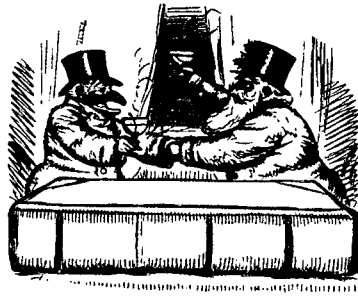


ARTS & CULTURE



C R I T I C U S

Signs and Portents

B Y G . B . T E N N Y S O N

O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky;
But can ye not discern the signs of the times?

— Matthew 16:3

MANKIND HAS been endeavoring to understand signs for as long as there is any record of human activities. Cicero wrote a work on divination in which he said: "It was ordained at the beginning of the world that certain signs should prefigure certain events." There were oracles throughout the ancient world, constantly being consulted by warriors, kings, and princes, and constantly baffling them with ambiguous utterances. So, too, the many sibyls in antiquity, including the famous Cumaean Sibyl in Greece who accompanied Aeneas into Hades and who sold the Sibylline Books to Rome where they were housed in the temple of Jupiter and consulted by the Roman Senate in times of emergency. There were, of course, prophets aplenty in the Bible as well as mentions of numer-

ous forms of divination. One source I consulted listed, in addition to the obvious modes of interpreting the signs of natural phenomena such as storms and lightning, eight Biblical modes of divination, including hepatoscopy (reading the liver of sacrificed animals), oneiromancy (interpreting dreams), necromancy (communing with the dead), and rhabdomancy (using rods or wands).

Then there are modes of divination through the use of almost anything you can think of: alectryomancy (rooster pecking grain representing letters), axinomancy (agate on axe to point to a criminal), belomancy (shooting arrows with messages attached; the farthest one being the truth), botanomancy (leaves with messages or the sounds made when leaves are crushed), chiromancy (palmistry), crystallo-mancy (crystal ball or precious stones), empyromancy (objects placed on a fire), extispicy (entrails as in haruspicy; see below), geomancy (earth thrown on a flat surface), gyromancy (walking in a circle until dizzy), pyromancy (fire or flames and the shapes they project) and xylomancy (twigs, rods, pieces of wood), to name but a few.

One method you can try at home is bibliomancy, whereby, looking skyward, you open the Bible at random and let your finger point to a passage. However

G.B. Tennyson is the editor of A Carlyle Reader (3d. ed., 1999) and many other works on Victorian and modern literature. He is CPR's official vaticinator.

that passage reads is taken as a guide to your future. Criticus did it and hit the "Begats," which he took as a sign that a grandchild was on the way. One was. But, then, he already knew that. The ancients also let their fingers do the walking with certain favored texts, usually Virgil and Homer. The practice was called *sortes*. The Romans consulted soothsayers (sooth = truth), one of whom, you will remember, warned Caesar about the Ides of March. They also turned to the *haruspex*, a diviner who interpreted the will of the gods by examining the entrails of sacrificial animal victims. Two or more such persons were *haruspices* and their practice is *haruspicy*. We all remember the Three Kings who read the message of the heavens and were guided to Bethlehem. Astrology columns and books are the modern descendants. Still among us are Gypsy fortune tellers, palm readers, crystal ball gazers, Tarot card readers, ouija board players, and now even dial-up psychics who advertise on television.

The more sophisticated among us would say that the ancient forms of divination are not to be taken seriously and that even the surviving vestiges cited here are fit only for teenage girls. Criticus acknowledges that one is unlikely ever to meet a *haruspex* in the shopping mall, though it is worth bearing in mind that in many countries to which your tax dollar is dispatched there are still such things as voodoo, juju, obeah, cargo cults, Rastafarianism, and that southeast Asian religion that venerates, among others, Victor Hugo. Moreover, there is one form of divination that thrives in the most advanced countries and that actually moved Criticus to this topic. It is called the Opinion Poll.

YES, IT was the recent election and especially the Florida Follies that put Criticus in mind of how we go about reading the signs of the times. By now every man, woman, and child knows about such things as the Voter News Service and exit polls and television projections and the unseemly rush to be first. The more cynical among us also know about Liberal Media Bias (and don't tell me they didn't know the polls hadn't closed in the

Florida panhandle). In the days of *alecetryomancy* they drew a circle and wrote the letters of the alphabet in succession inside the perimeter. On each letter they placed a single grain of wheat. A cock was placed in the center of the circle and observers noted which grains he ate. When trying to determine who would succeed the Emperor Valens, two Romans watched a cock eat the grains over the letters t-h-e-o-d, and thus "knew" that the successor would be Theod(orus). Is this believable? Were some grains subtly enhanced? Was the cock impartial? Did he stop eating after the five letters? Were there other cock-watchers to attest to the grains? History does not tell us, but evidently Theodorus did succeed, and *alecetryomancy* in that instance was more accurate than modern polls.

It was in the spirit of grain pecking rather than opinion sampling that Criticus decided that he would try to discern the signs of the times. He was mindful of the example of the great Victorian essayist, critic, and historian Thomas Carlyle in his 1829 essay "Signs of the Times," the title for which Carlyle took from the passage in Matthew cited above. Carlyle used his observations of the signs to pronounce upon the entire age. It was, he wrote, the Mechanical Age, not an age of dynamism. This was no compliment, mechanism for Carlyle being dead, lifeless, lacking a spiritual dimension. Though Criticus is known to have given Carlyle a fairly extensive look-in, he deemed it the better part of valor not to try to aim as high as the man who for his wisdom and insight into the age became known as the Sage. Instead, my plan would be to note simply those signs that have come my way in recent months and to make comment on them as they pass. Many of them touch on topics that Criticus has dealt with in the past. If they all add up to something, so much the better.

SCATTERED GRAINS

Herewith a few items so self-evidently foolish or malign that they indict themselves. A high school in Clovis, California, appears to have decided, following a name-calling incident (which they were too fastidious to specify beyond saying it was a "racial slur"),



**There is one form
of divination that
thrives in the most
advanced countries.**

**It is called the
Opinion Poll.**

that it is permissible intra-racially for students to address each other by a racial slur, but that it is hate speech if done inter-racially. Effectively this means separate vocabularies for the races. ONSI-

CONSIDERING THAT the racial composition of the school is rather varied, there will presumably be vocabulary lists for the following groups that make up the school population: black, white, Latino, Hmong, American Indian, Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian Our watchdogs at the ACLU are suing to have a 66-year old metal cross honoring WWI veterans removed from a desert town near Baker because it is on National Park Service Land and thus violates the separation of church and state The ACLU has remained silent about the 600 crosses planted in the ground at UCLA on the Mexican Day of the Dead by a "student social justice organization" to commemorate those who died crossing the border illegally since 1994. Some crosses are more equal than others And when will the media recognize that *La Dia de Los Muertos* that they so lovingly report on is, after all, the Christian All Souls Day? For that matter, is the Postal Service run by the Democrat vote counters in Florida? Criticus knows of one California conservative voter who received a fund appeal letter from "Lazio 2000" dated inside as October 6, but postmarked from Long Island on 10 November. Criticus knows of another who received the Judicial Watch October newsletter on December 2. Onward to yet deeper issues.

MASCOTTERY

Yes, we've been here before, but lately the mascot business has been sending conflicting signals. There is the case of San Diego State. After much hand-wringing and soul-searching the school has decided to retain its mascot, Monty Montezuma, and its school nickname of Aztecs. A Native American campus group had complained that the depiction of Monty was demeaning. The emperor is impersonated by a muscular, sparingly clad male undergraduate sporting an extravagant Indian headdress and feathers who en-



**The Seminole Indian
chief announced that
he and his people
are not at all
offended by Florida
State University's
Indian mascot.**

ters the stadium at a run, flinging a flaming spear onto the field and showing throughout the game a warlike demeanor as he exhorts fans to cheer for the team. The anti-Monty faction insisted

that the real Montezuma was a rather melancholic figure who wore a kind of Roman tunic and cape. In between pro- and anti-Montyers, we find a sly student of history pointing out in the *Times* that the true offense was the romanticizing of the brutal and oppressive regime that was Aztec rule. He noted that the Conquistadors, not known for squeamishness, were horrified to see as many as 20,000 war captives sacrificed to Aztec gods at once and that "the cruelties of these elaborate and lengthy ceremonies are best left undescribed." The pro-Monty faction appears to have been almost the entire student body, the alumni, and the general public in San Diego. One suspects that in this in-

stance money and power made a difference. The pro-Monty forces even set up their own web site. The final judgment was left to the school president Stephen Weber who made what he probably considers a Solomonic decision — keep Monty but change his attire and demeanor to reflect a more dignified image. This will in classic academic fashion be determined by a committee. The anti-Monty group is greatly disappointed, and Criticus wonders just how pleased the pro-Monty fans will be if the resulting Monty is made to look like "a thoughtful philosopher-king, deeply religious, always scanning the sky for omens," as he was described by a history professor at UC San Diego. Criticus thinks the historic Montezuma should have hired some haruspices to examine the entrails of all those sacrificial victims to find out how to resist the Spanish and how to avoid being stoned to death by his own people.

On the other coast, the Seminole Indian chief announced that he and his people are not at all offended by Florida State University's Indian mascot and the use of the tomahawk chop. "As long as the Seminoles keep winning, we're happy," he declared. So there are some good living Indians after all.

Still, there was East Coast folly as well. The Washington Redskins had to go to court to ask a federal

judge to set aside a ruling from a panel at the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office that ordered the cancellation of federal registrations of Redskin trademarks including the team's logo. The reason was that the panel found the name Redskins "offensive."

THE WHOLE mascot issue is but another example of the total humorlessness of the left. A mascot (the term derives from a word for sorceress and witchcraft) is a person, character, or object thought to bring good luck. It has always carried with it the idea of affection and good will and increasingly in sporting contests a degree of spoofing and exaggeration. Taken seriously, the idea of someone garbed as a Trojan warrior riding a horse around a football field is ludicrous. Or naming that horse Traveller, which was the name of Marse Robert's horse. How did that steed, or for that matter Troy itself, get to LaLa Land? What about that jokester got-up as a huge chicken? Or people wearing hats made to look like blocks of cheese? Or ... well, anyone can add to this number with more authority than Criticus whose knowledge of athletics is shaky and often disapproving. At least for a while you can, but for how long? For some time I have hoped that a student of popular culture would do a complete book of mascots, collegiate and professional, why they were adopted, how they have evolved. (The Aztecs, for example, were once the Wampus Cats.) Now it is a matter of historical urgency, for in the brave new world being imposed upon us, mascots, if they exist at all, will be uniformly solemn, dignified, inoffensive, and a credit to their people. And absolutely no fun at all.

STATUARY HELL

Not to be outdone in silliness, the English have been confronted with a problem troubling the recently-elected mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, long known as "Red Ken" for his political views. He wants two of the statues that stand in Trafalgar Square to be removed and replaced by better-known figures. Nelson will remain on his column but the statues of General Napier and Maj. General Havelock standing on

plinths at opposite corners of the square should be removed. The two were central to the British domination of India in the nineteenth century. Livingstone says nobody knows who they are, including himself.



A mascot (the term derives from a word for sorceress) is a person, character, or object thought to bring good luck.

Livingstone's critics think it is really a case of political correctness and a desire to erase Britain's imperial past. Criticus thinks a bit of both. America is forever exporting its worst ideas to the civilized world. Imagine if this notion came the other way from across the pond. Washington, D.C., would be wiped clean. Down with Kosciusko and von Steuben in Lafayette Square, and Lafayette himself, that Dead White Aristocratic European Male. Statuary Hall and many corridors in the Capitol building would be purged of the huge lot of unknowns representing the several states, such as California's Thomas Starr King (who he? many will ask), and the mob of known but "oppressor" people, such as California's Junipero Serra, to say nothing of all the slaveholders memorialized there. For that matter, who but a few family members and friends know the names inscribed on the Viet Nam memorial? Down with them all. Start anew with a statue of Hilary Rodham Clinton.

OLYMPIAN HUBRIS

The retiring head of the International Olympic Committee pronounced the Sydney Olympics the "best ever." Perhaps they were. They were not much seen in the United States because of NBC's prime time greed, which happily backfired into paltry ratings. Certainly the auguries for the Athens Olympics are that they will be the worst ever. This is prophesied not by any Critical pyromantic staring into the fire but by many IOC personnel who have visited the empty fields and waste places of Athens where construction has not even begun on the necessary facilities. If Athens does come a cropper it may be a blessing, signalling the end of the Olympic movement, which has outlived its usefulness.

For the Olympics are no longer in any sense of the word *amateur* athletics, that is, done for the love of it and non-professional. Every event is a professional contest. Perhaps the only true amateur in the entire

games was the bewildered African boy, who had been swimming for only six months but who won his heat because his competitors were disqualified. Seeing him labor his way down the pool like a house cat who fell in by mistake was positively endearing: you kept hoping he'd make it all the way to end and cheered when he, exhausted, did so. Virtually all other competitors were steely-eyed pros, practiced, proficient, cheerless, in not a few cases drug-enhanced for their sport, watched over by professional minders and trainers. To make matters worse, many of them, chiefly Americans, behaved abominably in victory, especially the sprinters who disported themselves disgustingly with the flag. And what of the large number of participants who came only for their own event (s) and then left for home? As one of them explained, "Well I have a career to get back to." That career was more training for future contests, and very likely lining up merchandise endorsements.

On the bright side, there were some excellent fireworks, and Sydney harbor is a spectacular setting. The Aussies were their light-hearted selves, something like Americans in the 'fifties but with a sense of humor. They may even, per-capita, have won the medals count. The official statistics that show the U.S. at the top of that listing could not, of course, indicate that, if you add up all the medals won by the countries of the former Soviet Union, then the Soviets came out on top. Is it possible that they are still running these force-feeding training programs in nations that are economic basket cases?

ET TO Criticus the most entertaining and instruc-

Yative thing to come from the Olympics was the discovery of the real meaning of Australia's unofficial anthem, "Waltzing Matilda." Now, as every schoolboy knows, the official anthem of Australia is "Advance, Australia Fair," which was heard now and again but not so often as the much better known unofficial anthem, with which they closed the ceremonies in a rousing sing-along that rocked the stadium. Most non-Australians, I'll venture to say, are like me in knowing only the refrain and simply hum along with the rest which is full of uniquely Australian words like "swagman," "cool-

bah," "billy," "jumbuck," and "billabong." And most, like me, probably thought it was a song about inviting a girl name Matilda to waltz, however curious that seems for an anthem. But the song is more complicated than that, and Criticus has researched the matter.

"Waltzing Matilda" has a series of four verses telling a story of a swagman (a hobo or drifter of shady character) who in the shade of a coolibah (eucalyptus) tree boils his water in a billy (tin can) and snatches a jumbuck (sheep) on his rambles only to be confronted by local residents and the militia and ordered to hand the sheep over, whereupon he leaps into the billabong (isolated pond left by a retreating river) saying, "You'll never take me alive." You can hear his ghost saying the same and singing the refrain as you pass by the billabong. The slightly complicated part is that each verse is followed by the "Waltzing Matilda"

refrain, but rendered so that the third line of the preceding verse becomes the third line of the refrain. Here's the first verse and the refrain (everybody knows the tune, I think): "Once a jolly swagman camped by a billabong / Under the shade of a coolibah tree / And he sang as he watched and waited till his billy boiled / You'll come a-waltzing matilda with me."

*Waltzing matilda, waltzing matilda,
You'll come a-waltzing matilda with me.
And he sang as he watched and waited till his billy
boiled,
You'll come a-waltzing matilda with me.*

Most illuminating of all is that the term "waltzing matilda" is not what it seems to be. It is even alleged that many Australians do not know its true meaning or origin. A swagman carried his goods and bed-roll in a swag, called a "matilda," and he went a-waltzing, that is, he hit the road. The origin is believed to be from the German *auf die Walz gehen* — to go wandering, with one's *Mathilde*, a girl's name applied to a bed-roll, if you take the meaning. So "waltzing matilda" means to take to the road with your swag and bed-roll on your back. It is not an invitation to the dance, or to nothing closer to one than perhaps a rollicking walk that a jolly swagman might strike while



The most entertaining thing to come from the Sydney Olympics was the discovery of the real meaning of 'Waltzing Matilda.'

wandering in the outback. Which is why the term is rendered without capitals and without a comma. "You'll come a-waltzing matilda with me," means "we'll take to the road together."

Well, the Olympics may not have been good for much else, but think of what they have taught us of Australian history and human aspiration. Yes, both those things, for there are no more swagmen waltzing matilda today, just a nation that nostalgically remembers when there were and when life was an open road. Like every nation, Australia has a national memory and a national myth. Typically for a nation settled by criminals, outcasts, hard-drinking Celts, and irreverent Cockneys, the national memory enshrines a grifter.

* * *

Space and time have overtaken Criticus, meaning that he has had to leave out many other interesting oddments that have come his way. He'll put them in a swag and go a-waltzing matilda with them in a future number. But he'll draw a few conclusions from such signs of the times as noted above.

The present day is, as Carlyle said all days are, the confluence of two eternities: "it is made up of currents that issue from the remotest Past, and flow onward to the remotest Future." But at this present confluence there is strife between those who want to hold onto the best of the past and those who want to trash the past in favor of an imagined perfect future. Using the instances cited above as representative of the divide,

should we emasculate the mascots, cast off old heroes, professionalize all sports — or should we preserve our symbols, honor our heroes, let sports be joyous again? Carlyle said it was no good sign to deal much in vaticination, which Criticus is about to do (and which Carlyle did all his life). Criticus is also about to go back on his word not to try to emulate Carlyle in pronouncing upon the character of the age.

First, the pronouncement. Criticus characterizes this as the Age of Dubiety. Perhaps even the Age of Double Dubiety. That means doubt on both sides, though the character of the doubt is different on each. One side — we'll call it that of the Dastard Doubters — positively embraces doubt, seeing it as something like a principle, indeed a god, if they believed in a god. The other side — we'll call it that of the Delaying Doubters — finds its traditional beliefs under constant assault from the ruling elite and begins to doubt those beliefs and to become defensively apologetic, thereby little by little conceding ground to the Dastards. Patrick Buchanan unsuccessfully tried to persuade the country that this divide constitutes a culture war. Criticus thinks the culture war is not yet upon us, but he is led by the circumstances to make his prophecy. That is that there will not be a culture war, only gradual capitulation, unless there is what it is now fashionable to call a paradigm shift. Such a shift must involve both a reaffirmation of tradition and a reinvigoration of it that makes it new. For man cannot live by Doubt alone.

CPR

B O O K S

A bit of Clinton-backed disinformation

B Y P E T E R H A N N A F O R D

BETWEEN 1995 and 1999, Switzerland's image metamorphosed from one of Heidi, chocolate, and cuckoo clocks to that of a nation of Nazi allies whose banks systematically robbed Jewish victims of the

Holocaust. In this gripping volume, Angelo Codevilla, a professor of international relations at Boston University and former senior staff member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, lays out in crisp, clear terms exactly how this

happened. He also analyzes the dilemma the Swiss faced in World War II and how they solved it.

Peter Hannaford's latest book is The Quotable Calvin Coolidge: Sensible Words for a New Century, reviewed in this issue of CPR, page 36.