they wrung from the reluctant earth with such vast labor was not, in the main, worth having. The profits all went to others. They suffered and died that land speculators and mortgage sharks might blossom into bankers, and bankers into railroad stockholders, and railroad stockholders into golfers. They served an uncouth, barbaric God who recalled their existence only to play jokes on them. The soil watered by their sweat and blood now sprouts country clubs, Prohibitionists, Coolidge men, Kiwanians. The final flowers of the civilization they wrested from the tough oak-tree and the tougher wolf are Judge English and Uncle Joe Cannon. The whole episode belongs to humor.

But it was not humor, save by occasional flashes of intuition, to those who figured in it. It was not humor to the forlorn farm-wives whose agonies marked the slow stages of the long and desperate struggle. Nor was it humor to their dull lords and masters, torn between the appalling enmity of Nature and the occult and sinister enmity of the powers of the air. The fortitude of these elemental folk with soil and weather against them and hell yawning for them beyond the grave, was fatuous, no doubt, but it was also heroic: it suggested somehow the grim firmness of those martyrs who have died for a typographical error in Holy Writ. Sandburg, it seems to me, gets its true character into his close-packed and immensely interesting pages. He converts the

march into the wilderness into a human drama of the first calibre. He gets dignity into it, and a fine flavor of simple poetry. The wilderness was hostile almost beyond endurance, but it was also beautiful beyond compare. There was a tremendous and romantic loveliness in its virgin rivers and its doomed forests, and there was loveliness scarcely less in the open reaches of its primeval meadows. It swarmed with wild things, afoot and awing, and its face was strewn with flowers. There was a symphonic cycle in the round of its seasons. It could blast, but it could also caress. In the midst of its wild gorgeousness Sandburg sets the boy Lincoln—a simple creature like the rest, but not a clod. The story is that of his struggle to rescue what was sound and beautiful in it from what was transient and hideous. The epic is unfolded with a sombre and compelling skill. No man has ever written of the young Lincoln with a finer insight, or with greater eloquence. Are the facts all respected? Is the narrative satisfactory to the professors of Lincology? To hell with the professors of Lincology! Sandburg, in his amazing first volume, has made a poem, and it is one of the noblest poems in our literature. In his second, of course, he comes sprawling. But all poets come sprawling soon or late. They should be shot delicately when their grand flights are over, and they flutter to earth. It would be a mercy to them, and it would be a service of merit to beautiful letters.

The End of the Century

THE MAUVE DECADE: AMERICAN LIFE AT THE END OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, by Thomas Beer. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

THIS book is by no means a history: it is a fantasia upon a rococo theme, showing all the resources and many of the affectations of modern literary instrumentation. What gives it color and distinction is not its value as document, for it has little, nor its form as work of art, for it has less, but its sheer elevation of spirits, its vast and

contagious gusto. For Beer plainly believes that in the closing decade of the last century the gaudy spectacle of American life reached its high point and the beginnings of its decline, and I am inclined to think that the more sober historians of the future will be forced to agree with him. It was the end of the Civil War that started the great show, and it went on in ever-increasing *crescendo* for thirty years—a whole generation. Then, suddenly and as if by some unintelligible act of God, there came a halt and a reconsideration—and *Katzenjammer* followed. The American people, it seems to me, have never been genuinely happy since. Today they are rich, and if the laws are to be believed they are virtuous, but all the old goatish joy has gone out of their lives. Compare Coal Oil Johnny to young John D. Rockefeller. Compare Jim Fiske to the current J. Pierpont Morgan. Or General Nelson A. Miles to General Pershing. Or Chester A. Arthur to the dull and preposterous Coolidge. Or even Anthony Comstock to his unhappy heirs and assigns. Something is surely missing. Life among us is no longer the grand and dazzling adventure it once was. The Americano no longer dances gorgeously with arms and legs. He has become civilized, which is to say, he has joined a country club. His father roared in the stews and saloons.

I am old enough to remember the final mauve decade—better, indeed, than Beer remembers it. His record, as I read it, thus seems to me to be full of gaps, despite its dazzling colors and its unfailing bounce. Why does he make so little of the White Squadron? I believe that it was a far more adequate symbol of the period than even the Chicago World's Fair—nay, than even Mark Hanna himself. It reflected a confidence that ran through every back-alley of American life, and showed itself in the bright and shining face of every American, however humble. While those lovely and lethal craft rode the waves, chiefly to

the southward, and glittered in their macabre way before Latin greaser and English Queen, there was peace and contentment from the Great Lakes to the Gulf. We had the men, we had the ships, and we had the money too. Fighting Bob Evans was a whole fleet in himself, and what Bob could not attend to would be done competently and to the tune of suitable rhetoric by old Schley with his goatee and his platoons of heroic Jackies, always on the spot! But now the White Squadron is no more—battered and sunk at target practice by floating machine-shops, scarcely to be distinguished one from the other, or from Ford service-stations. The drop in the national morale is enormous. Compare Dewey, emerging from Manila, with Pershing, haranguing his fellow Elks. Did we really win the late war? Then winning wars is no longer the thrilling business it was in 1898.

What brought about the change I don't know, though I have my notions. Perhaps nations, like individuals, actually grow old, and growing old, take to golf. Beer, in his chronicle, does not go into the question. His business is simply to describe the civilization that was, and he has achieved it in an extremely artful and effective manner. He makes the nineties live again, in all their incomparable color and joyousness, with their saloon doors wide open, their gamblers in plug hats, their frenzied fairs and carnivals, and their John Baptists howling in the wilderness. He has read deeply in their records, public and esoteric, and immersed himself in their swinish and happy life. His book is history of a new sort, and it is a sort that is extremely diverting and refreshing. I believe that it is also instructive. Let some talented psychologist examine the materials that he has so lavishly amassed, and tell us (*a*) what processes of man or God brought the American people to so dizzy a pinnacle of beatitude, and (*b*) what heaved them off.

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