

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;
662 pp., \$35.00

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,

afterward, coming to terms with the reality of the holocaust. Most importantly, with the start of World War II, there was no longer any place for an iconoclast on the American scene. After Pearl Harbor, the nation marched in lockstep. Most Americans accepted some form of government censorship.

In 1948, Mencken suffered a stroke, the first of several illnesses that led to his death in 1956. In the 1940's and 50's, Mencken published his memoirs, plus collections of essays. He remained on the best-seller lists. He even became a "national institution," but he was no longer someone at the center of American culture and of political battles. Mencken's decline was not without its poignant moments. He was coaxed into covering the 1948 political conventions. At those gatherings, Mencken was idolized by the rising generation of reporters. His dispatches were as irreverent as always, but a new monster had arrived on the scene. The elderly Mencken found himself tripping over the television cables strung across the convention floors. The age of print journalism and, with it, Mencken's America was coming to a close.

Despite the book's leftward tilt, Marion Rogers strives for objectivity in summing up Mencken's efforts as an author and editor. For instance, at Dayton, Mencken did not seek out those thoughtful proponents of creationism who lived in the area. Instead, he wanted only to skewer the locals. On the literary side, Mencken the aesthete published and promoted such giants as Sinclair Lewis, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Thomas Mann. Because of his boorish dislike of white Southerners, however, he nearly missed out entirely on the Southern literary renaissance of the 1920's and 30's. Here, Mencken was saved—to a certain extent, anyway—by his wife, Sara, a writer and a native of Montgomery, Alabama, who helped her husband to see the value in such novelists as William Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe.

A "German Valentino" for much of his adult life, Mencken proved a devoted husband when he married at last, at age 55. Although he suffered greatly from the loss of Sara, who died only five years into the marriage, Mencken, in both his personal and his professional life, was a lucky man. He came of age when newspapers ruled the media, when it was possible for an ambitious young man to land a reporter's job at a big-city daily despite his lack of a college degree and his identity as a white European-American male.

And he wrote in the pre-Pearl Harbor age, when a man could still speak his mind without fear of being fired from his job or being ostracized in his profession. For Mencken, the old America still lived in those boisterous early years of the 20th century. By the 1940's, he was mourning the passing of a lost world. "[This] once great and happy republic," he observed during the ravages of World War II, "[is now] a dismal burlesque of its former self."

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The Great Getaway

by Clyde Wilson

White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism

by Kevin M. Kruse

Princeton: Princeton University Press;
325 pp., \$35.00



A friend who sells high-end real estate tells the story of a well-heeled Northern couple who were enchanted by the idea of owning an antebellum Southern mansion. He met them at the airport and took them to one of our charming old South Carolina towns—one that, having failed to be liberated by the U.S. Army in 1864-65, contained several attractive properties. Scarcely had they arrived, however, when the two demanded to be taken back to the airport. It was evident that the sight of large numbers of black Carolinians in the streets, going about their work and leisure, had led to rapid disenchantment on the part of our prospective citizens.

This is not exactly what Kevin Kruse means by white flight. He has in mind those evil Southerners who have fled Atlanta in recent decades rather than stand and fulfill what he considers their moral duty: Stay behind in pursuit of Kruse's commonplace yet fantastical daydream of egalitarian paradise. High taxes, crime, corruption, and nonfunctional schools seem to the author a small price for others to pay for the realization of his desideratum. Yet most people will sympathize with those in flight, even if they have created the endless nightmare of suburban congestion that is a damned nuisance for

anyone trying to get past Atlanta to some civilized place like Forsyth or Macon. Of course, when Southerners do something bad, they are simply confirming their evil, America-contaminating nature, which is a well-known fact of the universe. Never mind that Georgians in white flight were only doing what Northerners had been doing for 50 years or more with less provocation. (The minority metropolitan-area population for larger Northern cities is 10 percent, compared with Atlanta's 35.)

White Flight does present some interesting history of Atlanta politics during the Civil Rights Era and since—the rocky path ascending from Southern benightedness to the glowing virtue of true American urbanism. Of course, what really happened was the takeover of the city by an unholy collusion of unscrupulous "leaders" of the black community with unscrupulous rent-seeking businessmen speculating in public subsidy. Come to think of it, Atlanta has become a true American city after all—though not, of course, the American city as fantasized in the daydreams of egalitarian utopia.

This is a book written for liberal daydreamers to tell them what they ought to think about Atlanta. These people, it seems, mistakenly honor Atlanta as a model for the success of "civil rights" and black enfranchisement. Liberal right-thinkers should be warned that there is another side to the story. The real lesson lies not in the much-celebrated defeat of segregation but in the massive flight of middle-class whites to the suburbs. Actually, this is news to no one except a daydreaming liberal. White flight has simply become the established, though unofficial, American way. The purpose of presenting this non-news as a fresh discovery is to give liberals a comforting explanation for the electoral strength of "conservative" Republicanism. It is obviously a product of the suburbanization that is a direct result of the "racism" that caused middle-class whites to flee, rather than remain behind in the city to create the reign of loving brotherhood that would certainly have ensued but for their cruel abandonment of the unfortunate. Instead of realizing the author's utopia, they cut and ran. Worst of all, perhaps, they became Republican voters.

Kruse's scenario is plausible only to those who believe that it is somehow a triumph of "conservatism" for Southern voters to have been co-opted into support of the national Republicans' strange brew of state capitalism, imperialism, Christian