

Wilbur L. Cross: Scholar in Politics

BY JOHN CHAMBERLAIN

WHEN he was a Yale undergraduate back in the eighties, Wilbur Lucius Cross was known to his classmates as Senator. In later years, when he was Dean of the Yale Graduate School, the boys called him Uncle Toby. The names falsely suggest a dual, or at least a changed, personality. But for all their inadequacy they touch, even though they do not satisfactorily define, the two extremes in the character of the ruddy, blue-eyed, white-poll'd old gentleman who retired from teaching nine years ago presumably to finish a book on the novel but actually to plunge into Connecticut politics. Wilbur Cross was sixty-eight when he gave up his Sterling professorship of English at Yale and his executive duties in the Graduate School—old enough to take a merited rest. But the Great Depression was just upon us, and the Connecticut State Democrats were calling for an available candidate for governor. Cross was elected to his first term in 1930; and he has been Governor of Connecticut ever since. He is running again this fall for the fifth time; and so certain is he of victory that prominent Connecticut Republicans have worked overtime to avoid being selected to oppose him.

Just why Governor Cross was ever called Uncle Toby nonplusses those who look for logic in a nickname. For Uncle Toby, as all readers of Laurence Sterne's delectable "The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman" know, was a fellow with a one-track mind, given to riding the harmless hobby of playing at soldier. The Widow Wadman, to whose hand he aspired, doubted that Toby knew a hawk from a handsaw—to express the matter in a genteel way that Sterne himself would have disdained to use. Now, Governor Cross taught "Tristram Shandy," and expatiated on the quirks and humors of Uncle Toby, to generations in the Yale Sheffield Scientific School, in Yale College, and in the Yale Graduate School; and his "Life and Times of Laurence Sterne" is a fluent and charming and scholarly work. But there is not a shred of Toby Shandy's wool-gathering spirit in his character, which is pure Connecticut Yankee shrewdness even in its political liberalism. (As the governor in Cross puts it, "change comes whether you like it or not"; and it is the mark of Yankee shrewdness not only to make the best of



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it but to see to it that it comes without harshness and violence.) The nickname of Senator is better, and one can see why it should have been applied to Wilbur Cross as an undergraduate, but even that rings false today. The Governor, whose moods vary from friendly loquacity to abstraction, is hardly one to demand the ceremony of a title, even though he gets one as a matter of course.

We used to hear a lot about the "scholar in politics." The late Henry Cabot Lodge, author of biographies that

had a distinct and sometimes unscholarly Federalist flavor, was supposed to be such a person. But today the phrase is used either with magniloquent meaninglessness or as a term of sarcasm (as in Walter Millis's "The Martial Spirit"). Hence it is not quite fair to speak of Governor Cross as a scholar in politics—although he is a scholar and he is in politics. His scholarship is attested by his work on Sterne, by his essays on modern English novelists, and—more importantly—by his "History of Henry Fielding," which demolished a hundred years' crop of false Victorian legends about the alleged vicious habits of the creator of Tom Jones, the foundling. But it was not scholarship that prepared Cross for public life. That job was accomplished in childhood, when he hung around courtroom and country store in the Yankee village of Mansfield in northeastern Connecticut. Wilbur Cross learned to be a "realist" about facing things when he watched village judge and constable railroad innocent people just to collect the fines. And he learned to despise such tactics by listening to outraged conversations in the country store. The anatomy of government was obvious in the rural backwaters of sixty years ago; Wilbur Cross didn't have to go to college to learn about the uses and abuses of power.

However, Cross's scholarship has served to reinforce his native bent for realistic observation and realistic attack on abuses. Fortunately he chose English literature of the eighteenth century for his scholastic immersion, thus avoiding possible infection from the sentimentalism of the Victorians. Laurence Sterne, of course, is more fun than sociology; but the social criticism of Henry Fielding, which remains implicit in "Tom Jones" and comes sharply to the surface in "Jonathan Wild," was meat and drink to the village Yankee from Mansfield. It was old Professor Lounsbury who put Wilbur Cross on the track of the political realist in Fielding. To those of us who think naturally in terms of "radical," "liberal," and "conservative," the tangled politics of the eighteenth century, when Whig and Tory were often

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as indistinguishable as Tweedledum and Tweedledee, do not make immediate sense. Henry Fielding was a member of the Pitt-Chesterfield country wing of the Whig Party, the wing that opposed Walpole; but all this means little enough today. However, the party clique man in Fielding interested Cross less than the eighteenth century novelist's enlightened work as a justice of the peace in the Bow Street Court. As was the case with justices in the Connecticut village of Mansfield, the Bow Street magistrate was supposed to take his pay in the form of fines. But to Henry Fielding this seemed dirty money. The novelist whose character was later to be infamously blackened by Thackeray and Austin Dobson insisted on getting a straight emolument for his job of magistrate; he refused to put himself in the way of temptation. And when juvenile delinquents came before him, he refused to sentence them to Newgate; that prison was filled with hardened criminals whose influence was bound to work insidiously on young minds. The record of Fielding in humane application of the law commended itself strongly to Cross, and he has kept it in mind during his four terms as Governor.

Wilbur Cross was a Yale undergraduate when Grover Cleveland was raising the issue of "honest government" in the United States for the first time since the Civil War. And, with mugwumpery the fashion in intellectual circles, the young Cross became a Democrat. He was encouraged in his stand—which was a mildly courageous one to take in Republican Connecticut—by the teachings of the famous William Graham—or Billy—Sumner. Certain aphorisms of Sumner have stuck with Governor Cross through the years; and one of them—"There's never overproduction; there's only overproduction at a price"—partly explains the Governor's loyalty to the New Deal. It is true that the New Deal has been forced into the political tactic of encouraging price-raising in some things, but its basic philosophy of abundance, as expressed in the attack on monopoly, pleases the Cross who got his economics from Billy Sumner. Professor Albert G. Keller, Sumner's disciple and successor at Yale, looks askance today at Governor Cross's political allegiance. He would in all probability deny that it expresses the true essence of Sumnerism. But no matter. The influence that led Cross to the New Deal was partly Sumner's, and the old boy will have to take the blame—or the praise—for adding to the present-day woes of good Connecticut conservatives. In justice to Governor Cross it must be added that he sticks pretty much to the traditional "pay-as-you-go" policy for Connecticut, even though he has supported



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the New Deal spending nationally. Governor Cross believes in the balanced budget whenever possible, and he has succeeded in getting by without having recourse to a State income tax. But Roosevelt, he considers, has had to fight emergencies that defy fiscal orthodoxy at least for the time being.

Throughout his career as teacher, scholar, provost, dean, and editor of the quarterly *Yale Review*, Cross kept his interest in politics, public affairs, and business at the pitch which had earned him his undergraduate nickname of Senator. He belonged to an informal organization known as the Sunday School Class which met every Thursday night for convivial discussion at the Yale Graduates Club. There were university professors in the Sunday School Class, but there were also New Haven business men and editors—notably Colonel Norris Osborn of the *New Haven Journal-Courier*, an independent editor whose like has disappeared in recent years from the New Haven scene. Osborn brought news of local business and politics to the Sunday School Class; and he was later to prove instrumental in overcoming the effects of a cynical defeatism in the Democratic Party that almost lost the 1930 election for Cross. During the years of Graduates Club discussion, Cross kept pace with Arthur Twining Hadley, Yale's president, in posting himself on details of business practice; and even today, a septuagenarian and busy governor, he handles his own investments. Although Governor Cross still has in his desk drawer a partially finished book on the novel which he began years ago, there has never been anything of unworldly estheticism in his interest in the formal problems of literature. Cross was born a Yankee and raised a Yankee, and like a Yankee he will die with his

feet in the workaday world. Esthetic preoccupations have, however, had one effect on him as Governor: his proclamations, often limited to a paragraph or two, eschew the windiness normally associated with such utterances. Once Governor Cross split an infinitive in a proclamation. The *Hartford Courant*, a Republican paper, kidded the "professor" unmercifully.

In the twenties Wilbur Cross, with the encouragement and complicity of Yale Law School Professor William R. Vance, used to mock the Republicans in the Sunday School Class by mimicking Warren G. Harding, the blandly ignorant Front Porch Campaigner. Both Cross and Vance were especially delighted with Harding's pompous welcome to a troupe of actors who visited Marion, Ohio, in 1920. Harding had spoken of the great pleasure of seeing that great actor Richard Harding Davis in that great Shakespearian drama, "Charles the Fifth." Imitation of Harding led Cross and Vance to other mimicry. They elaborated goofy party platforms which straddled "Ku Klux Klan" and Prohibition issues, and they succeeded in making the Republicans of the Sunday School Class wince. If the New Era had proved permanent, the political japery of Cross and Vance would have remained—japery. But in 1930, when Cross was about to retire, Vance came to him and said: "See here, we've been joking about this political business. But isn't it time we did something about it?" He got Cross's promise to abide by the result if a nomination for Governor by the Democrats could be wangled. The nomination was wangled, by Vance and Colonel Osborn. At a meeting at Savin Rock, an amusement park outside of New Haven, Cross told Augustine Lonergan, who was sticking to the negative issue of lamenting Hoover and hoping ultimately to win his Senatorship by it, that the Democratic Party couldn't do anything locally without positive issues. Cross proposed three slogans—"get the farmer out of the mud," "repeal the Eighteenth Amendment," and "end invisible government." The first was aimed at the Republicans' tightwad refusal to build adequate rural "farm-to-market" roads; the last referred to alleged political influence at Hartford in behalf of the utilities. As for the anti-prohibition plank, Cross knew that Connecticut, along with Rhode Island, had never deigned to ratify the Eighteenth Amendment.

The organization Democrats were happy to head their State ticket with a distinguished Yale scholar. But they had no faith in the scholar's will to victory. For years they had existed by making undercover deals with the Republicans, and in November some of them went about their usual business of

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A Dozen Men in One

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN. By Carl Van Doren. New York: The Viking Press. 1938. \$3.75.

Reviewed by CRANE BRINTON

IN these days of Freudians, Marxists, debunkers, Stracheyites, Guedallans, and other practitioners of the unsettled and unsettling art of the "new" biography, one does not often come across a book as clearly in the great tradition of biography in the English language as Mr. Van Doren's "Franklin." Or perhaps, since Mr. Granville Hicks has appropriated the phrase "the great tradition" for the Marxists, we had better say that Mr. Van Doren's book is near the central core of biography in English, that it is mined from the same vein that Boswell, Lockhart, Froude, and Morley worked.

This is not to say that Mr. Van Doren has unmistakably written an enduring book, a "classic" that will be enshrined in the textbooks a hundred years hence. He may well have done so. But the reviewer who ventures confidently on such long-range predictions is trespassing on ground properly left to posterity and to the blurb-writers. He had better not even attempt to guess at the possible sale of the book, for those more close to the trade are usually far better guessers than he. All the reviewer can safely do is describe the kind of book he is dealing with, its scope, its methods, its general flavor. Mr. Van Doren's book is clearly the kind of book men at the central core of biography in English have written; it is not the kind of book—good or bad as they may be—men like Mr. André Maurois, Mr. Stefan Zweig, or Mr. W. E. Woodward have written.

It is a long book, but barely long enough for the long, full life it records. Franklin was a dozen men, artisan, business man, inventor, scientist, philosopher (this last strictly in the eighteenth-century, not in the technical or academic, sense), moralist, man of letters, soldier, diplomatist, and statesman. He was the most Protean, the most Goethean, of Americans, and deserves all the space Mr. Van Doren's publishers have granted. Mr. Van Doren has room enough to let Franklin expand properly, and speak for himself in his autobiography, his letters, and his innumerable editorial writings, articles, pamphlets, from the "Silence Dogood" letters in his brother's *New England Courant* to *Poor Richard*, his little French verses, and those "surreptitious" writings which, like the even broader ones of Mark Twain, continue to circulate in a queer underworld of print. Yet Mr. Van Doren's preface, "in effect, Franklin's autobiography is here completed on his own scale, and in his own words," is misleading. The biographer of Swift and Peacock is not so false to the methods of his craft as to con-

fuse autobiography with biography. He lets Franklin speak for himself, but he fills in the spaces, criticizes, arranges, explains as a good biographer must. You never feel that he is warping his subject to fit his own theories and sentiments, that he is stuffing out a dummy. He is a biographer, and not a ventriloquist. He admires and likes Franklin—indeed this is, like almost all lives in what we have ventured to call the central core of English biography, a "sympathetic" biography—but it is no mere hagiography. Anyway, Franklin was much too successful to tempt the lay canonizers. Those who want to make saints for this harsh world have



Franklin in Philadelphia, about 1748: "At one time or other his life touched almost everything of importance that was going on" . . .

rightly turned to such eternal witnesses to the discomforts of virtue as Paine and Marat.

Mr. Van Doren skillfully contrives to remain always on the right side of the uncertain boundary which divides biography from history. It would be easy to make Franklin an excuse for writing a history of the Western world in the eighteenth century. At one time or other his life touched almost everything of importance that was going on in America, England, and France for some eighty years. Mr. Van Doren does not leave his reader in ignorance of anything in Franklin's environment that is essential to understanding what he did and how he did it. When, for instance, he comes to that eternal historical puzzle centered around the early negotiations between the rebel Americans and the French, he untwists beautifully the tangle into which Arthur Lee, Silas Deane, Franklin, Beaumarchais, and Vergennes managed to get, to the despair of the historian. There are few short accounts of the "affair of Beaumarchais's

million" as clear, as fair-minded as the one Mr. Van Doren gives here. If you want a neat example of the difference between careful, judicial writing and violently partisan writing, compare Mr. Van Doren's treatment of this affair and that of Mr. Frank Smith in his just-published life of Thomas Paine. Paine, at the American end, got up to his neck, and beyond, in the affair, and his recent biographer is sure that everyone else involved was either a grafter or a fool. Mr. Van Doren knows better, as Franklin himself knew better.

Mr. Van Doren, then, holds the difficult balance between "Life" and "Times" always in favor of Franklin the man, so that the reader understands what is going on, but is never swamped with unnecessary historical details. He also holds what is, in the present state of the publishing business, an even more difficult balance between the demands of the scholar and the demands of the general reader. The book is the October choice of the Book-of-the-Month Club, and will not disappoint the numerous readers such a choice guarantees it. It makes splendid, leisurely reading, following down all the highroads and all the little lanes of Franklin's varied life. It has none of the panting immediacy, the melodrama with which some biographers try to spice their books, nor is it "epic" in the cheap sense the word seems to have acquired. Mr. Van Doren even leaves the epigrams and the aphorisms to Franklin himself, who borrowed or invented enough to make a fortune for a dozen ordinary writers. The book is interesting enough to be read steadily and consecutively, and, something rarer and more difficult to bring off, it can be dipped into here and there, as you would dip into Boswell. But it is also a work of great erudition, one that will undoubtedly run successfully the gauntlet of the learned reviews. Mr. Van Doren's fifteen years of research have been incorporated in the work with the care of the artist and the scholar. They are not displayed with the pedant's glee, but neither have they been concealed as something supposedly detrimental to a wide circulation among the reading public. Simply from the point of view of the mechanics of book-making, the book is an admirable example of what to do with the necessary, but often clumsy, apparatus of learning. The footnotes are there, and the bibliography is there, but there so unobtrusively that no one need be bothered by them who doesn't want to be. The index, a vital matter too often skimmed in new books nowadays, is a marvel of completeness.

This is certainly the Franklin book of our generation. Franklin had a tremendous press in his own day, and men have been writing about him ever since. Mr. Van Doren has mastered this great body of writing, got the best out of it, and put in much himself. He is scrupulously fair to his predecessors, though perhaps he passes over a bit lightly what the French,