

Human Culture

ARE WE CIVILIZED? HUMAN CULTURE IN PERSPECTIVE. By ROBERT H. LOWIE. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company. 1929. \$3.

Reviewed by ALEXANDER GOLDENWEISER

MODERN superstitions are as hard to dislodge as were those of older days. Dogmas are impervious to reason and stand forth in the face of contradictory experience. Anthropological evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, it is still commonly assumed that "savages" are improvident, that necessity is the mother of invention, that economic factors have it all their way in the history of culture, that the white race is more gifted than its colored rivals and the Nordic than the Alpine and Mediterranean, that "progress" is largely the achievement of modern man, that religion is the arch-enemy of enlightenment, and science incompatible with prejudice. These are some of the current superstitions Professor Lowie has set out to combat.

To achieve his purpose the California anthropologist has chosen the method of factual exposition. Facts may not speak for themselves, but when marshalled by the hand of an expert, they may be made to speak loud enough, and if the expert is also honest, their voice may prove to be that of truth itself.

Is culture a function of race? how then explain the "striking oscillations in British culture"? "Did the Elizabethans carry in their sex cells an extra dose of animal spirits that was blighted by a charge of gloom under Puritanism but revived by the Restoration? And what of Japan? There was no sudden influx of a new stock in 1867; there was a sudden change in culture because new *ideas* were allowed to enter. Neither geography nor heredity explains the difference between old and new conditions. The key is held solely by history."

Is European culture responsible for our food supply? Well, "after cutting out the American tomatoes, potatoes, beans, corn bread, pineapples, and chocolate, and the coffee that is native to Africa; the Chinese tea; the rice and sugar from India—what remains of our meal? Veal, wheat, rye, and milk. Of these, rye did not enter Europe until about the time of Christ. The rest are indeed very old there, but they are not natives. One and all they go back to the near Orient; there cereals were first sown, cattle first reared, and cows first milked. *Western Europe does not deserve credit for originating a single item.*"

Talk about refinements of food etiquette! It is true that savages and ancients often act disgustingly in such matters, but then again we must consider that "every one until about 1550 drank from a common glass. Over a hundred years later there was a lady in polite society, who regularly served with her ten fingers. Another, in 1695, thought nothing of ladling out sauce for a guest with a spoon that came 'fresh from her fair lips.'"

Economic determination? Man subjugating animals to fill an economic need? True enough, in some cases, but not in others. "Primitive man began to keep animals not with an eye to profit, but for the uneconomic though quite human reason that he jolly well liked to have them about as companions and for entertainment. To this day South American tribes coddle parrots, cage birds of prey, and hang lizards by the side of their hammocks. In one village storks and ostriches stalk about as the children's playmates; in another there is a little menagerie of fawns, turtle, and mice. Yet none of these animals serves the slightest practical purpose."

The ways of culture are devious; at times it "slinks in by the back stairs," as in the case of rye which first entered Europe as a useless weed, but was cultivated together with wheat in the mountainous districts of Persia, for there its remarkable resistance to cold had been discovered.

Persistently man, primitive or modern, refuses to learn from experience. As an example, a page from the history of Housing.

In Denmark, town-dwellers had begun putting up stone walls as early as 1500. However, with grim tenacity, they clung to the roof-thatching of rural days. Accordingly, their houses were no safer than the wooden structures of Sweden and Norway. Naturally, conflagration followed conflagration. Everyone knew that in all probability his native town would be destroyed at least once during his lifetime. In fact, Aarhus was burnt down twice between 1540 and 1550; and Bergen suffered the same fate in 1561, 1582, and 1589. Within a space of sixty years, thirty-six

towns were thus destroyed in Scandinavia—some of them more than once.

Man wearing clothes to keep out the cold? Yes, the Eskimos do, but not the Tierra del Fuegians, who go about naked and freezing—but not to death. Nor has modesty anything to do with it, for modesty is rooted in convention.

An Austrian lady of the Victorian era has been known to boast that, though she had borne her husband eight children, he had never seen her breasts. The very Brazilian woman who unconcernedly stalked past Nordskiöld in complete nakedness blushed violently when he bought the plug from her nose, and at once dashed off in search for a substitute.

"Man is a peacock." In order to be beautiful, one must suffer.

Under Marie Antoinette French ladies wore headdresses so high that a short woman's chin was exactly midway between her toes and her crest. . . . Ladies of the court knelt on the floor of a carriage, thrusting their heads out of the window. . . . The heavily powdered and padded pyramids worn on the head came to teem with vermin. Discomfort was intense, but West European genius did not abolish the fashion. Instead it invented an ivory-hooked rod and made it good taste to jab at the itching spots with it.

There are illuminating pages illustrating some primitive crafts when at their height. For example, the making of bark cloth in the South Seas and felting as practiced in Central Asia. The fascinating story of glass and its later application to pottery as glazing is told succinctly but suggestively, with a concluding slam at Western pride:

In 1607 the French Dauphin took his broth in a china bowl, but only kings and lords could afford such luxury. At least as early as 1518 European potters and alchemists tried to duplicate the Chinese invention. Many of them pretended to succeed, but not one of them ever did. The King of Saxony came to take interest in the matter, and at last, about 1710, true chinaware was produced in Meissen and marketed in 1713. That is to say, with samples of Chinese ware before him, with all the advantages of Western technology and royal patronage, it took the Caucasian craftsmen a couple of centuries to catch up with the benighted Mongoloid.

It is all very well to speak of progress in means of transportation but it must not be forgotten that before the inception of the most recent advances—which, to be sure, are spectacular—no signal forward step was made for many centuries:

As soon as a tribe had once put some animal before a cart, it was as well off in point of transportation as any North European in 1800 A.D. An Englishman of that period enjoyed no advantages over an Egyptian of 1700 B.C. who had just got horses to draw his chariots. For several thousand years humanity accomplished next to nothing.

The family and state, education, art, religion, medicine, and science are treated in the same concrete and telling fashion. Even the scientist, we are told, has much to learn, his expert's knowledge apart, to become truly civilized; "science has made advances; the scientist is still a primitive man in his psychology."

That Dr. Lowie should take "progress" with a grain of salt, is to be expected:

Posterity learns to chip a stone knife and to chop off a finger joint with it in mourning or prayer. Firearms shoot down game and human beings. Rulers elaborate law for larger states and devise torture chambers. Biologists study heredity and try to tinker with human beings.

The book is simply written. The sentences are direct and brief, somewhat deliberately so. There are no technicalities, as the author himself writes in the preface, but there are some unnecessary flippancies. In all of its major features however, the book is not only solid but also dignified. While no "civilized" person (least of all, Dr. Lowie himself) will expect it to speed up the wheels of progress, it will bring pleasure to many and instruction to a few.

According to the Norwegian correspondent of an English paper Knut Hamsun lived up to his reputation as a hater of publicity when he celebrated his seventieth birthday recently. "To be correct," says the correspondent, "everybody except Knut Hamsun himself celebrated the day. All newspapers were filled with portraits of him, of his wife, of his children, and of all the houses in which he had lived. Literary clubs and institutions gave receptions and sent solemn letters of congratulation to him. And his publisher printed several biographical volumes and a collection of his works. Only one person was seen nowhere. Knut Hamsun had hired a car and gone to Mandal, a small coastal village. Here, among humble folks, who did not know him, Knut Hamsun enjoyed his birthday."

An American Mystery

BITTER BIERCE, A Mystery of American Letters. By C. HARTLEY GRATTAN. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1929. \$2.50.

PORTRAIT OF AMBROSE BIERCE. By ADOLPHE DE CASTRO. New York: The Century Company. 1929. \$3.50.

Reviewed by FRANK MONAGHAN

IN 1893 Bierce, at the age of fifty-one and in the plenitude of a remarkable literary dictatorship of the Pacific coast, published "Can Such Things Be?," the volume of his short stories that mark the perfection of his style and technique. Three years later he came east and settled in Washington where he continued his potboiling for William Randolph Hearst. The publication of his "Collected Works" in twelve volumes (1909-1912) demonstrated the complete collapse of critical faculties that had never been conspicuously vigorous. Having succumbed to a *Weltschmerz* that had long been growing upon him he wrote a few friends in September 1913 asking them "to try and forgive my obstinacy in not 'perishing' where I am . . . good-bye—if you hear of my being stood up against a Mexican stone wall and shot to rags please know that I think it a pretty good way to depart this life. It beats old age, disease, or falling down the cellar stairs. To be a Gringo in Mexico—ah, that is euthanasia."

Many and weird are the stories that have come out of Mexico to explain his end, but all agree that he at last found the "good, kind darkness" that he sought. In his death, as in his life, he deliberately and assiduously cultivated mystification and obscurity. His asthma, which friends understood he acquired by sleeping in a graveyard, compelled him to live in high altitudes; and from his retreat on Howell Mountain he scattered vitriol on the fools and rogues of San Francisco. There he dwelt, remote and ineffable, in a cloud of glory: pen in one hand; in the other, a sheaf of thunderbolts. Surely this was a fascinating figure for a biography; and the unpublished letters and manuscripts, the reminiscences of friends were splendid opportunities for the biographer. Mr. Vincent Starrett in 1920 published a brief and sympathetic monograph; there have been scattered essays and articles, but these volumes of Mr. Grattan and Mr. de Castro are the first detailed studies of Bierce that have been published.

Mr. Grattan is not without reputation as a promising young critic and his biographical and critical study of Bierce has been commended in the press, especially by Mr. Hansen of the *World*. It is therefore surprising to learn that he not only fails to use the rich and available sources of Bierce materials, but denies their existence or accessibility; it is upon his "Collected Works," his "Letters" (all written after he was fifty), and a few magazine articles that he has turned a mildly critical eye. He early laments that Bierce does not mention the writers and thinkers to whom he was indebted and, in the absence of these tags which he might conveniently collect, Mr. Grattan has been modest and has "chosen not to guess too frequently." Despite this modesty there has been considerable and disastrous guesswork. He states that when Bierce went to London in 1872 "he was undoubtedly seeking to obliterate the memory of his marital unhappiness" and around this fact does much theorizing, little suspecting that Bierce really went to London on his honeymoon and that he was happily married for some years following. An idea of the composition and the accuracy of "Bitter Bierce" is obtained from his treatment of Bierce and the editorship of *The Lantern*. The Empress Eugénie, then in exile in England, employed Bierce to edit the two issues of *The Lantern*, a periodical designed to prevent a renewal of the attacks upon her by Henri Rochefort and his *Lanterne*. To this affair Mr. Grattan devotes about seven and one-half pages. Of these, two pages are epigrammatic quotation from Philip Guedalla; two are quotation from *The Lantern*; two and one-half are quotation from Bierce; the remaining half page is a paraphrase of several writers which tells us how Rochefort gave up the unequal struggle and fled. But had the author troubled to consult Henri Rochefort's "Adventures de Ma Vie" or the contemporary London periodicals he would have learned that Rochefort remained in London, published at least twenty-nine numbers of *La Lanterne*, and that he seems never to have heard of Ambrose Bierce.

While Mr. Grattan realizes that there is some

doubt concerning the authorship of "The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter" he does nothing to clear the matter up. In the numerous pages that he devotes to a discussion of the story he gives Bierce abundant praise for his clear perception of the sexual-psychological conflict upon which the plot is based. In this he follows others who have written of Bierce. But does not literary scholarship demand something more than a begging of the question and a description of the story? The author seems not to know Richard Voss's "Der Mönch von Berchtesgaden," the German source of Danziger's English translation which Bierce revised. A comparison would have revealed that the most significant passages of Bierce's version are merely literal translations from the German. To Bierce belongs the credit for the splendid editing and revising of a poor translation, but little more than this. After "careful study of Bierce" the author borrows a page from Van Wyck Brooks and concludes that Bierce was frustrated by his parish and his time; that he was "made" by his parish and his time could be more easily demonstrated. "Bitter Bierce" abounds in errors, both of fact and of interpretation; it accepts without questions the old myths about Bierce and adds new ones. Its scholarship is shoddy; construction, clumsy; and style, impoverished: it is incompetent.

Adolphe de Castro, the author of the "Portrait of Ambrose Bierce," is the G. A. Danziger who collaborated on the "Monk and the Hangman's Daughter" and who was for years a friend of Bierce in California. The adulatory note of his volume is sounded in the extravagant introduction contributed by Belknap Long. "Brave St. Ambrose," Mr. de Castro cries in ecstasy, "a god of the elder world fallen by mischance among men." And the reader will quickly understand that the author speaks of no mere mortal when he says that Bierce was born in Meigs County in southeastern Ohio and in Akron in Northern Ohio (pp. 3, 4, 347). And in the pages of this book we learn that Bierce's lyric poems (had they not been destroyed) would have established him as a poet "no less great than Heine"; that "he could have done the work of any of the nineteenth century poets"; and that "Bierce, knowing all that Horace, Juvenal, and Swift knew in addition to the experience gathered since then, was naturally their superior." De Castro states that Bierce compares favorably with Lincoln, Garfield, Apollo, the Chevalier Bayard, Lord Bacon, Napoleon, Cervantes, and Disraeli. We realize anew, when we have checked the twentieth factual error in the volume, that the gods were never circumscribed by mortal facts, nor is Mr. de Castro.

Yet despite its verbosity, sentimental drivel, and numerous inaccuracies Mr. de Castro's book has an undeniable value. He reproduces the atmosphere and incidents of early years in California, he relates conversations with Bierce, and while publishing many of Bierce's letters also makes available materials that have been buried obscurely in the files of western periodicals. But Mr. de Castro cannot stop at a single portrait, he must do a gallery. Among the most striking of these is the canvas of himself. Whether he pictures himself conversing with senators in the Blue Room of the White House, mauling ruffians in Hacquette's Crystal Palace Saloon in San Francisco, or playing leapfrog with Commodore Dewey his strokes are certain, vivid, and interesting. But if he can allow himself to describe his activities at teas that he never attended it is hardly possible to determine from his own book the exact nature of his relations with Bierce. Certain it is that those relations were sometimes intimate, often peculiar, and, when Bierce shattered a cane over Danziger's head, violent. The further publication of Bierce's letters will do much to dissipate this uncertainty. The definitive biography of Bierce remains to be written; and to that volume Mr. Grattan has contributed materials for a lengthy paragraph; Mr. de Castro, a chapter.

An inquiry into the books bought for the German Reichswehr whose literary budget amounts to ten thousand pounds a year is interesting. The sum includes magazines and newspapers. Although no veto has been pronounced in Germany, as in Austria, against the private purchase of "All Quiet on the Western Front," the book has not been bought for the German Army. There is a preference shown for military memoirs and the works of tried and proven authors who were popular favorites before the war. Rudolf Herzog, Rudolf Straatz, Heinz Skrownnek, and Clara Viebig are among them, good narrators whose tales are non-controversial.



Once and for All*

THERE is, I imagine, no defence of anthologies. I do not propose to erect one. I dislike the very word. In the Greek it means a gathering of flowers, which is very pretty. But I distrust the Greek. *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*, as the New Soak would put it. An anthology today is often compiled to show what the younger poets and their accomplices are doing. It is rarely a gathering of flowers, such as "Fifty Nasturtiums You Want to Know." It is an index, rather, to tendencies and form. I object to form when it is self-conscious, and tendencies are never of any value until acceptance has hardened them. Jules Lemaitre has said somewhere: "One of those abominable books called anthologies."

The only anthology of the slightest use whatever is the kind we carry about in our heads. Here everything is good, or at least we think it is. You can't tell me that most of our contemporary collections are full of things that somebody, excepting the author, has liked. The thought is too dismal. They are not even full of things that one is expected to like. They contain chiefly examples, disturbances, spectra, indications, suggestions, verves, lacunæ, aberrations, fids, and dottle. There are not often many genuine poems, if poetry is legal tender; and not often much good prose, if prose is the article enjoined. A handful of sand is a fair anthology of the universe, and the streets of Singapore, I am told, invite consideration of the smells of the world. Yet the sand is too complete, and the odors are nauseating. Is it violent to say that nothing can be enjoyed which is outside the experience of enjoyment? If it is not, then we may safely argue that the speciousness of anthologies is in fair proportion to the wilfully unenjoyable stuff which they promote.

One should not attempt, architecturally, to construct an anthology of anything. You can't do it. The labor will certainly show. There has been cheating. All the important things appear too important, and the indifferent stick out like so many sore thumbs. But consider any one of the anthologies in your head. There is no sham in this. It remains, after all, a catalogue of what you like. And at least it is something honest. If other people don't like it—well, they can read detective stories. They may even say you are an ass, and perhaps you are. But they can't honestly say you are dishonest.

It is therefore with a clear conscience that we could subscribe to the things in such a book. Neither you nor I went hunting for them. Let us put aside the thought that anyone might consider them winnowed. We had read them, merely, at some period of our life and liked them. They were (they still are) in the private drawer of the mind, though—like all things in private drawers—a trifle faded. We have often brought them to light. Sometimes, when conversation was dull, we used to say (we still could): "Do you know a good thing about fish that Holbrook Jackson once wrote?" But perhaps our friend doesn't care for fish. Or we might say: "We prefer 'No. 2. The Pines' to all that has ever been written on Swinburne." Or we might say any of a dozen other interesting things. We shouldn't have to any more, if they were all in a book.

I have sometimes considered a collection of light essays. One should qualify that. What is the light essay? I cannot tell you. It has been degraded by some into signifying the smallclothes of literature. This is an insult. It is more than that. There are light essays so profound that one trembles at what they suggest. I would not intimidate you. I have never yet known a light essay to injure anyone. Indeed, they are normally read for pleasure. But the form is hard. The form may worry you. Almost any prose which has no other convenient name is a light essay. The French-Canadian roadsign that said "Unidividual Cabins" was, of course, a light essay in itself. Dialogues and conversations, like those of Mr. Milne, are much too something to be stories and not something enough to be classified by themselves. They are therefore light essays. Mr.

* This article will serve as introduction to a collection of British and American light essays, selected by David McCord, to be published this month by Coward-McCann.

Herbert's telephone conversations are neither treatises nor of economic value. They are therefore light essays. "The Voyage of the Mona," a Tomlinsonian relic of "Old Junk," is a light essay by virtue of its point of view and not because of the volume which contained it. "On Nothing" might be just a letter addressed to Maurice Baring, but it happens also to be an admirable example of the essay in the Belloc tradition. Given enough time, I could even invent an excuse for the presence of Mr. Pearson's "The Lost First Folio." But I am making things hard. The author of "Dreamthorp" understood. In defining the essayist, he alluded deftly to our theme. "You walk through the whole nature of him," he said, "as you walk through the streets of Pompeii, looking into the interior of stately mansions, reading the satirical scribbles on the walls." *Scribbles* is the word; but of a noble order, like the strumming to which Kenneth Grahame referred.

Were it ever compiled, I should need forgiveness for latitude in the nonconformity of all my seriatims. In England you would call some of them sketches. Sketches, however, lead to notes, and notes to memorabilia, and memorabilia to *curiosa* and *facetia*, and then we are well out of our depth. Once and for all, I should look upon it as a nest of the many-colored eggs of a single family; and if, in your unreason, a cowbird were thought to have laid in it, I alone should suffer the blame. No one has startled me into the belief that such a collection is a good idea. You may take it for granted that most of the authors and publishers involved would be apathetic about it. The latter usually have their price, and none of the former would write to say "You have done a great service in bringing us all together."

I should not venture far out of the century; and then only twice into the very late 'nineties, certainly not the gayest years. Many of the essays I should include have been written since the War. That would leave a modern flavor. You would find omissions, of course; but, as I have said before, an anthology which pretends to be agreeable cannot afford to be comprehensive. I should call it a triumph of heart over mind, yet I do not imagine it would be posted with the Gideons. I cannot, I would not, hope that my favorites were your favorites. Certain logical contenders I should intentionally exclude. A maker must have his reasons. To go back to Jerome, for example, would be tapping the sources. You may be sure Mr. Squire had some large intent when he omitted from "Apes and Parrots," with a second-rate substitution, his own Spoon River Elegy and one of the brightest parodies in the language. We are all very weak in so many different ways.

There is one thing more. American and British humor are not always vastly different. Several things of my inclusion would display no stamp of nationality. And ultimate laughter, of which Max Beerbohm has said nobody ever died, is more miscegenetic than man. Here again, as we figure the notion of laughter, we must concede that the light essay and the humorous are marked for fellowship. Yet they are still distinct. The light essay is designed no more inviolably for laughter than the humorous essay is steadily capable of producing it. Both often pass under the wicked name of "easy reading." There was never any "easy reading." When reading is easy it is only a waste of time. Dime novels are all of this, as many professors will tell you. I do not like to think that things of my choice could ever be regarded in that light. *Caveat emptor!* But I'd be quite safe. I should append a postscript: *Only the italics are mine.*

DAVID MCCORD.

An announcement from Hoboken apprises us that the "Last Seacoast of Bohemia" has ambitions for typographic renaissance as well as drama. The statement reads:—

"There is room for a few serious connoisseurs on the mailing list of the Foundry Press, which (under the direction of Mr. R. C. Rimington) will be the official printing office of the Hoboken Free State.

The Foundry Press will be devoted to the occasional emission of limited editions and bibelots of distinguished oddity and esteem. The first of these, now on press, is the Hoboken Free State Passport, possession of which is restricted to members of the III Hours for Lunch Club.

Those who are seriously interested in typographic luxuries may receive Foundry Press announcements by sending their names and addresses to Mr. R. C. Rimington, The Foundry Press, 1 West 67 Street, New York City."