

The American Frontier

The Frontier in American History. By Frederick Jackson Turner. Henry Holt Company.

TWENTY-SEVEN years ago Professor Turner, then of the University of Wisconsin, read before the American Historical Association a paper on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." The paper opened with a quotation taken from a Bulletin of the Superintendent of the Census of 1890, to the effect that the progress of settlement had proceeded so far that now "there can hardly be said to be a frontier line," and that, accordingly, the "discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc. . . . cannot . . . any longer have a place in the census reports." This brief official statement, said Mr. Turner, "marks the closing of a great historic movement. Up to our own day American history has been in large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development."

To suggest in a general way how the existence of the frontier might explain American development was the object of Mr. Turner's paper. "In the case of most nations," he said, "the development has occurred in a limited area; and if the nation has expanded, it has met other growing peoples whom it has conquered. But in the case of the United States we have a different phenomenon. Limiting our attention to the Atlantic coast, we have the familiar phenomenon of the evolution of institutions in a limited area, such as the rise of representative government; the differentiation of simple colonial governments into complex organs; the progress of primitive industrial society, without division of labor, up to manufacturing civilization. But we have in addition to this a recurrence of the process of evolution in each western area reached in the process of expansion. Thus American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominant in American character."

Not only did this westward expansion profoundly influence the outstanding issues in American history—the rise of nationalism, the growing detachment from Europe, the slavery struggle; it was above all the persistence of a primitive society on the frontier, above all this "perennial rebirth," that preserved for us our earlier ideals of democracy and gave to us in large share our characteristic intellectual qualities. "To the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier."

In 1893 this was novel doctrine. Time has not diminished the validity of it, although it has perhaps brought into stronger relief certain traits of American character which we owe in large part to the frontier also. In American mentality a strong sense of freedom is not incompatible with a strong instinct towards conformity, a spirit of intolerance which, under stress, easily rises to the level of fanaticism. The frontier placed a premium upon individual initiative and the quick finding of expedients; but on the whole the initiative required was an initiative working within a rather narrow field, the expedients that needed to be found were expedients that everyone was

seeking and ready to use when found. Generally speaking, the initiative which Americans admire is initiative within the sphere of the practical, the material world, the initiative that brings material gain to the individual or practical advantage to the community. Confronted with initiative or originality of another sort, with conduct which the provincial standard regards as "bad," or thinking which that standard regards as "wrong," the first instinct of the American is "to do something about it"; and so it may often happen that his genius for finding expedients is directed to the suppression of those who are sufficiently individual to be in a conspicuous minority.

If we can now see that such traits as these are due to our peculiar environment quite as much as to our English or European inheritance, it is in part because Mr. Turner's original paper on the frontier was to prove an epoch-making event in the investigation of American history. The field which he then sketched he has himself assiduously cultivated for a quarter of a century. The present volume, a collection of monographic studies, articles in periodicals, and addresses before learned societies and at various universities, gives us in convenient form a part of his published work. The high significance of this work has long been recognized by writers on American history; but if the influence of Mr. Turner were to be estimated on the basis of his published work alone, it would be accounted far less than it has in fact been. For a quarter of a century he has been training an army of students; and there are now in our colleges and universities, among the teachers and students of American history, very many men who have been profoundly influenced by his ideas and inspired to fruitful publication by the magic spell of his personality. One who has been long under that spell may not be the best judge; but I think it is safe to say, at least I will venture to say it, that in giving direction to the methods of investigating American history and in furnishing new light for its interpretation, the share of Mr. Turner has been the most profound and abiding of this generation.

More than this cannot reasonably be expected of any man. Yet students of American history, well pleased as they are sure to be to have these now familiar studies in one convenient volume, may be pardoned for still looking forward to some more comprehensive and systematic exposition of our history, or a portion of it, from the point of view which they are so well prepared to understand.

CARL BECKER

The Epic of Dulness

Main Street. By Sinclair Lewis. Harcourt, Brace and Howe.
Poor White. By Sherwood Anderson. B. W. Huebsch, Inc.

THE Middle West gives birth to prophets but also to destroyers. Let it take what brief comfort it can in its Meredith Nicholsons and Booth Tarkingtons. Garnett, Kansas, produced Edgar Lee Masters; Warsaw, Indiana, nurtured Theodore Dreiser; out of Camden, Ohio, came Sherwood Anderson, and out of Sauk Center, Minnesota, Sinclair Lewis. No doubt these towns are careless today of their wild sons. *Main Street* is bent more closely than ever on its immediate business. But the imaginative record of that business with all its implications is already the most massive in American literature. Suffering and rebellion have wrung from these men of the Middle West an iron authenticity. They bring us—these lovers of beauty once caged in insupportable hideousness—the acute vision of their oppressed and distorted youth. They needed not to observe in order to write; memory and a kind of despair stung them to embody in expression the civilization from which they came. They know it. "It is negation canonized as the one positive virtue. It is the prohibition of happiness. It is slavery self-taught and self-defended. It is dulness made God."

Dreiser alone and at his best remains superior to Sinclair Lewis. He has hours of a more rapt absorption, of a more visionary identification of himself with the objects he renders. Mr. Lewis, on the other hand, has a clearer and more orderly

intelligence and a precise and cultivated style. Dreiser has the more brooding eye, Mr. Lewis the acuter and more sensitive ear. Thus while his narrative masses are less impressive, his dialogue, which he uses very freely, is brilliant. The exactness of this dialogue is a literary achievement of a very high order. Novelists and playwrights put us off with symbols and adumbrations. Mr. Lewis has given literary permanence to the speech of his time and section. But the dialogue in "Main Street" is anything but literature in the sense of Verlaine; it is living talk. When Dr. Kennicott declares (to take an inferior but brief and quotable example) that "Miss Sherwin in the high school is a regular wonder—reads Latin like I do English," we know where we are. We know that we have heard that very remark in Springfield or Peoria and have heard it from a physician. To produce such authenticity of speech once or twice would be merely clever; never to miss it in four hundred and fifty pages is magnificent.

In building his book Mr. Lewis has not permitted his larger purpose to crowd or distort the things that were actually to be communicated. His thesis is the standardization of the innumerable Main Streets of our small towns, the savorless flatness of that life, the complete substitution of the mechanical for the vital, the tawdry spiritual poverty of a people that "has lost the power of play as well as the power of impersonal thought," and the menacing extension, like a creeping paralysis, of this form of existence, so that the Minnesota Swedes exchange "their spiced puddings and red jackets for fried pork-chops and congealed white blouses," and trade "the ancient Christmas hymns of the fjords for 'She's my Jazzland Cutie.'" He has a stern enough sense of the danger of what Alice Meynell once called "decivilization" and of the incredible arrogance of the actors in that process. He has notes toward an "American Credo" (pp. 152-3 and 244-5) that should be inscribed on tables of brass as both record and warning. But he is never tempted into the didactic or prophetic. His business is with Gopher Prairie, Minn. He makes nothing symbolical; he lets it be so. He neither strays nor preaches. His method is undeviatingly creative; he is secure in the knowledge that to show things truly is to show them up.

His people are many and they have not only mobility, the appearance of gesture and speech that come from an inner impulse; they have the rarer quality of solidity; they detach themselves from the page and are in space, smelling of flesh and hair, cloth and leather. Carol Kennicott, through whose sensitive and feebly rebellious soul we see Gopher Prairie, is not the most exact or convincing. But Dr. Will and Sam Clark, Mrs. Bogart and her son Cy, Vida Sherwin and the "Red Swede," Professor Mott and the Rev. Zitterel—these are all triumphs. There are no minor characters. Some are more involved in poor Carol's adventures and some less. But we know the Harry Haydocks and the Jack Elders and even the Nels Erdstroms as well as we do Guy or Erik. It is a richly peopled world—a world that may become some day like the worlds of Fielding or Hauptmann. Mr. Lewis, unlike the masters with whose beginnings his present work may justly be compared, has done a good deal of shoddy work in his time. Was he not even responsible for a certain play called "Hobohemia"? He is making a full atonement. "Main Street" would add to the power and distinction of the contemporary literature of any country. He must not again forget the responsibility which his talent involves, nor his own sure knowledge that our literature and our civilization need just such books as this.

The appearance of "Main Street" at almost the same moment as "Poor White" tends, somewhat unjustly no doubt, to dull the impression of Mr. Anderson's book. His period is a slightly earlier one; his scene Ohio instead of Minnesota. But his theme is the same; a civilization in which the clutter of cheap and ugly things has crippled and drained dry the souls of men. But where Mr. Lewis shows, Mr. Anderson only tells. And neither his description nor his narrative cling or bite. He shifts his narrative method and changes his point of attack and convinces

us of both his earnestness and his knowledge. But neither Columbus nor Bidwell nor the farm are creatively there. The best scenes are the early, Southern ones. Later the sensory perceptions, and hence the vividness of the things to be rendered, seem to become dulled. Hugh McVey, moreover, is romantically and symbolically conceived. Clara is concreter. But the definiteness of both characters and events is blunted by structural looseness and a diction that alternates between the pretentious and the mean. In veracity and intellectual honesty Mr. Anderson's book is incomparably superior to most of our novels. But compared to "Main Street" it lacks fire and edge, lucidity and fulness.

Alaska

A Winter Circuit of Our Arctic Coast. By Hudson Stuck. Charles Scribner's Sons.

The Land of Tomorrow. By William B. Stephenson, Jr. George H. Doran Company.

HUDSON STUCK, Archdeacon of the Yukon and the Arctic, was of the tribe that leavens our era, an explorer for souls to save, for bodies to cleanse; a fighting priest who hearkened to the whisper of the weakest of the whites of the tundra and the beach, but who would face the polar bear on the hummocked floe to help one of his charges. Any long-time resident of Alaska realizes the real impossibility of covering in one book a land which from strange frozen seas sweeps south many leagues to warm westward isles where the breath of the Japan current fills the air. But Stuck, in his fourth book on Alaskan travel, wrote an absorbing narrative of a six months' journey by dog-sled round the entire Arctic coast, that bleak top of the world where the ink freezes as it issues from the fountain pen and the winter lights play above vast plains of sterile white.

There is a quiet and peculiar charm, distinctly of the North, in this narrative of what would have been, to many men, monotonous day-to-day travel. To the Archdeacon, whose mind was a storehouse of remembrances, even the grimmest and dreariest incident of the trail was enough to set him off on brief but delightful excursion into the unexpected. When his party comes upon the frozen body of a dog which had been set up on its feet in the snow by the trail, the author records the sniffing of each malamute in his own teams at this grisly Eskimo joke, and then, presto, he is off on the *modus operandi* of the sense of smell; there comes a tantalizing glimpse of Fabre's insect lore and a whiff of musk from the days of Marie Antoinette, before the Archdeacon again "hits the trail." Despite the introduction of much history and some philosophy born of the silent places of the North, the writer was nothing if not practical, and his book, though written primarily to set forth the general condition and needs of the Eskimo, might be used as a handbook on Arctic travel.

He pays tribute to the malamute, without which travel in the Arctic would be impossible, notwithstanding the growing use of reindeer for this purpose in some localities; and there are some sidelights on the sport of dog-racing in the North—notably at Nome. Alaskans, adventurers and gamblers all, must bet on something, and ordinary gambling is denied them by law. The Archdeacon writes with sorrow that the pure-bred malamute is becoming a thing of the past, owing to the crossing with bird-dogs, hounds, and others, in the effort to secure speed. "The malamute dog has been virtually bred out of existence to make a Nome holiday," and the resultant breed, though noted for speed, cannot stand up under the hardships of the long trail.

Archdeacon Stuck in his long, earnest work among the natives of the North did more, perhaps, than any other man to redeem the Eskimo from the debauching influence of the renegade whites of the old whaling days, when there was "neither law of God nor man north of Fifty-three." Of the Eskimos he says they are the "truest, the cheeriest, the most industrious, the most hospitable, and altogether the most winning native people" he