World Citizens on Main Street

by Bill Kauffman

Igor Kopelnitsky

"It's a small, small world," or so chirp the marionettes of Michael Eisner's Disney, the outfit that brought you NHL hockey in Orange County and a free Pocahontas glass with the purchase of a Happy Meal at the McDonald's in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

In fact it is not a small world, at least for those of us who actually live in it, rather than on Planet Hollywood or in the never-never land of Washington-Manhattan Conservatism, where freedom's just another word for nothing, and the twin titans of the press—the Hearst and McCormick of our day—are bizarre foreigners named Rupert Murdoch and the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, a.k.a. God.

The world, in fact, is incomprehensibly large, though there are forces that would erase it with a Nike swoosh. Wendell Berry once challenged the eager beaver Birkenstock girls and backpack boys with their "Think Globally, Act Locally" pins to "look at one of those photographs of half the earth taken from outer space, and see if you recognize your neighborhood."

Global integration is a blessing, we are told, and besides, it's inevitable—it broadens the horizons of children raised by parochial parents; it forces workers to put their noses so close to the grindstone they have to breathe out of their mouths, and how wonderful for the GNP that is—but apart from microwave egg rolls I can't really see how it has enriched our town. I am not talking here about the free exchange of goods between countries, or even better, regions, which is generally a very good thing, nor do I complain about the small number of people from other states or even lands who have come to live with us in Genesee County, and be part of us. Native-born doctors refuse to practice in the hinterlands, so I'm grateful to our foreign-born physicians. Besides, without the smattering of Asians, Batavia High School would never have a valedictorian.

But internationalization—the imposition of alien practices and cultural forms on native populations—deadens our souls, saps our vitality, and leaves us with lost and alienated men and women who feel as strangers in their own land. I will speak a bit about my own town, because that's the only place in the world I can ever begin to know.

Several years ago, a large tractor factory in Batavia, which employed several hundred neighbors as well as a member of my family, was purchased by a German firm. Upon taking possession, the new German owners, displaying the puckish humor and gentle mercy for which their people are so widely loved, fired all salaried employees who were within a few years of a full pension. They did so without repercussion, for unlike the family that had once owned the factory, our Teutonic overlords were tied to Batavia only by the flimsy cord of the almighty dollar. The executioners did not have to look into the faces of 50-year-old men, good and loyal workers, solid fathers and citizens, who were handed their walking papers one week before Christmas. A couple years later, the Germans goosestepped out of

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town, leaving an empty factory and devastated lives in their wake.

At least on the way out the road signs posted the speed limit in miles, not kilometers. A little victory, by the way, which suggests myriad possibilities. The grassroots revolt against the metric system, that monstrous spawn of the Big-Government-Big Business-Big Science alliance, was beautiful and inspiring, even better than our ancestors' rejection of Esperanto. As Herbert Spencer, one of the great metric system haters of all time, put it during the English metric debate: "Ten thousand persons intend to make twenty million persons change their habits." And that is precisely the logic of globalism.

Poor Spencer's side lost, several decades after his death, but by then his people had been hopelessly corrupted by imperialism and boarding schools, the same poisons that degraded our WASP ruling class into deracinated internationalists who with blithe spirits sent their social inferiors off to die in senseless wars on behalf of the United States of Abstraction. "It is not worth the while to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar," as Henry Thoreau wrote, and we must remember this: that for every Mickey Kantor or Jack Kemp there are 10,000 Americans who stand with Thoreau. Among the unsung patriots of our day, my everyday heroes, are the ornery old men who speak of quarts, not liters; the refractory kids who flunk tests on their metric conversion tables; and the track officials who still stage 100-yard dashes and mile runs.

International competitiveness and national defense: the stated rationales for the metric system are the same given for seemingly every act of despoliation over the last half century. Almost every healthy manifestation of American cultural life—whether the regionalist art movement, the Iowa renaissance, the agrarian-distributist alliance—was snuffed in the worst of all decades, the 1940's, when our rulers determined that henceforth, till the end of time, an attack on a single cat in Zanzibar was tantamount to an attack on us, and our boys and our money would be sent away, far from home, to serve the Acronym of the Day. We were all Zanzibarbarians now.

It is impossible to overstate the devastation visited upon my country by the Cold War. All those 18-year-old boys from Batavia or Holley or Lime Rock, New York, who were stolen from their families and their towns and died, scared and alone, in Korea and Vietnam. Who learned, as the light went out, the sad truth that a Batavia boy had written in his diary a century earlier, as he drifted away in a Virginia hospital bed, a casualty of the Battle of the Wilderness: "Today the doctor says I must die—all is over with me—ah, so young to die."

Between the dead and the displaced, fed by the blood of hundreds of thousands of nonwhite people who had to die so that Strange Robert McNamara could have nightmares in his Aspen chalet, the Cold War also gave us the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways, which wasted our money and destroyed local patterns of life and commerce; such abominations as statehood for Hawaii and Alaska, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Holy Meter; and the first major federal assault on education—the National Defense Education Act.

As a boy I attended John Kennedy Elementary School, which was named, I am pleased to say, not for Angie Dickinson's paramour but rather for the turn-of-the-century superintendent of Batavia schools, a self-consciously Important Man who wrote books on orthography and the "Batavia System" of instruction.

Kennedy was sober and pompous; he merited, I am sure, every "Kick Me" sticker that irreverent wits pinned to his back, but still, he was ours, and a buckram symbol of an age in which Batavians might still organize their own schools and draw up their own curriculum. He was a fanatic on the matter of teaching local history, for as he wrote in his history of the Holland Land Office: "Grandfather's chair may be a very humble piece of furniture, but it is prized beyond all price because it is grandfather's chair."

Despite the noble efforts of many terrific teachers, grandfather's chair is not much more than kindling today, as textbooks tell of the magnificence and victimhood of every group of grandfathers but our own. Our 13-year-olds can name the president of South Africa, but don't know the words to "Fifteen Miles on the Erie Canal." It'd be nice if they knew both, but given that they live 15 miles from the Erie Canal and 8,000 miles or one TV screen—which is even farther—from Pretoria, one bit of knowledge is essential to their citizenship and the other is useless, rather like being able to list the films of Robby Benson.

The New York State legislature mandated not long ago that all schoolchildren in our state be enlightened by "holocaust education." The Nazi extermination of European Jews was a ghastly and diabolical episode, but since when is it more important to our children than their own history? Now Governor Mario Pataki has signed a bill requiring all districts to teach the Irish potato famine, and soon the school year will be wall-to-wall genocide studies, September to June—with the Indians, the only victims who have a legitimate claim upon our time, getting the short end of the stick, as they always have.

So what we end up with is our children being taught the pain and suffering of every people on earth while they learn *nothing* of their own history: our kids should be getting James Fenimore Cooper and Red Jacket and Grover Cleveland—indeed, if Albany rededicated Martin Luther King Day as Harriet Tubman Day, in honor of our neighbor from Auburn, then I'd be all for it—but none of this can happen if the history of foreigners comes to mean more to a people than their own history.

Our children are as flies to the Worldwide Web, trapped in the computers that state mandates and the lobbyists of the computer-industrial complex are hard-driving down our throats. And why? So we can educate our boys and girls to be interchangeable parts in a vast impersonal—antipersonal—machine. So they can die for Microsoft. And here I might add, contra Bob Dole's ventriloquists, thank God for the teachers' unions. They stand and fight with us, with the defenders of local control, on issue after issue: opposed to school consolidation, opposed to year-round schooling, opposed to national teaching standards, and dead-set against the apple of every Robo-Con's eye, school vouchers.

"Ere long, thine every stream shall find a tongue, land of the many waters!" exulted the antebellum New York poet Charles Fenno Hoffman. But globalism acknowledges no streams, just a single world-encompassing ocean in which all local flavor, color, even sin, is drowned.

In Batavia, we once had our very own legendary madam, a lady named Edna, who for decades kept a famous brothel on Jackson Street. Edna was the city's most generous philanthropist: she endowed the orphanage that occupied the former home of our railroad baron Dean Richmond; she paid the medical bills of many of our town's poor; she quietly distributed

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dolls and baseball gloves and toys to children of indigent parents every Christmas. Prodded by bluenoses—usually transient Protestant ministers—the cops had to raid her once or twice a year, but she was always forewarned by her friends in the police department.

Edna's is long gone; lechery, too, has been abstracted, made unreal. Next door to Edna's old place is Batavia's first X-rated video store and vendor of what used to be so charmingly known as "marital aids." So rather than disport with the local doxies the boys can stop by after work and pick up a video filmed in the province of Mexico called Los Angeles, and make like Graham Parker: "I pretend to touch and you pretend to feel."

Plenty of the guys already have their applications in at what will soon be one of Batavia's biggest employers, the new Immigration and Naturalization Service holding center that our congressman, a callow Bosnia hawk and PAC-aholic and Gingrich boytoy named Bill Paxon, has obtained for us. As if the Attica prison revolt of 1971 did not leave a jagged enough scar: now we can look forward to playing jailer to frightened and angry Haitians who will slit our throats at the first chance. Prisons and waste dumps: the growth industries on Main Street in the Age of Clinton and Dole. And even the prisoners and the waste have to be imported.

At this point I should bemoan the globalization—thus the negation—of local art and thought, but I won't. I should affirm that wonderful line by Morrissey, the Oscar Wilde of postpunk English music:

> We look to Los Angeles for the language we use
> London is dead, London is dead, London is dead.

But I can hardly claim virginity in these matters, knowing, as I do, the words to the theme songs from both *The Brady Bunch* and *The Partridge Family*. And besides, though I yield to no man in my hatred of French sex comedies, they are not the problem. As a gal from Northern Virginia once said, "I know the problem is me."

Like the old men who resist going metric, we have it within our power to nurture 1,001 little regional revivals. Like the old paper-rock-scissors game, one handful of dirt trumps an entire globe. We are in the position of Edward Eggleston, the Indiana novelist of the 1870's, who wrote: "It has been in my mind since I was a Hoosier boy to do something toward describing life in the back country districts of the western states. It used to be a matter of no little jealousy with us, I remember, that the manners, customs, thoughts, and feelings of New England country people filled so large a place in books, while our life, not less interesting, not less romantic, and certainly not less filled with humorous and grotesque material, had no place in literature. It was as though we were shut out of good society."

Instead of whining about New England's hegemony or plotting the assassination of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Eggleston wrote *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*, and we ought to follow his example. Every Main Street and Oak Street and Elm Street deserves its own record, its own poem, and the lack thereof is not the fault of Sumner Redstone or David Geffen or Boutros Boutros-Ghali, however horrid these men and their playthings may be. Good old Ed Howe understood that "in every town there is material for the great American novel so long expected, but no one appears to write it."

The tools of our regeneration are at our feet, if we'd just take a minute to look down. "Art, although potentially universal in significance, is always more or less local in inception," as Grant Wood wrote. Wood painted "American Gothic" for his muse and murals for the amusement of Cedar Rapids businessmen: the perfect synthesis of art and life on Main Street. He did so at the same time Henry Luce and the American Centurians wanted their uppercase *Life* to replace our lowercase lives, and yet we endure. Our own historical society recently put together a wonderful exhibit of the work of Batavia's own Grant Wood, the naturalist Roy Mason, kind of a Winslow Homer without the p.r. agent; Mason supported himself by painting calendar art for the Family Liquor Center and the Baker Gun Company, among others. My lawyer, my dentist, my car repairman, my barber, the guys who fixed our roof, and so on, are all kids my brother and I played ball with or went to school with, and if this is possible in as devastated a place as Batavia then I can't help but feel optimistic about the prospects for an American revival. The ingredients are still there for us.

The great Edward Abbey called his classic *Desert Solitaire* "a tombstone . . . a bloody rock," and he advised readers to "throw it at something big and glassy." But though some may "love the sound of breaking glass," as a reprobate Englishman once confessed, after the brick shatters the window all you get are shards in the yard and splinters in your feet and a mess to clean up. Rocks and bricks are no match for the tanks and bombs and organized hatreds that prop up the state. The colossi of globalism—Disney, the U.N., Time Warner—are impregnable against conventional weapons anyway, but just as H.G. Wells slew the invading Martians with "the humblest things that God, in His wisdom, has put upon this earth," so must we preserve our homes, our streets, our towns, with acts of recovery, restoration, and resurrection, and the seed, the prayer—our only prayer—is love. c

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Telling Stories in the New Age

by David Hackett Fischer

Igor Kopelnitsky

Thank you for this honor, and for this very handsome prize. It means all the more because I am privileged to share it with Richard Wilbur. [Editor's note: Richard Wilbur was the 1996 recipient of The Ingersoll Foundation's T.S. Eliot Award for Creative Writing.] I have long admired the art and craft and wisdom of his poetry.

A good part of this prize should also be shared with Paul Revere, who never got an award, and had trouble even collecting his travel expenses. He deserves something, not only for making all those many rides, but also for giving us the story of the midnight ride, which came first from his pen.

As I was telling that story, I often thought of the German pianist Walter Schnabel who once said of Beethoven's sonatas that "this music is greater than it can ever be played." That's the way I think about my books *Paul Revere's Ride* and *Albion's Seed*. The stories of American history are better than they can ever be told. Thank you for this encouragement to storytelling.

Today I'd like to tell another story about the books that you have honored, and especially about *Albion's Seed*. It has had a strange career, which is full of clues for happenings beyond the book itself.

The book began as a historian's inquiry, very much in the spirit of Herodotus (in ancient Greek, "history" meant inquiry). *Albion's Seed* was a search for the origins of an opening society in what is now the United States. After many years of reading and reflection, I found an answer to that question in four great migrations of English-speaking people to America, from 1629 to 1775. They came in four great waves, sharply defined in time and space. The first was New England's Puritan migration of 20,000 people, mostly families of middling rank and a strong Calvinist faith who came mainly from eight counties in the east of England in the period 1629-40. The second was a movement of a small Cavalier elite and large numbers of indentured servants from the south of England to Virginia (1640-75). The third was the Friends' migration of Quakers and other Pietists from the north midlands of England and Wales to the Delaware Valley (1675-1725). The fourth and largest was a flight from the Borderlands of North Britain and northern Ireland to the American Backcountry (1717-75).

These four groups had much in common—the English language, their strong Protestant faith, and their fierce pride in British liberties. But they were profoundly different in other ways: in their dialects and religious denominations; in the way that they built their houses and raised their children; in their attitudes toward work and play, love and death. Most important, they had very different ideas of order, power, and especially freedom. *Albion's Seed* is about four distinctive cultures of freedom that were transplanted to the New World and took root in what is now the United States. America's diversity stemmed from this regional pluralism of American life, and the interaction of these four cultures gave rise to a libertarian system that was more free and open than any of them alone had been or wished to be.

None of this seemed controversial to me when I began to write it in 1986. The book was first drafted in the quiet of an Oxford college. Much of the research had been done when we were living in an idyllic East Anglican village. Most people I grew up with agreed entirely with its findings. In my origins I am an American mongrel of the most common variety—part Anglo, part Saxon—a mix of German and English ancestry. I had been a small child during World War II, ten years old when the war ended. As part of that generation, I was raised in the shadow of great historical events, in a moment when the "special relationship" was very strong and everyone was talking of

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