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Russell Davenport's "My Country"

BY CHARLES ANGOFF

THE Era of Self-Denunciation in America is over, and we are now in the early stages of a period of mounting Self-Respect. They who in the twenties and early thirties sneered at the Declaration of Independence as a sham and who held up to ridicule the song, *America the Beautiful*, have gone out of fashion. It has become indecent to shout, Down with Ourselves. Most everybody knows now that the sentiment in the line, "And crown thy good with brotherhood," is filled with such holiness of purpose as to add to the stature of every one of us — and to add to this nation a splendor that is unique in history.

Something has happened in these forty-eight States the past few years. It is evident everywhere — in the press, on the radio, on the lecture platform, in parlor discussions, in the easy gabble of bar-rooms. We have become proud of our heritage, truly, fully proud, and in our pride we have made a silent affirmation to continue that heritage, to build upon it, to be true to its eternal truths. This accounts for the amazing unity of this country at present — a unity even greater than the one which bound us

in 1917-1918. The unity has deep spiritual roots. It transcends the instinct of self-preservation, of mere nationalism, of all party affiliations. It is religious in the profoundest sense.

What has happened is so momentous that it cannot adequately be expressed in prose. The times plainly call for another Walt Whitman — a man of deep insight and of such huge tenderness that he can sense the fulfillment of divine destiny in the echo of the distant march of columns of armed men. Another Walt Whitman has not yet arisen. But two men have raised their voices in a manner that Old Walt would have understood and admired — the late Stephen Vincent Benét, whose posthumous *Western Star* was the able beginning of something that probably would have been of enduring size, and Russell W. Davenport.¹

Mr. Davenport is not new to poetry, professionally or spiritually. He wrote poems in his early years, but later devoted the greater part of his time to more "practical" things, like being the managing editor of *Fortune*

¹ *My Country*, by Russell W. Davenport. \$1.50. Simon and Schuster

and chief editorial writer of *Life* — and the chief associate of the late Wendell Willkie. It is plain now that poetic feeling never ceased motivating Mr. Davenport, even when he presided over a busy office high up above the smooth hard sidewalks of Radio City. It is even plainer that when he joined his fortunes with those of Mr. Willkie he was moved not only by political considerations but also by a realization that these are the times of grave decision in the unfolding of the American spirit.

II

His book recalls many of the Revolutionary ballads. It has the same sweep, positive affirmations, sonorous ring and moving conviction. It burns with hatred for intolerance and bristles with bitterness at our former isolationism:

Where was America, in the name of God,
When all the broken-hearted world was
waiting

For us to act? We could have risen
then: . . .

We were neutral! . . .

Neutral with the light on our faces

Of bonfires burning up our destiny: . . .

Denunciation, however, occupies only one-fourth of Mr. Davenport's poem, which is written, roughly, in sonata form. The other three parts are largely hymns to the American Purpose. Occasionally these hymns are too loud to be true hymns; at other times they are mere heavy-footed prose recitatives; and at still other times they don't add up to any

intelligible meaning or give forth a melody, as for example, this passage:

Unknown and relative to the
Unknown and relative to the
Related and still relative
To the unrelated, the presumed . . .
(Oh, where is the presumed?

Oh, where is

The uncreated place?)

Where is God?

Such lines, true enough, are in the tradition of some of the better advertised professional poets who seem to think that nonsense and profundity are synonymous. But Mr. Davenport is so honest a man and has so much to say that he should not have been attracted by such verbal trickeries. Happily, he isn't attracted too often. More happily, he can sing with considerable loveliness and there is a goodly measure of pity in him. Part III, wherein a dead soldier's sister, teacher and buddy pay tribute to his memory is poetry of a high order.

While Mr. Davenport in the main keeps away from the emotional immensities of solitude and the night, he is adept in the use of soft oboe words and of a muted orchestra of words. He reaches his noblest heights when he sings the riches of his native soil, the greatness of the American Dream, the tremendous magnificence of Freedom, American Freedom, World Freedom — all of them essentially one. This is Mr. Davenport's central theme; he returns to it time and again.

All tongues and races are American,
All nations are embodied in her job,
To breed the noble concept of a man

Whose freedom is, that others should be free —

Mr. Davenport looks into the future:

My country will be generous to the bold;
To those who do not fear the dangerous thrust

Of progress toward the far and unforecast,
But know that like a promise freedom must
Lie forward of the darkness, not behind,
And know the Brother in their hearts, and trust

This light at last to liberate mankind.

Democratic freedom cannot be a purely nationalist thing; it is by its very nature universal:

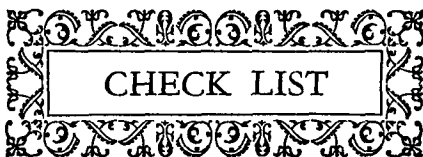
To face the axiom of democracy:
Freedom is not to limit, but to share;
And freedom here is freedom everywhere.

III

This concept of democratic freedom is not new with Mr. Davenport. The Founding Fathers made it one of the foundation stones of our national edifice. "My country is the world," said Thomas Paine, who realized that a democracy that hoarded its ideals within its own borders quickly turned into its own worst enemy. More than a hundred years later, Woodrow Wilson pointed out that "Our greatness is built upon our freedom," and no one did more to try to spread that freedom everywhere.

We now realize, probably more than ever before, how truly both men spoke. Mr. Davenport's moving and deeply-felt book is additional proof that perhaps America has at last caught up with its own spiritual glories. This may be the most signifi-

cant fact of contemporary American culture. It marks the beginning of a new epoch in our annals — when the principles of the Four Freedoms will finally replace the concepts of Manifest Destiny, the Big Stick, Normalcy and all the other fabrications of petty minds.



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CHINA TAKES HER PLACE, by Carl Crow. \$2.75. *Harper*. A brilliant addition to the series of works through which this American has turned the searchlight of understanding on a country he knows inside out, loves and has faith in. For any one with an interest in China beyond what ideological admirers of the Yen-an and Chungking régimes have to say, this is required reading.

LIFE AND CULTURE OF POLAND, by Wacław Lednicki. \$3.50. *Roy*. Dr. Lednicki, who has taught Russian and Polish literature in many European universities and also in American universities — among them, Harvard, Columbia, Chicago, Wisconsin, California — here discusses various phases of Polish history and culture "as reflected in Polish literature." His thesis is that the political health of Poland is an index of the political health of Europe, and he insists — sometimes even shouting it — that Poland must regain her independence, "because Poland is a principle, a part, a fragment of a system of principles for which this war is being waged." The book was originally delivered as a series of lectures at the Lowell Institute in Boston.

ARGENTINE RIDDLE, by Felix J. Weil. \$3.50. *John Day*. As director of the Latin American Economic Institute — and a native of Argentina, a businessman and a journalist to boot —

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