

Mr. Wickersham in Retrospect

BY R. L. STROUT

*Why did the Drys clasp his wet Report to their bosoms and the
Wets disclaim it?*

LET me state the problem in the simplest possible way:

When the Wickersham Commission brought out its famous report on Tuesday, January 20, 1931, seven of the eleven Commissioners went on record as favoring some immediate change in the dry law, while of the remaining four, three were ready to accept a national referendum after an appropriate interval. That verdict, in retrospect, seems overwhelming. It overshadowed other parts of the study. And yet, extraordinary as it is to recall today, this verdict — or rather the Report in which it was contained — was straightway heaped with the most bitter scorn by the very Wets which it would seem to favor, while the Drys figuratively clasped it to their bosom! The problem is, why did it happen that way?

The Wickersham Commission is dead and gone and there can be no effort to revive it. But Prohibition is as much alive today as ever and continues a matter of national controversy. In the light of retrospect is there nothing in the study of what President Hoover described as "an able group of distinguished citizens

of character and independence of thought" of value to the present day? I believe there is. But I do not propose to discuss it here. My object is to probe the circumstances surrounding the preparation and presentment of the extraordinary Report in an effort to find the causes for the paradoxical and hysterical reception which it got. This is not a problem of Prohibition at all, but the problem of seeing how public opinion is molded in a democracy, and it involves an episode which, in the light of reflection, appears to have been one of the most picturesque in the nation's history.

At the outset let me offer a personal statement. Certainly any one discussing this subject should make his own prejudices clear. My own bias is probably on the side of Prohibition. It would be untruthful, however, if I did not admit that the Wickersham study has made upon me a considerable effect. Yet so far as it goes, I confess I feel none of the convert's characteristic enthusiasm. It is because, frankly, I think the Wets on the other side are stupid. Never more so than in their treatment of the Report. I defy almost

any fair-minded middle-of-the-road citizen who has a strong dislike for liquor but at the same time an uneasy feeling that all is not well with Prohibition to read that scrupulously impartial and magnanimous presentment without experiencing some change. Dr. Irving Fisher of Yale confessed in print after reading it that it had to a degree altered his views, though by how much he did not say. But what was the reception of the Wickersham Report — a Report let me repeat for emphasis, for it lies at the heart of this article — in which seven out of eleven Commissioners announced themselves favorable to immediate change in the law, while three of the remaining four were prepared to consider a national referendum? What was the reception? Why, the document that might readily have become a rallying cry for modificationists was ridiculed and laughed at by a great majority of their spokesmen, and only at this late period is beginning, it seems, to attract some of their attention! Other Drys who have read the report profess themselves as perplexed as myself at the abuse of the Commission by the Wets. It appears to us that the Wets were simply outmaneuvered by their opponents. To put it bluntly, that the same bar-room obtuseness that made Prohibition a possibility in the first place is now alienating groups who might aid them in bringing about its changes.

But whether the Drys like it or not, there the verdict of the Wickersham Commission is, with substantiating detail on the difficulties of the present situation beyond anything yet gathered for circumstantialness and authority. To be specific, the

verdict is contained in the eleven individual statements of the Commissioners at the end of the Report and one only needs to read them and add up the total to get the result. These opinions were available from the first, and yet despite their overwhelming character, the Report itself was the subject of extraordinary misconception that has extended to this day. What caused the misconception? I believe the reasons were, in the main, two, although each is capable of elaboration. In the first place, publication of the Report was badly bungled. This, as I see it, was partly the fault of the Commission, partly the fault of the White House, and very largely the fault of the press. In the second place, Wets and Drys alike had completely pre-judged the Wickersham Commission, and they could not at first believe that they had judged it wrongly, even after the Report itself was issued.

TO TAKE the question of publication first. The Commission did not even issue a summary of its Report. It prepared a document the size of a small novel and put it out without the slightest effort to digest it. It prepared, it is true, a list of conclusions and recommendations. But no one in America was more surprised, I believe, than some of the legally minded members of the Commission, when they found these recommendations uniformly referred to as a "summary." The crusading elements of the Wets particularly excoriated the Commission for failing to include what I have heretofore described as the seven-to-four "verdict" against Prohibition *status quo* and other matters in the alleged

summary. I know no better answer to these charges than the simple one that the list of conclusions and recommendations was *not* a summary. It was nowhere referred to as such in the Report. The attack on the Commission in this respect simply amounted to designating something that is not a summary, a "summary" and then assailing your opponent because it does not summarize! The true attack, and a legitimate one, was that there was no summary. Each reader, each newspaper correspondent, had to dig out the seven-to-four verdict for himself. The Commission divided its 80,000-word Report into three parts: the first 40,000 words presenting a factual discussion of enforcement offering a mine of material for the Wets; the second part containing a brief four-page list of conclusions, as heretofore mentioned; the third part containing individual statements from each of the eleven Commissioners. Seven of the members, Anderson, Comstock, Loesch, Mackintosh, Found, Baker and Lemann, favored immediate change, and the two last favored outright repeal; three of the remaining four, Wickersham, McCormick and Kenyon, were prepared for a later referendum. This was the roll-call of the Hoover Commission after twenty months' study, in which at least one former Wet had become a Dry and several former Drys had become Wets. The record is history. But in the light of future efforts to guide public opinion by expert findings it must be pointed out that it was necessary to read each one of those eleven statements, amounting in all to about 40,000 words, to get the roll-call. So be it.

The Commission prepared an able survey of the whole situation and then expected the press and public to read it. How stupid! How little it knew the press and the public. Of course it should have prepared a summary.

But this was not the worst mistake. The Commission's Report was misjudged because of something else. It was not even the overhasty handling of the Report by the White House when it was published that was at the root of the matter, though this contributed to the same end. Every one will remember even today the howls of rage against the White House that went up when the supposed contents of the Report were spread forth in print. It was not enough to say that the Commission had failed — the Hoover Administration had been dragged down with it. What were the grounds for attacking the White House through the Report? Why, because the same wet leadership in Congress insisted that the Report was "bone dry," and hence argued that a plot existed by which the verdict had been rendered in collusion with Mr. Hoover.

"The White House, under control of the Anti-Saloon League, directed the conclusions!" ejaculated Loring Black, Tammany Democrat, perfectly epitomizing the incredibly childish outlook of the whole present wet group in Congress. A verdict of seven-to-four against Prohibition in its present form would be about as popular in the Anti-Saloon League as a monograph by Mrs. Sanger in the Vatican State.

The rather remarkable error that the White House *did* commit passed almost without comment. Here was a

report that had taken almost two years to prepare and that contained some of the best work of some of the brainiest men in America, and by that I refer to Newton D. Baker, George W. Wickersham and Roscoe Pound of Harvard. It was obviously sensational in character, and it was a complex and extended document that needed time and leisure to digest. What did the officials do with it? See that it got careful advance release over the great cities of the land before publication? See that it had a digest (though this, as I have said, was properly the duty of the Commission)? Did they give Washington correspondents who are the bottle neck through which America gets this sort of material (and who are so busy with political gossip as to be almost helpless before a non-political document of real importance) — did the authorities give these politically minded interpreters a chance to get the matter through their heads? They did not. They hurled this dynamite-laden Report out into America with a twenty-four-hour time fuse, or release date, and sat back and waited for the explosion. Correspondents got the Report at noon one day, for release at noon the next. It is obvious that in the mere nature of train travel, the Report could not have got much further in the brief time allowed than, let us say, Chicago, and by the time it arrived there it would have already been released in the East so that the Chicago editor would only have had the sad satisfaction of dropping his copy into the waste basket! The fact is the more extraordinary because Government departments make the habit of putting out rela-

tively unimportant documents weeks in advance, so that they can be in the hands of distant editors for simultaneous publication over the nation. But this study of monumental importance got only twenty-four hours! The Report simply did not have national distribution.

Because the matter is so illuminating let us examine it a little further before going on to that fundamental reason which, I believe, was the real cause for the extraordinary misconception of the Wickersham Report. Let me here insert a table showing the number of copies made available by the Commission, by four public-spirited newspapers which published the document in full, and later by the Federal Printing Office. There is also given the date at which these copies were available.

Source	Date Available	Copies, or Approx. Circ.
Wickersham Com. (Adv. press copies)	Mon. noon, Jan. 19	2,500
N. Y. Post	Tues. eve., Jan. 20	102,612
N. Y. Times	Wed. morn., Jan. 21	416,995
N. Y. Herald-Tribune	"	292,164
U. S. Daily (Wash., D. C.)	"	41,346
U. S. Printing Office (Wash., D. C.)	After approx. 3 days	
	(1st Ed.)	30,000
	(2nd Ed.)	38,000
	(3rd Ed.)	1,500
		<hr/> 925,117

Though the above total seems large at first, it must be remembered that the first edition of Government copies did not affect the situation while public opinion was being crystallized; that distribution occurred entirely in two Eastern cities; and that free copies circulated by public-spirited newspapers mean a vast number of copies put into heedless hands. The facts are, therefore, that the correctives, which a plentiful sup-

ply of actual copies of the Report would have had on the mistakes of ignorance or prejudice, were lacking. National distribution of the Wickersham Report, at a time when a hysterical country was forming its judgment of the document, did not exist.

I DO NOT believe that the foregoing reasons alone would have accounted for the extraordinary misconception which followed publication of the Commission's Report, though I have seen a whole nation misled for almost a day by erroneous press interpretations put out on decisions of the Supreme Court because of the same mechanical difficulties in mastering complicated documents not put out in advance. Nor do the two following more or less subsidiary details reach the final explanation, though they come close to it. One of these was the sheer physical task of "moving" a story of that sort by the telegraph key from Washington to outside points in such a brief interval. It would have tasked even the best newspaper organization. The first reading of the manuscript would take six hours. If it were done in relays, and it was so done in the Washington offices, the connecting links between the three parts of the Report would tend to be obscured. The telegraph men would have to start sending extracts of the stuff before the Washington office had finished reading it, simply to insure getting it to New York, St. Louis or California in time, while the home offices would have to wait on Washington hopefully for a "lead" later on. In fact, when the Report was published in abbreviated newspaper

form, it gave every evidence of the hurry and lack of understanding with which its various parts had been pasted up.

Then finally there was the idiotic "enterprise" of the American press with which any big story of this sort has to contend. Not content to give all the brief time available to presenting the Report, the press associations with one accord immediately set about getting comments on the yet unpublished document! Prominent Washingtonians were actually roused from bed that night of Monday, January 19, to find out what they thought of something they had never seen.

And this brings me to the very heart of my story. Of course the people who were asked to give statements by the press were the very ones who had expressed themselves most strongly either for or against the prospective document in previous days. Now who were these people? Why, they were the professional Wets and Drys, with intermediate sprinklings of pro- and anti-Hooverites. The Wets were against the Report; the Drys were for it. They had been arguing and disputing over the Wickersham Report for twenty months before the Report was made public. There it is in a nutshell. The Drys were *for* the Report, long before it was issued; the Wets were *against* the Report. Neither side had waited to see what was in the Report. The whole matter had been pre-judged and decided in advance in the light of the individual's opinion on the merits of Prohibition.

Of course there is a possibility of exaggerating this charge, but

there are files of a thousand editorial pages to witness the bias toward or against the Commission which existed. Did the phrase "Wicked-Sham Commission" originate after the Report was published? Of course not. Mr. Loring Black and his facetious wet friends had been applying it to the Commission for months before that January. The leaders who used that nickname took it for granted that the Commission would bring in a dry Report. By the same token, the professional Drys, from the outset, rallied to the Commission's defense, because it was a Hoover Commission, because Mr. Hoover was a Dry, and hence because they supposed the Commission would be dry, too. If they had no other reason they rallied to the Commission because the Wets hated it. There you have the fundamental reason for the reception which the Report finally got, to which the incompetent publicity-handling of the material was the contributory factor.

This was at the bottom of the situation when reporters scurried out on Monday and the morning of Tuesday, January 20, to get interviews on the yet unpublished Report. Washington, of course, is full of people ready to give to a reporter final judgment on any subject at any time, and the task of collecting comment was not hard. The reporter himself, who sought the statement, generally had not read or even seen the Report; he had perhaps been given a hasty coaching in the salient points as they were grasped by the head of the copy desk, and these he now passed on as well as he could to the man he was interview-

ing. The latter spoke by a sort of reflex action; accepted whatever was said as confirming his own solemn prognostications and proceeded to laud or assail the Report on the basis of earlier prejudices. Next day the newspapers carried columns of such comments, published simultaneously with the Report. Some papers carried more comment than Report. Editors reasoned, probably rightly, that the public would rather have somebody else make up its mind for it than to do the job itself.

The Wickersham Report, in brief, carried from the very moment of publication, a heavy load of subsidiary snap-judgment, culled from the most volatile of America's political publicity snatchers (examples will be given in a minute) and based largely on prejudices formed long in advance. Presentation of the true merits of the matter never had a chance.

To other distracting circumstances was added an attached statement from Mr. Hoover, in which the President seemed to disown his own Commission. The statement does not seem particularly sensational today and if anything merely emphasizes how far from dry the Report was. But newspapers featured Mr. Hoover's words and the comment of men from all over the country, and the long-awaited Report itself was frequently given a subsidiary place, or, as in the *Baltimore Sun*, an inside page.

LOOKING back on it all now, there is an element of humor in shuffling those old newspaper files. How extraordinary some of the comment seems! This applies, of course, to

Drys as well as Wets. Here is the W. C. T. U. praising the Report. Here are Mr. Andrew J. Volstead, Mr. Grant Hudson, at that time dry stalwart in the House, and a score of other professionals hastily rushing to the defense of the document which if not absolutely wet was certainly damp. Of course, it is only fair to say that there was plenty of good material for the enforcement side within the voluminous document and its general conclusions.

The spectacle of the Wets, on the other hand, must cause sadness to any one who looks for intelligence in public affairs. They had no reason, like their adversaries, to confuse the issue. It might well have been to them a Heaven-sent gift, but they had thrown it away in advance. They attacked the Report on sight. The so-called crusading Wets were particularly hostile. The state of their moral indignation at this time has hardly been equalled on the North American continent since the sinking of the *Maine*, or the appearance of the "atrocities" stories in the World War.

Mr. Loring Black's charge that the White House had yielded to the Anti-Saloon League has been noted. Wet leaders like Mr. La Guardia and Mr. Campbell of Pennsylvania attacked the Report. "The Commission owes the country an apology!" cried Mr. Campbell. "It is an insult to the intelligence of the American people!" roared Mr. Tinkham, Massachusetts Wet leader. Senator Wagner, slightly less committal, remarked that "it appears to be a typical Hoover report" which was probably not a compliment; Senators Blaine and Glass, wet and dry

alike but equally hostile to the Administration, attacked the document respectively as "useless verbiage," and a "useless waste of \$500,000." Big Bill Thompson, of Chicago, with characteristic simplicity, dismissed the whole matter as "Hooley!" Pontifical Mr. Brisbane, a day later, writing from Los Angeles (where it will be remembered, the text of the Report was not available) declared "the Commission came out of a solemn conference and straddled the fence — you get the impression that gentlemen chosen for political purposes don't quite dare to say what they think." In Boston, the wet *Herald*, and the *Globe*, considered the Report a fizzle; various other wet papers asserted the Commissioners had further befogged the issue.

Now it must be recalled that these statements, practically in all instances, were issued by men who had never seen the Report. Most of them spoke by hearsay, not study. Presumably they responded as hundreds of others did whose statements are not given, to a sort of reflex action when the subject of "Wickersham Commission" was mentioned. They were for or against the Report "sight unseen." And they knew that if their opinion was to have any effect on the herd mind it must be got in early, and must be expressed emphatically.

Since this article is a study of public opinion and not the Prohibition question, it would be useless to cite from the Report itself to confute these critics. But that the latter would have modified their views by a more careful reading, or any reading at all, there can be little doubt.

One incident is illustrative. The editor of a wet Boston newspaper which had bitterly denounced the Report on publication called up Dean Pound, a week later, and apologized for his earlier criticism. He explained that he had not read the Report when he wrote his attack; he had been misled by the wet clamor from Washington; but since then he had got the Report for himself and found out his mistake. The incident is probably typical. But how many men who submitted snap judgments at the time were able to recall their words later on, when they had an opportunity of seeing the document?

Among newspaper critics, probably the most vociferous was the Scripps-Howard New York *Telegram*, a crusading wet paper, which carried charges of discrepancies in the Report from the second sentence of its very first Washington dispatch on the subject, and that has never since relaxed its grim suspicion of the hapless Hoover body. Such relentlessness for a righteous cause would be exemplary. But the fact is that at the very time that the *Telegram* was frothing at the mouth in greatest indignation there was a sober background of thoughtful comment in New York, from sources certainly just as hostile to the dry law as the *Telegram*, which indicated the true facts in the matter. Thus, for example, the three conservative morning newspapers, whose wetness could not be doubted by any one, uniformly pointed out the real inwardness of the Commission's report.

The *Times* praised it. It had no difficulty in grasping and presenting the important fact in its first editorial that "six out of the eleven Commis-

sioners are of one mind as to the one form of modification that should be adopted, if any" (namely, the Anderson Revision Plan) while in a front-page "box," and elsewhere in its news columns, it showed that in addition to these six, there was Mr. Lemann's blanket vote for repeal to make a total of seven Commissioners urging immediate dry law change. The *Times* made only one mistake in listing the Commissioners. It counted only two of the remaining four, advocating further trial, as prepared to consider a national referendum. Actually there were three of them, Commissioners Wickersham, McCormick and Kenyon.

Nor was the *Times* alone in taking a different view from the *Telegram*. No one can deny that the *Herald-Tribune* is and was a wet journal. While the *Telegram* was figuratively running amok over the Commission's treachery, the former paper was referring to the Report's "fairness, clarity and general excellence." Of course the *Herald-Tribune* did not have the strong anti-Hoover bias of the *Telegram*, but even so it is hard to understand how the editors of the *Telegram* could have let this bias influence it after Mr. Hoover had publicly stated in effect that the Report was too damp for him.

Again, the strongly wet *World* was not daunted by the derisive whoops of the Congressional wet leadership — although later Mr. Lippman gave credence to a so-called "plot" — and in its initial editorial insisted that the Commissioners actually "take a defeatist view of the noble experiment."

Many more instances could be

adduced to show that a different view of the Report was evident to those who had not blinded themselves by advance prejudices. Mr. Henry H. Curran, for example, head of the Association against the Prohibition Amendment on January 22, politely points out the "painstaking" nature of the Report, condemns Mr. Hoover's rejection of its findings, and asserts its essentially wet nature. How different the wet effort to revise the dry law might have been if the modificationists of the country had listened to such advice as this, instead of being stampeded into rejection of a strong weapon by the hot-headed fanatics of their side who had to save their faces from silly earlier jibes by proving the Commission's duplicity!

With all respect to the editors of the New York *Telegram*, that paper may be taken as typical. The *Telegram* began its news treatment of the Report with an attack on alleged contradictions. It must be pointed out of course that the idea of retaining, but of revising the Eighteenth Amendment, was practically born with the Commission. The difference between repeal and revision was obvious enough to a Commission that had been studying the matter two years, but it could not be readily grasped by an hysterical zealot for repeal, for it was, in essence, a compromise. Hence the immediate confusion and the insistent charge of discrepancies as contained in the first Washington dispatch to the *Telegram* and in its first headlines. The dispatch said:

The Commissioners' report declared in opposition to repeal, *although in curious contradiction*, a majority of the members of the

group expressed themselves in appended statements as being in favor either of repeal, or of immediate revision of the prohibition laws.

The point was emphasized by the headline of the *Telegram*, "Hoover and Dry Board Oppose Repeal, Majority Favors Liquor." "(Figure it out yourself — we can't — Editor.)"

The second day, the *Telegram* had discovered an amazing plot by which President Hoover had doctored the Report, and thereupon denounced the "amazing trickery" of the body, but added that "courageous individual statements leave most of the Commissioners with clean hands. But there is dirt somewhere."

And the day later, with the "plot" fully established, it thundered:

We share the feeling, which seems to be growing in public opinion, that the deception involved in the Commission's summary as contrasted with the Report itself is a national disgrace and humiliation.

The facts as to the "summary" have already been explained. It is an entertaining sidelight that Mr. Heywood Broun, the *Telegram's* columnist who seems to have got hold of the actual Report (doubtless from the *Telegram's* rival, the New York *Post*, for the *Telegram* did not print it) was writing in his column that the "Wickersham Commission has done a surprisingly good job." However, after a day's denunciation by his paper he seems to have thought better of it, and next day referred to the whole thing as a "fiasco."

The so-called "plot" charge, so reminiscent of the hysterical atrocity stories of the War, was born in the positive and direct affirmation car-

ried in a press association copyright dispatch from a White House correspondent and published in the *Washington Herald* (a Hearst paper) and elsewhere over the country, that President Hoover had deliberately intervened to alter the document, as follows:

A report that President Hoover persuaded the Wickersham Commission to abandon a tentative recommendation in favor of revising the Eighteenth Amendment *was confirmed in an authoritative quarter here last night.*

This flat statement — which carried no if's and but's — immediately received widest circulation at a time when Congressional denunciation was at its height. It was picked up and rewritten by other Washington correspondents; was broadcast over the Columbia radio circuit by Henry Kaltenborn, a radio news editor, that night; and was the forerunner of a series of bitter attacks by editorial writers, of whom Mr. Walter Lippman was the most able. The *Telegram's* Washington correspondent promptly "confirmed" the rumor on his own account, and his paper has never retracted the charge.

The slightest reflection on the character and personnel of the Commission shows the utter absurdity of the story. It was immediately branded as "absolutely untrue and without foundation" by the chairman; it was denied with heat by Dean Pound; in St. Louis, Judge Kenyon declared it "absolutely untrue"; Judge Mackintosh in San Francisco, January 23, stated that "the President never, in any way, interfered with the framing of the Report nor did he ever hint in the subtlest manner to any member what his wishes were in regard to the

Commission's findings." The writer has talked with other members of the Commission, wet and dry alike, and they show equal indignation over the Report. But it had gone forth over the nation further to influence sentiment against the document at a time when public opinion was crystallizing. It is a truism of publicists that a denial can never catch up with a direct charge.

Enough has been said of the circumstances under which national judgment was passed on the famous Report. Yet still it might be asked, why did not the Commissioners themselves rush into print to justify their work? The official viewpoint was expressed in a private letter from Dean Pound to the Columbia Broadcasting Company, which had invited him to make such a defense. He said:

I feel very clear that I ought not to think of taking advantage of your invitation. It seems clear to me that we should not put ourselves in the position of explaining or defending the Report to the public. We are not advocating anything and discharged our whole duty when we investigated the subject fully and reported our conclusions to the President. I have no programme to promote, no political ambitions, and nothing to say to the people beyond what I have said in print in the Report.

IN REVIEWING all the foregoing facts I find myself wondering if there is any moral. There seems today to be a growing disposition among modificationists to return to the famous Report and to use it for the weapon which it might have been from the first. Wets like former Senator Wadsworth have employed parts of it with effect.

That the Report has had immense influence there can be no doubt. I have mentioned Irving Fisher who,

writing in a syndicated Hearst statement, declared that "the Report has made upon me a profound impression and, in a degree, it has altered my view of the subject."

The same spirit of fairness in the Report has equally impressed stalwarts of the other side. We have Henry L. Mencken confessing in a copyright article in the *Evening Sun* of Baltimore, shortly after the Report's publication, that his own side in the affray has "sometimes preached rebellion without taking into account its more inconvenient consequences," and adding, "now both sides have before them the massive proof that the solution will not be easy, and if it is ever reached at all it must be by patience and compromise."

"Patience and compromise!" Surely it is a masterpiece that could elicit such slogans from Mr. Mencken. Indeed, to me, the fact that two such extreme opponents as Mr. Mencken and Dr. Fisher could meet in common praise of this same document answers a thousand other critics. There can be no doubt of Mr. Mencken's feelings. He finds "not the slightest sign of a desire to evade plain issues" in the Commission's study, and remarks that "it is an excellent job — in fact a job so good as to be almost brilliant." He adds, "If I had been a member of the Commission I believe I'd have signed the Report."

Today, almost a year after publication, it is obvious that the Commission interfered in a national dog-fight. It got lacerated in the process as might have been expected. It was, and is, a fight (as results have shown) in which some of the participants would rather bite, maim and kill each other, than be ruled by the whistle of human intelligence.

It is doubtful, in retrospect, whether the immediate result of the Commission's Report would have been much different no matter how the publicity was handled. The Report's publication, it is now shown, was bound to be the culmination of one of those moments of national hysteria in which, as before a war, people become creatures of emotion — when rumors fly like wildfire over the land.

At this later date, when the ecstasy of excitement has passed, it is still possible for the intelligent man or woman to go to the Report and find for himself what it contains. He will probably find, in reading the document, his views, whatever they be, modified by the process. He will find rancor toward opponents abated by the wise reasonableness of the study, even as Mr. Mencken suggested. The Report would seem still to offer, for practically the first time in the long debate on Prohibition, a common meeting ground for the moderate elements of either party.



Myths of the West

BY CAREY MCWILLIAMS

FOR centuries the Far West was the Dark Continent of America. Myths arose from this unknown and fabulous region beyond the Alleghanies like mists from the sea. It was reported to be a legendary land of uncharted rivers, delectable mountains, valleys of rich promise, and magical fountains bubbling with the waters of eternal youth. To the north was a mysterious passage to the Orient, while the buried treasures of the Spanish and the jewels of the Indians were hidden in the south. The exploration of the Far West was, indeed, prompted by the handsome fabrications of the natives working on the gullibility and avarice of the Spanish. Coronado traversed an empire in his fruitless search for the Seven Cities of Cibola. No sooner were the boundaries of the region established and its topography verified, than the heroes of its conquest passed into the realm of mythology. Through its mountain valleys and across its interminable plains stalked the tall figures of Davy Crockett, Kit Carson, Marcus Whitman, Billy the Kid, Wild Bill Hickok, Jim Bridger, and John Sutter.

Carried East by excited tongues, these legends were greatly embroidered in the telling. The existence of an oral epic of the West is demon-

strated by the amazing collection of books and pamphlets that serves today as a monument to the westward movement. It was the unknown and unpredictable character of the land that fostered the Myth. The East was diligently suckled on fabulous Government reports, the swollen and embellished narratives of mendacious travelers, and the pamphlets of such saga writers as Hall J. Kelley, James O. Pattie, and John B. Wyeth. These men pictured the Far West in hues of the rainbow and the peacock. A sizable bibliography could be made up alone of books on *Life in the Far West*. These pretentious pseudo-histories invariably contained chapters devoted to such marvelous exploits as "Shooting the Rapids," "An Encounter with a Grizzly in the Rockies," "A Battle with the Indians," "A Tough Tussle with a Panther," and "The War Dance of the Comanches." The Far West was not always glowingly depicted; in fact, just the converse was often the case. The school geographies of the Thirties, Forties, and Fifties, pictured the land west of the Missouri as the American Sahara; even Government engineers were deceived by the paucity of rainfall into fostering the legend of the West's aridity. But whether deceived by under-