

---

## THE LIBRARY

---



---

### ON AMERICAN LITERARY HISTORY

by CHARLES ANGOFF

THE writing of history, at its best, is a noble and most exacting art, demanding from its practitioners a combination of qualities that is very likely even rarer than that demanded from the practitioners of any of the other literary arts. There are fewer good general histories in English, as indeed in any other language, than good novels or plays or poems. When one has mentioned the masterly works by Edward Gibbon, Thomas Carlyle, and James Anthony Froude, one has mentioned many of the enduring histories by Englishmen. In the United States no general history has been produced that can be compared to these works, though *The Rise of American Civilization* by Charles and Mary Beard probably comes close to them, and the volumes by Francis Parkman and W. H. Prescott must also be considered.

Yet scarce as great general histories are, truly great literary histories are even scarcer. The reason seems to be obvious enough. The writing of liter-

ary history calls, not only for all the high virtues necessary for the writing of general history, but several others besides, among them, a fine feeling for literary values, a keen perception of the interrelationship between environment, in its broadest sense, and the creative impulse, and the ability to distinguish between a writer's gift for dramatizing his largely private psychological aberrations and his gift for giving expression to the hopes, joys, anguishes, and ecstasies of the vast majority of men and women. If it is true that a mere novelist or playwright has to be omniscient properly to exercise his talents, how much more so is it true of the literary historian.

The United States was somewhat late in the matter of general historical writing. It was, indeed, not till well toward the end of the nineteenth century that professional historical writing achieved much respectability in this country. In the preceding 200 years there were, of course, many chronicles and historical encyclopedias, but most of their authors had small regard for truth and not very much more for the high qualities

of the English language. Even so magnificent a period, historically speaking, as the Civil War, was for two decades almost the exclusive province of collectors of legends, fervid lecturers, and hasty journalists.

Literary history lagged behind general history. There was *A History of American Literature*, by Moses Coit Tyler, published in 1878, but since it dealt chiefly with theologians, analysts, and jinglers, it can hardly be called a literary history. There were a half dozen others that concerned themselves more truly with literary works, but they were too brief and uncritical to be taken seriously. Probably few will disagree with the statement that it was not till 1900 that a thoroughly competent man, Barrett Wendell, attempted a serious study of our literature in a systematic manner, in *A Literary History of America*. Since then there have been many literary histories, some very useful for reference purposes, most of them, however, mere textbooks. A landmark as to scope was *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, published in 1917-1921, and now what amounts to its successor is issued under the editorship of Robert E. Spiller, Willard Thorp, Thomas H. Johnson, and Henry Seidel Canby, who have been assisted in their labors by Howard Mumford Jones, Dixon Wecter, and Stanley T. Williams. [*Literary History of the United States*. 3 volumes. Macmillan. \$20.00.]

More than five years of work went into this history. Altogether there are

55 contributors to it, most of them academicians. The editors state, sensibly enough, that "each generation should produce at least one literary history of the United States, for each generation must define the past in its own terms."

They apparently aim for the general intelligent readers, since they feel that "scholars can no longer be content to write for scholars; they must make their knowledge meaningful and applicable to humanity." By way of excuse for the basic plan of the book — allotting each subject to an authority on it — they say, "the United States has produced, in its life of less than two centuries, too much literature for any one man to read and digest. Its literary history can therefore best be written by a group of collaborators, whatever the risk of differences of perspective or opinion." The editors have not been content to let the contributors write their chapters. Many of the chapters, as originally submitted, "have been substantially revised in order to fit them into the larger plan, and parts of some have been lifted and incorporated elsewhere."

The individual chapters have no by-lines; the "table of authors" appears at the end of Volume II, but because of the extensive revisions, it is clearly not always to be taken too literally. While the entire work occupies three volumes, only two contain text; the third is devoted in its entirety to bibliographical material and the combined index.

## II

The work reveals all the virtues and defects of current literary criticism and historical scholarship in America. Several of the chapters are quite good. Those on Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper, both by Stanley T. Williams, are so sound, so effectively written, and so sensible as interpretation that they probably preempt the two subjects for many years to come. Dr. Williams rightly labels the bulk of Irving's work "insipid," but he hastens to add that Irving was not a mere merchant of words, and that beneath his "insipidities" burned one strong response to life, his sadness or romantic melancholy in the presence of the law of change." Dr. Williams dismisses Cooper as "a tyro in the more subtle aims of the novel"; at the same time, he is wholly cognizant of Cooper's awareness of "the moral quality of liberty" and of "his conviction that an aristocracy of worth was not inconsistent with the democratic ideal."

Even better are Dr. Williams' essays on Hawthorne and Emily Dickinson. He probes deeply into the "secret space" in Hawthorne's mind, his uncanny ability to distill "historical episodes into moods," and his "classic dignity." "Few American writers have obeyed so implicitly as he the imperious, unconscious dictates of genius." Dr. Williams illustrates his ideas with a masterly analysis of *The Scarlet Letter*. His discussion of Emily Dickinson is not only the best piece

in this *Literary History*; it is a superb job of literary criticism, one of the very best to see public print in the past twenty-five years. The Amherst recluse's "thrilling life as an adventuress in eternity — and as eternity's witty critic, too," seems to have an endless fascination for Dr. Williams. He is not unmindful of the fragmentary nature of her work, of its occasional unfathomable obscurity, of its spotty harshness of rhythm, but he keeps on returning to the soft magnificence of the lyrics of "this shy, intellectual, spiritually wayward woman," who was on friendly terms with infinity and who also cherished "a fairylike intimacy with plant and bird." "Where, in all the august company of mysticism, do we find her like? Her conjunction of the cosmic and the comic? She is a saint in cap and bells."

Also worth reading are Robert E. Spiller's chapter on Emerson; Dixon Wecter's chapter on Mark Twain; Odell Shepard's essay on Longfellow, Holmes and Lowell; Harry T. Levin's on "The Discovery of Bohemia"; Malcolm Cowley's essay on "How Writers Lived" in the period between the two World Wars; and H. L. Mencken's lively chapter on the American Language, in which a vast amount of fascinating information is compressed within the space of some seven thousand words.

The other articles are dull, poor, or atrocious. The discussions of our colonial fiction are almost unreadable. Professor F. O. Matthiessen has some

sensible things to say about Poe's criticism, but he seems to be confused by his poetry and short stories. In the chapter on "Humor," written by "Harold W. Thompson (with passages by Henry Seidel Canby)," a heroic effort is made to explain American humor in terms of American history and sociology but the characteristics and essence of the peculiar wit and burlesque and hyperbole that go to make up our national humor seem to evade the two authors. "The Hope of Reform," dealing with the era of the New Freedom, by Henry Steele Commager, is, surprisingly, pretty much of an intellectual quickie.

Perhaps the three least satisfying chapters are "A Cycle of Fiction," by Maxwell Geismar; "Abraham Lincoln: The Soil and the Seed," by Carl Sandburg; and "Henry James," by Richard P. Blackmur. Mr. Geismar deals with such writers as Fitzgerald, Wolfe, Faulkner, and Farrell, but he is so interested in their backgrounds that he almost forgets their writings. Mr. Sandburg's essay on Lincoln, like his books on the Civil War President, is indiscriminate verbiage caked with sentimentalism. His very first sentence is a fair sample of his thinking and writing: "There is one man in whose words, spoken and written, the West of vast spaces and the East of many peoples are subsumed under one meaning." Mr. Blackmur may be a very profound man, as the more esoteric critical groups maintain, but one must add that he also makes no sense most of the time. His essay on

Henry James really might as well be about two other people, for all the relevance his words have to that author. What does he mean in the line: "If religion was in James an inner primal piety, history was a felt objective residue"? And in this: "In short, neither the domestic economy of social conventions nor the vocation of the artist was ever enough to bring out in James a mastery of substance equal to his mastery of form"?

### III

The large number of poor pieces is not, however, the chief trouble with the work. Even if all the chapters were of the same high order as Dr. Williams', it would still be, at best, only a valuable compendium, and not a literary history. The basic concept of the editors, that a literary history can be written by a variety of hands, is dubious. Literary history, like any other art, calls for a unified point of view, reflecting a highly personal attitude toward the world, or any special aspect of it, which is to say, it can be practiced only in solitude, by one person. An attitude toward life cannot be arrived at by agreement among a group of people. It is something that grows in the mystic soil of the individual soul.

The editors claim that American literature has become too vast for one man to digest. This is a strange claim for academicians to make. English literature is older than American literature, yet no English literary historian of standing has ever been

frightened by the vastness of his subject, and one literary historian — a Frenchman, too — covered the subject so thoroughly and so well that his work is still held in the highest regard. And what Hippolyte Taine did for English literature, Émile Faguet did for French literature. In the case of American literature, unfortunately, the claim of the editors is not only bizarre in itself; it is not pertinent. From 1607 to 1811, when William Cullen Bryant's "Thanatopsis" appeared, virtually no literature of any moment was produced in this country. Only chronicles, religious tracts, and sombre doggerel came from the colonial presses. Why the editors devote between a fifth and a fourth of the first volume — or between a tenth and an eighth of the two volumes of text — to this period is difficult to understand. Equally difficult to understand is the space they allot to orators, politicians, lady versifiers, feature writers and other journalists. Perhaps as much as a third of the entire project has little or no relationship to imaginative writing, and is therefore mostly a waste of effort.

The amount of respectable American literary art is clearly not sufficient to overwhelm the historian specializing in this field of expression. The better ones, despite their faults, at least had the virtue of possessing a point of view, without which no literary historian has a right to call himself such. Barrett Wendell was blind to Melville and bewildered by

Whitman; he didn't get the full measure of Hawthorne; he didn't always distinguish between the moral and the beautiful; but he did recognize, to borrow a phrase from D. H. Lawrence, that "there is a new voice in the old American classics," and he succeeded, to a great extent, in making that voice clear. Leon Kellner gave too much significance to the early Americans' absorption in the ways of God, as Ludwig Lewisohn, about two decades later, perhaps employed Freudianism a bit too freely as a critical instrument; but both, especially Dr. Lewisohn, shed fresh light upon the variations and quality of literary expression in America. Professors W. B. Cairns and W. P. Trent, though blessed with less imagination and critical insight, did reveal the importance of nationalism, among other factors, in our literary culture. Even Dr. Fred Lewis Pattee, whose absurd and crudely written histories held a generation of college students in their grip, had a point of view; it was an academic-moralistic-Fundamentalist point of view, true enough, and thus basically anti-literature, but at least it illuminated the forces that have lined up so often, here and elsewhere, against literary artists.

#### IV

In the interval between the two World Wars, two major errors have contributed to the low state of critical writing in America, and both are largely to blame for the disappoint-

ment of the latest literary history: the error of politico-economic-psychological interpretation and the error of over-specialization. The first error probably has its origins in the German school of historiography in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, in which many of our earliest professional historians got their training. The various elements of an author's background are no doubt important to the understanding of his work, but no amount of such explanation can take the place of evaluation. Too many of the authors in the present work, as has been pointed out, spend so much time telling about the society in which a writer lived that they forget to tell whether or not what he wrote has any quality, and precisely what that quality is.

Many of them also ignore the fact that sometimes an author's background sheds very little light on the origins or quality of his work. Jane Austen lived in the Napoleonic Era, yet that era probably had slight impact on her novels. The Civil War was all around Emily Dickinson and Melville and Hawthorne, yet their works show small evidence of it. Only inferior writers and journalists can be wholly explained in terms of their times. Superior writers cannot be explained in this manner; there is always

an unexplained residue in them, for they deal with the abiding problems of man's relationship to others, to himself, and to the universe.

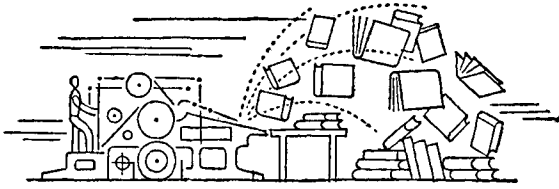
Specialization in literary criticism has run parallel with specialization in science, particularly in medical science. There is, of course, value in such specialization. Individual authors and "movements" merit intensive study; but these authors and "movements" belong to the organism of the national literature, which both nourishes them and draws nourishment from them. This organism of the national literature, this national psyche, is the proper province of the literary historian. Van Wyck Brooks was a very admirable literary historian in his earliest books, but since then he has become a polite chronicler of social and literary manners. The younger men, meanwhile, have strayed off into the by-ways of specialism. There is great need for the return of the literary historian in the realm of literary comment. The combination of massive erudition, critical insight, and writing skill necessary for being a Hippolyte Taine or Émile Faguet is extremely rare, but it is well worth cultivating in so far as is possible. Literature is one of the supreme and abiding glories of the human soul, and the literary historian is its truest recorder and guardian.



---

## THE CHECK LIST

---



### HISTORY

**THEIR FINEST HOUR**, by Winston S. Churchill. \$6.00. *Houghton Mifflin*. In this second volume of his history of the Second World War, Mr. Churchill deals with the period between his assumption of the post of head of the British government to the victorious conclusion of the Battle of Britain and the Desert Victory, or, roughly, between May 1940 and January 1941. As in Volume I, there are long, dreary stretches of military detail, and there are also equally long, dreary stretches of Churchillian verbiage that are very embarrassing in their pomposity. But there are also magnificent passages, many of them, dealing with one of the noblest periods in human history and surely the most sublime in British history. Those seven months when the Germans threw everything they had at England, which stood alone, already mourned by the multitude and given up by the "experts," was truly the nation's finest hour, and in the description and appraisal of that hour Mr. Churchill's organ roll of majestic paragraph upon majestic paragraph is most appropriate, and reaches Olympian heights of effectiveness. "Alone, but upborne by every generous heartbeat of mankind, we had defied the tyrant in the height of his triumph." As history, in the long-range view, this volume probably suffers even more than the previous one. Mr. Churchill thinks that he was nearly always right, and his opponents nearly always wrong. Already Messrs. Reynaud and Gamelin, among others, have made sharp dents in his reputation as an im-

partial historian. In time, other critics will probably make still more dents. But no one will deny that Mr. Churchill's work will form a primary source book for future historians.

**PATHS TO THE PRESENT**, by Arthur M. Schlesinger. \$4.00. *Macmillan*. There are thirteen essays here on a variety of subjects, from "The Rôle of the Immigrant" to "Food in the Making of America," and from "Biography of a Nation of Joiners" to "The City in American Civilization." At this late date, it is hardly necessary to offer extended comment upon any writings by Dr. Schlesinger of Harvard, one of the most distinguished and most informed and most penetrating historians America has produced. He is a quiet thinker and does not wield adjectives like lesser colleagues of his at Harvard or Columbia or Princeton; he relies upon facts to tell their story. That, however, does not mean that he adheres to any bogus objectivity. If facts reveal a truth he tells the truth without hemming and hawing. His chapter on the immigrant in American history is a perfect model of objective historical writing and truth-telling. No super-patriotic Daughter or Son of the American Revolution can read it — if he or she ever will read it — without feeling deeply ashamed. In every way an excellent book, which will undoubtedly be read and pondered for decades to come.

**STORY WITHOUT END**, *An Informal History of the Jews*, by Solomon Landman and Benjamin Efron. \$3.00. *Holt*. It may