

The Way Home

by Bill Kauffman

The Way of Ignorance and Other Essays

by Wendell Berry

Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard;
208 pp., \$24.00

Wendell Berry's latest harvest of essays contains characteristically wise observations on mobility, industrial agriculture, and other maladies of our age, but it also displays a Berry seldom glimpsed—that is, Wendell Berry as a rural Kentucky Democrat reluctant to quit a party that long ago quit rural America. He even titles one short piece “Some Notes for the Kerry Campaign, If Wanted.” (They weren’t.)

Like the men of Port William in his novels, Berry is a yellow-dog Democrat. He refuses to give up on the party “because of its name.” Not a bad reason—probably better than mine, which is a sentimental attachment to the Loco Focos, William Jennings Bryan, and Gov. Al Smith—but Democrats in the age of Hillary Clinton bear the same relationship to democracy that George W. Bush’s empire-loving Republicans have to the republic.

Berry reproves the Democrats for their smug secularism. The “stereotypical ‘liberal’ view of the religious people of the ‘red states’ is that they are provincial and stupid,” he writes, opining that “the Democrats’ failure to appeal to intelligent Christians” is a grave mistake. He offers the best response I have read to the intelligent design *versus* evolution squabble: Let schoolkids read both Darwin and the Old Testament, for “no young mind is going to be seriously warped by exposure either to Genesis or to the theory of evolution.”

The real “failure of the Party,” according to Berry, is the unwillingness of the Democrats to confront “the great moral issue of our time”—“violence,” which comes in many shapes and sizes, from perpetual warfare to strip mining. Wendell Berry is pro-life, which is to say he is opposed to abortion, capital punishment, and war. A Democratic Party of his stamp would counter what he terms a “violent economy” by defending family farms, small-scale and locally owned businesses, and the air and water and ground.

His democracy would be an agrari-

an party with principles drawn from the Twelve Southerners’ 1930 manifesto *I’ll Take My Stand*, although with a more democratic and Jeffersonian coloration. Berry encountered *I’ll Take My Stand* as a sophomore at the University of Kentucky when a composition instructor, after reading a paper in which Berry argued on behalf of a farmer whose land was to be condemned for an airport or a highway, called his argument “agrarian” and steered him to the greatest hit of Nashville’s band of fugitives. “It is a valuable book, in some ways a wonder,” he marvels, “and I have returned to it many times since.” (What breathing Democratic politician might understand, let alone be moved by, *I’ll Take My Stand*? Jerry Brown? Fred Harris? Jim Hightower? Misfits, renegades—men not invited to the party.)

Yet UK, where Berry later taught for many years, did not nurture his “native agrarianism. It seems to me now that my agrarian upbringing and my deepest loyalties were obscured by my formal education.” A book alone does not an agrarian make. The more significant act was Berry’s 1964 reclamation of the Kentucky River farm “about a mile from the house where my mother was born and raised and about five miles from my father’s home place.” *You’ve got to stand on what you stand for*, as Berry’s friend, the late desert anarchist Edward Abbey, liked to say. In taking up the plow, “I knew that I was not a literary agrarian merely but also a practical one.”

In Berry’s 1970 essay “The Regional Motive,” he wrote, with the candor of youth, that “the withdrawal of the most gifted of [the Southern Agrarians] into . . . Northern colleges and universities invalidated their thinking, and reduced their effort to the level of an academic exercise.” He now calls that remark “a piece of smartassery,” but his regret is mitigated, one suspects, by the knowledge that sometimes smartasses are right. And Berry was right. He was gently scolded by Allen Tate and added an apologetic footnote when the essay was reprinted, but, in thinking on it three decades later, he concludes that “the major fault of *I’ll Take My Stand*” is that it is “abstract, too purely mental.”

An “absentee regionalism” of the sort practiced by many of the Southern Agrarians ignores “the difficulty and the discipline of locality.” It’s hard to be an ideologue when you’re topping onions. An anchorless academic agrarianism ignores

“the distinct individuality of every farm,” argues Berry. In daily farming, “one is abruptly and forcibly removed from easy access to the abstractions of regionalism, politics, economics, and the academic life. To farm is to be placed absolutely.” One “must shed the clichés that constitute ‘The South’ or ‘My Old Kentucky Home’ and come to the ground.”

For all of Berry’s agrarianism, he also sounds populist themes, never more so than in proposing a pair of constitutional amendments that come right out of the Midwestern populist playbook, circa 1917: First,

that when war breaks out the president and all consenting members of his administration as well as all consenting legislators, whatever their ages, should immediately be enrolled as privates in combat units; and 2) that for the duration of any war all executives and shareholders of corporations contributing to the war effort should be restricted to the same annual income as the workers in their factories—no sacrifice being too great in a time of national peril.

Once upon a time, Democrats such as Sen. Thomas P. Gore and Bryan, the Great Commoner, proposed much the same thing. Somehow, it fell through the cracks of John Kerry’s platform.

Berry is not a self-consciously aphoristic writer, but each essay contains its gems. Among my favorites: “a house for sale is not a home.” And in the happily titled “Compromise, Hell!” he notes that Americans have become “a submissive people,” for

Most of us are still too sane to piss in our own cistern, but we allow others to do so, and we reward them for it. We reward them so well, in fact, that those who piss in our cistern are wealthier than the rest of us.

We also hear from Berry the optimist. Though we are living amidst what he has called punishments and ruins, he is pleased by “a growing interest here in farmers markets, community supported agriculture, and other means of direct marketing to local customers, in diversified, sustainable agriculture.” Relocalizing the economy “will require a long time and a lot of work, but we have begun.”

There are stirrings of a "movement of redemption" to save families, small farms, historic buildings, wilderness, plants and animals, the sky, darkness, silence. Berry keeps his optimism from running over: He concedes that the redemptive side in the national debate "is hardly a side at all. It doesn't have a significant political presence. It is virtually unrepresented in our state and federal governments." But it is out here.

In a superb speech to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Berry rues the "ain't-it-awful conversations" we all have. "Mere opposition finally blinds us to the good of things we are trying to save," he says, and keeps us from "the sense of shared humanity" with our opponents, "who no doubt are caricaturing us while we are demonizing them." Simply being against things is not good enough; in fact, it is not good at all.

You have to be for something. Nothing seeded in hate can bear fruit. Wendell Berry's party, it turns out, is not the Democrats. It is the party of home—the party of love.

Bill Kauffman's *Look Homeward, America is due in May* from ISI Books.

Blue State Mencken

by Joseph Scotchie

Mencken: The American Iconoclast
by Marion Elizabeth Rogers
New York: Oxford University Press;
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In 1989, a volume of H.L. Mencken's journals was published. The contents revealed, among many other things, impolite utterances by the Sage of Baltimore about blacks and Jews. (Mencken also sailed into the ways of "lintheads" and "mountaineers," but that bothered no one.) The denunciations came fast and furious. As I recall, one journalist refused to accept an award in Mencken's name. Almost overnight, the once-iconic H.L. Mencken had become the latest victim of political correctness. That was 17 years ago. For some, the statute of limitations has run out.

This thick biography is not for *Chronicles* readers. Instead, its goal, at least as I see it, is to reclaim Mencken for the left.

"H.L. Mencken, the legendary scourge of the booboisie, infuriated red-state Americans while enchanting urban freethinkers, boozers, and long-haired eggheads," enthuses Russell Baker in a back-cover blurb. That says it all. Yesterday's booboisie is today's red stater. And so, meet the H.L. Mencken for the 21st century: a blue-state prophet.

The story of any writer who starts out with ambition and manages to succeed can never grow old, and this biography is no exception. Growing up in pre-television America, the teenage Mencken "read like a machine." His lifelong writing habits weren't any different. Evenings were often spent researching and writing book projects on subjects that usually had little to do with his newspaper work. Much of Mencken's early reading was conventional, but the writer who impressed him most was Thomas Henry Huxley, who, according to Rogers, converted Mencken into a "violent agnostic." In the early 20th century, social Darwinism was all the rage among intellectuals, and the young Mencken signed up for the cause. Such thinking also caused him to champion the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, of whom he penned a biography in 1907. This worldview would lead to repeated conflicts with the lingering Christendom of the Western world.

Mencken loved newspaper work, and he rose quickly through the ranks of Baltimore journalism. He had a gift for language as it was spoken on the streets, a fascination that inspired him to celebrate the American version of English as something vital and colorful. Mencken was a born pundit who also burned to write serious literary and theater criticism, all with the goal of shaping American culture, which he achieved most spectacularly with his editorship of the highly popular *American Mercury*.

All that energy paid off, causing Mencken's fame to soar well beyond Baltimore. The 1920's were his heyday. As with Babe Ruth, another larger-than-life German-American, Mencken swaggered his way through the Jazz Age, staring down would-be censors in dour Boston and riding high as a national celebrity. How many journalists could travel to Hollywood and be treated with the same admiration as a leading man? Mencken's career was not defined by the 1926 Scopes Monkey Trial in Dayton, Tennessee, but that event did dramatize his beliefs: science *versus* Christianity; big-city agnosticism against small-town religion. In fact,

a paranoid Mencken now felt his task was to defend the "beleaguered city" from the "barbaric yokels" in Middle America.

Long before Dayton, Mencken had disliked William Jennings Bryan, the vanquished presidential candidate who defended Tennessee's anti-evolution laws. The Scopes trial gave him a chance to finish off Bryan for good. In fact, it was Mencken who suggested that Clarence Darrow put Bryan on the witness stand. It worked: Although he lost the case, Darrow made Bryan look foolish by questioning his literalist reading of the Bible. Moreover, the pressure of the case caught up with Bryan. Incredibly enough, he died only days after a worthless guilty verdict was handed down to John Scopes. "We killed the son of a bitch!" Mencken gloated after hearing of Bryan's death. It was not exactly his finest hour.

Indeed, the bell would toll for Mencken himself. The 1930's were a tough decade for him. The Depression forced him to resign from the *American Mercury*, which soon became a mere shell of its former self. A 1930 book, *Treatise on the Gods*, caused a controversy for its brief but critical remarks about Jewish behavior. (Mencken protested by claiming that he didn't like "religious Catholics and Protestants," either.) Most importantly, the libertarian Mencken ran into the New Deal, whose big-spending ways he abhorred. But Mencken more than met his match in FDR. Americans wanted government action to alleviate their economic suffering, and Roosevelt's charisma had easily won over the public. Roosevelt was aware of Mencken's published criticisms. At a 1934 Gridiron Club gathering, FDR used a Mencken quotation—one that playfully ridiculed the journalistic profession—to humiliate his nemesis. In 1936 and 1940, Mencken traveled the country with FDR's GOP challengers, Alf Landon and Wendell Wilkie, but that was a nonstarter. FDR's 1940 reelection to an unprecedented third term marked the end of Mencken's career as an active pundit. It was not only the triumph of the New Deal that laid Mencken low; there was also the impending war with Germany. Mencken came from distinguished German stock. Like many German-Americans, he had felt humiliated by the anti-German propaganda that raged throughout the country during World War I. Covering the next war might, in fact, have been painful for him. Mencken had great difficulty in criticizing Hitler during the 1930's and,