

ica, disappearing in the smoke and clangor of wartime. *B.F.'s Daughter* (1946), which the author called "a novel of manners" drawn from his wartime service in Washington, contains a scoffing portrait of a New Deal speechwriter, Tom Brett, demotic on the surface but walking evidence that "all liberals were turning into self-righteous, complacent social snobs." Tom marries the daughter of a headstrong but honest titan of industry who, as one fatuous radio chickenhawk puts it, "represented a way of life and a mechanism of life that is completely gone. . . . It's gone, and I don't know where it went, and what's more, I can't entirely remember what it was, although we all lived in it. We're like fish being moved from one aquarium to another."

This idea (minus the piscine metaphor) recurs throughout the novel. The war is changing America: indeed, "nothing matters that happened before the war." A new order is at hand, drab and grey and conformist. "No one seems to be an individual anymore," one spirited lady complains, even as the air is thick with platitudes about the Four Freedoms and the coming More Abundant Life. "Personally, I thought the world we used to live in, cockeyed though it was, was better," says one of Marquand's gentlemen. So did many Americans.

By the 1950's it was all over. America was remade, from sea to shining sea, and though the Beats noticed this and raised a fuss ("America was invested with wild self-believing individu-

ality and this had begun to disappear around the end of World War II with so many great guys dead," fretted Jack Kerouac), they were condemned as barbarians and then ridiculed and then honored for all the wrong reasons, and finally these holy fools were dealt the coup de grace of postwar America: they got tenure and won NEA grants.

By 1963 Edmund Wilson, despairing that "our country has become today a huge blundering power unit controlled more and more by bureaucracies whose rule is making it more and more difficult to carry on the tradition of American individualism," had concluded that "this country, whether or not I continue to live in it, is no longer any place for me." Wilson stayed, though no one much cared, and in his final years he retreated to Talcottville, as secluded a fastness as any Jeffers mountain. He died deeply in debt to the IRS, which needed the money to fill up yet another blood-lake.

Wilson was one of the lucky ones. He was treated indulgently, as a kind of national village crank, but even the Presidential Medal of Freedom that his fellow America Firster John F. Kennedy awarded him could not keep Wilson from falling—with Masters and Saroyan and the rest—into the slough of despond. The Republic had perished, and these men were quite unable to revive it. They left us only road maps, soiled upon issue and now yellowed from years of neglect, but readable just the same. <c

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## Underwater

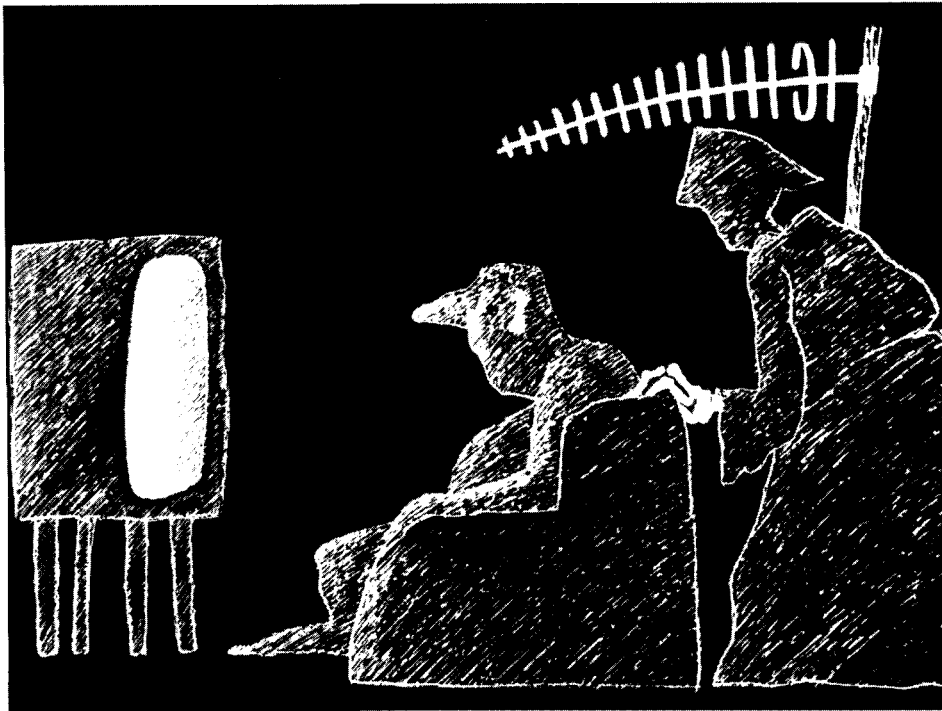
by Rudolph Schirmer

Lord of what current rules the flowing kingdom  
Where the lorn Monarch of Mud repines  
And water lilies all but bow in homage  
To the slumberland of make-believe?

Ah, and what subjects—turtles, toads, amphibians—  
Profess their fealty in ribald speech,  
Miring their tributes in a tangent pool  
Where only the finned Treasurer can find them!

# The Plains States and America's Future

by Anthony Harrigan



Igor Kopelnitsky

The halls and vast columned spaces of the St. Scholastica convent in Atchison, Kansas, are dark and empty now. The sisters who filled these buildings with busy religious life for several generations are dead or departed into the secular world with the virtual demise of convent life as a result of Vatican II. I talk quietly in a corner of the chapel with an aged nun who remains true to her vows and who, after 60 years as a religious, is dutiful, obedient, and devoted. The world is full of disappearing or vanished eras, and the ordered life of a large convent, grounded in the ancient ways of Christendom, is only one of many forms of existence that have been damaged by time's relentless flood.

The end is all around us in life, as small and large epochs are eclipsed. In small towns and great cities entire communities lie asleep in graveyards, marked only by weathering letters on marble markers. Life that is so vivid for a little while quickly becomes lost from sight. With each generation there is a new, albeit ephemeral phase of modernity, which in time fades away. Civilized life is periodic in character. In Atchison, London, New York, Mexico City, or wherever, the vibrant structures of a decade, generation, or century soon become skeletons. Entire eras, like individuals, disappear unless uncovered and brought to life by scholars, writers, and moralists.

Only in the historical mind's eye do the human actors and patterns of a past time live in glowing detail. Fragments survive, of course, and this is good. French architect Le Corbusier, writing in *When the Cathedrals were White*, said that "there

are living pasts and dead pasts. Some parts are the liveliest investigators of the present and the best springboards into the future." But the corpus of an era, the rich fabric of another age, is usually lost from sight. The obliteration of a world is a cruel process because so much human energy, imagination, belief, and effort go into the construction of any era, no matter how brief. To have a generation's work covered over so quickly makes life itself seem terrifyingly transient, and one's own time seems dangerously imperiled even as one lives it. Hence the desire on the part of archaeologists to preserve or recover pieces of the fabric of an earlier life, whether public buildings or places of worship. These searchers after a buried past delight in comprehending the customs, mores, language, pleasures, sorrows, and dreams of people whose epoch has ended. America, despite its brief history, has seen an extraordinary number of distinct eras, and despite the fact that America is the land of the bulldozer, where "progress" has been worshiped and "urban renewal" has meant the obliteration of handsome, ordered communities, vestiges of other eras remain and are increasingly cherished.

One such place where a portion of the past survives, a place off the beaten track of contemporary life, is Atchison, Kansas. High on a bluff above the Missouri River stands a remarkable collection of homes built by railroad executives, real estate barons, and prominent merchants in the late 19th century. Amelia Farhart, the pioneer aviatrix, grew up in one of the oldest homes here, a Browning cottage built in 1850. Nearby are numerous opulent mansions built in the 1870's and 1890's. The stained glass windows, parquet floors, gaslights, Romanesque columns, towers, and turrets testify to the imagination and inventiveness of the original owners who commis-

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