

# The Rivers of America

BY GEORGE R. STEWART

WHAT should a book about a river really be? Should it be the story of the river itself, of the river and its tributaries, of the river valley, of the people who inhabit the valley, or of all of these mingled? In other words, how are we to derive from a vague fluvial idea that essential unity without which no satisfactory book can be written?

One fact is sure—these uncertainties have not prevented the writing of books about American rivers. As early as 1770 Philip Pittman had produced a Mississippi volume, so that Cramer's Ohio-Mississippi of 1801 and Flint's Mississippi of 1831 were really late-comers. These early works were largely in the nature of descriptive guide-books for traveler and immigrant, but some of them included historical sections. In the first years of the present century we even had a river series, including the Ohio, Hudson, Colorado, and others—solid historical works, and not bad reading either. In 1933 appeared Fergusson's excellent "Rio Grande"; this work has probably exercised a considerable influence upon later writers because of its emphasis on the river-valley as an environmental unit. On the other hand, Ludwig's widely read "Nile", although dealing also with the people of the river-valley, puts its chief emphasis upon the stream itself; as expressed in the subtitle, it is "The Life-Story of a River." Lengyel's recently published "Danube" follows somewhat this same pattern.

Several years have now passed since The Rivers of America was announced in a prospectus, "Rivers and American Folk," prepared by the editor, the late Constance Lindsay Skinner. Of twenty-four volumes promised, seven are now in print. These books have been reviewed individually as they appeared; as yet, however, there has been little attempt to consider the progress of the series as a whole.

For such an attempt a natural place to begin would be with the prospectus. Unfortunately for present purposes, that document is couched more in poetic than in factual language, and only a few general intentions can be deduced from it. Titles notwithstanding, the books were to deal primarily not with the rivers but with the folk of the rivers, or (what this would inevitably mean) with the folk inhabiting the drainage basin. The series was to have a moralistic purpose—to buck up Americans in a time of depression by passing in review their glorious past. Twice in the prospectus the intention was stated of producing "a lit-

erary and not an historical series." Unfortunately, no definition was offered for either literary or historical. Along with the historian, the economist and the sociologist were told that this series was not their affair.

Since the prospectus gives directions only at large, we must seek elsewhere for evidence upon which to establish some criteria of criticism; we accordingly turn to the first of the series, "Kennebec," by Robert P. Tristram Coffin. As the first book this may naturally be considered a kind of keynote volume. Moreover, in the opinion of this reviewer at least, "Kennebec" is definitely the best of all the books yet to appear. Much of its charm must be credited to the excellence of Mr. Coffin's prose, but we must forgo any discussion of such personal qualities and consider the ways in which he has handled the problem of the river itself.

First of all, he has constantly taken pains to demonstrate a linking between the nature of the region and the nature of its people. The characters, and therefore the incidents, of his story, we come to feel, did not just happen to happen on the Kennebec, but are really Kennebeckian. The author points out ways in which the bitter winters, the hilly farms, and the beautiful river itself have shaped the people and their lives. Under these influences even the immigrant French-Canadians are, he assures us, rapidly becoming Kennebec Yankees. Perhaps at times he overworks his idea, as

when he writes: "A person cannot live among these days and so much granite and pungent bayberry and sweet fern and clean evergreen without getting clear and good-smelling inside." But we always feel sure that Mr. Coffin himself believes what he has written. In any case, the close linking of river and people gives to "Kennebec" an essential artistic unity.

Further unity comes from Mr. Coffin's resolute sticking to his last: his subject is the Kennebec and nothing but the Kennebec. As a third point of importance, "Kennebec" strikes a balance between past and present. About a quarter of the book deals with our own period; there is even a chapter on the future. The reader thus lays down the volume with the feeling that the river and its people are carrying on and that a romantic past is decidedly not the whole story.

In some lesser matters "Kennebec" need not be held up as a model. Mr. Coffin is not so careful about unity of idea as he is about unity of place. Also, his affection for his own land lures him into superlatives.

With such an excellent beginning as "Kennebec," the series seemed destined to great things, but Mr. Havighurst's "Upper Mississippi" lost the first fine rapture. By writing almost entirely of the Scandinavian immigrants he failed to produce anything which can be called a comprehensive account of the region. "Suwanee River" by Cecile Hulse Matschat added still a third type to the series. She wrote essentially a local-color piece; or it might be considered a book of travel with emphasis upon flora, fauna, and primitive people. It does not seem to carry forward the editor's intentions or Mr. Coffin's



Drawing by J. O'H. Cosgrave II, from "The Sacramento"

example; neither does it seem to this reviewer to be an integral part of the series. Yet it is a highly readable book, and in its own genre excellent.

Perhaps the great divergence of the first three books led to more editorial direction; at least, the next four books have all resembled "Kennebec" in type although in their average falling far below it in quality. The best of these later books is certainly Mr. Carmer's "Hudson." Its detail is brilliant; its anecdotes are excellent. But, to this reviewer, it seems lacking in unity of construction; its chapters are too often isolated. More important, it fails to bring out clearly the connections between environment and folkways. The other three books, Mr. Burt's "Powder River," Mrs. Niles's "James," and Mr. Dana's "Sacramento,"\* although differing in quality, have much in common. The last of these is the latest volume of the series; it seems, moreover, to represent in certain ways the type into which the river series is hardening.

California is known as a land of rivers which are wild floods in February and dusty stream-beds in August. The Sacramento is not such a stream. Its drainage basin includes a sixth part of California, and receives more than a quarter of the precipitation which falls within the state boundaries. Many a resident of Los Angeles has been surprised to discover that the Sacramento carries a year-round traffic of large steamboats.

In telling the story of this greatest of California rivers, Mr. Dana has not been successful in attaining the standards set by Mr. Coffin. The region has been too recently settled to produce a Sacramentan race as the Kennebec has produced a Kennebeckian. But certainly Mr. Dana might have coördinated geographical and cultural factors more intimately than he has actually done. The book simply fails to make us feel the river intimately, as we come to feel the Kennebec.

One reason for this failure certainly is that too many events not connected with the river monopolize long sections of the book; for unlike Mr. Coffin (but, unfortunately, like Mr. Burt and Mrs. Niles), Mr. Dana does not confine himself to his river. His Part II, a quarter of the whole, is a running summary of California history down to 1847, ranging geographically all the way from Oregon to Lower California. In this section readers of Mr. Dana's earlier works may experience what is known as that I've-been-here-before feeling. They need not, however, attribute it to pre-existence; the explanation is



Drawing by J. O'H. Cosgrave II from "The Hudson."

that to write this part and also some of Part III he has frugally made much use of his own "Sutter of California."

The modern aspects of the river have not been very adequately handled. The only flood-control project treated in any detail concerns some private diking around Grand Island. But the modern Sacramento with its magnificent system of levees, weirs, and by-passes is really a show-piece among American rivers. Under certain conditions a four-mile stretch of the great flooded river can actually be made to reverse itself and flow back up-stream. In enthusiasm for the miracles of the frontier it is a mistake to miss all the modern miracles. In addition, there was a fine chance for a telling contrast to be made between the disastrous bottle-necking effect of private levee-building and the excellent results of coördinated Federal planning.

There are a good many points upon which I feel urged to argue with Mr. Dana on matters of fact, but I shall confine myself to his first two sentences. The first states that the river is 320 miles long; a recent official publication of the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers ("The Sacramento River Flood Control Project," 1938) gives the length as 370 miles. The second sentence reads, "The river runs south . . . to San Francisco." In the publication above cited, the river is ended in Suisun Bay near Collinsville, about fifty miles from San Francisco; ordinary usage ends the Sacramento at the same point. To say that the Sacramento runs to San Francisco is like saying that the Hudson runs to Sandy Hook or the Susquehanna to the Virginia Capes.

The Rivers of America opened with an excellent volume; since then the series has produced two which can be ranked as good; but this is not an encouraging average and the curve is declining. To bring it up, the future writers in the series must take thought. They must study their rivers more intimately and carefully, particularly the geographical conditions; they must confine themselves to their own regions and avoid the far-flung sprawl which so nearly manages to overcome all the good qualities of Mr. Burt's "Powder River." To attain proper balance they must not deal too exclusively with a romantic part of frontier exploits, legends, ghost-stories, and good old days.

Moreover, if they read Miss Skinner's prospectus, they should not be lured into believing that what they are writing is "literary, as distinct from historical." I can hardly think of any worse idea to loose broadcast among a group of writers; it has probably done much harm already. To begin with, it is an untenable position. Oh, shades of historians from Thucydides to Parkman, when did literature and history become incompatible? Moreover, these river books (whether literary or not) are certainly some kind of history, unless they are to be taken as fiction. To urge upon a group of writers, few of them trained scholars, that they should not be concerned to be historical is merely to encourage all the natural human tendencies toward carelessness and sloth. I think also that the same attitude may have helped bring about the terrifying discursiveness which disfigures three of these seven books; for, if the standards of history are rescinded, no definite aim remains; one anecdote therefore does as well as another, so that Mrs. Niles can use the story of a Potomac planter for a book on the James River. Finally, literature is a term both vague and high-sounding; it encourages illusions of grandeur. A man dealing in fact is likely to be modest. Persuade the same man that he is writing literature, and he will begin to believe that even his careless jottings are *verbatim* dictations from the nine Muses.

Most people who are interested in American backgrounds probably reacted favorably to the original idea of The Rivers of America, but with almost a third of the volumes published the total of achievement is not very great. Apparently it is difficult to write a good book about an American river. Or perhaps some of these writers merely erred in underestimating the difficulty of the task, and so did not work hard enough and thoughtfully enough. The future is with the seventeen writers who are still to try.

\*THE SACRAMENTO: RIVER OF GOLD. By Julian Dana. Illustrated by J. O'H. Cosgrave II. New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1939. 294 pp., with index. \$2.50.



# Women on the Job

**IT'S A WOMAN'S BUSINESS.** By Estelle Hamburger. New York: The Vanguard Press. 1939. 300 pp. \$2.50.

**A WOMAN'S PLACE.** By Hortense Odum. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1939. 286 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by ELIZABETH HAWES

**E**STELLE HAMBURGER was seventeen when, on September 15, 1916, she went into R. H. Macy & Co. Her book will encourage all young women who may have qualms about being successful business executives, wives, and mothers all at once. The zest for life which sweeps from page one to page three hundred is wonderful. It becomes apparent that a neat combination of brains, imagination, and energy have reaped Miss Hamburger a just reward. She's now executive vice-president of Jay Thorpe in New York, and the mother of twin boys, who have graduated from elementary school.

The rising young female generation probably still needs a good deal of assurance on the virtues of a woman's place in being not necessarily in the home. Miss Hamburger's nice, quick, easy way of telling all on the subject of bosses who let you down, and others who don't—coupled up with the difficulties of getting a proper nurse for a working woman's offspring—the fact that she's not only still alive but obviously more alive than ever, will doubtless turn a lot of working girls into mothers and a lot of mothers into working girls.

It hardly seems fair to take issue with the author when such cheery ideas as hers are let loose in this mixed-up world of today. But those of us business women who, for whatever reasons, write our stories, probably do as much harm as good. There will now be a rush of eager young ladies into the field of Fashion Advertising and their experiences won't prove necessarily as exhilarating as those of Estelle Hamburger. A lot of them will discover that the technique for perfect marital adjustment between the working girl and her man hasn't been very highly developed yet by either husband or wife. We working-girl-writers have a neat way of leaving out that side of the picture. I have perfect confidence in the ultimate solution, but the sexes have a lot to learn about how to handle one another when both are ready to scream after a bad day at the office. Who is to finally take over the house-keeping? Miss Hamburger overlooks this problem, undoubtedly from a perfectly normal desire, shared by most of us, to keep her private life private.

And, to drag in a book reviewer's personal prejudices openly, Miss Hamburger got a justifiable kick out of being among the first to discover that one didn't just tell the public about *beautiful* clothes. No. In 1923, it was found that the trick was to tell them about *new* clothes and, Miss Hamburger candidly admits, "it became more important to be new than be right." My personal theme song is that this is one of the ills of our civilization.

Maybe if I hadn't entered the fashion trade a decade after Miss Hamburger, I would have felt the first excitement instead of the nervous indigestion of an over-stuffed public. Doubtless the coming generation will feel quite differently from either of us. I think they'll get something out of "It's a Woman's Business" to encourage them to slap down the past if they don't like it, and ride rough-shod and triumphant into the future. So I hope a lot of young women read this book.

Hortense Odum, President of Bonwit Teller, didn't mix her babies and business all up together. Her opinion of a woman's place, in regard to her husband, is stated in her book: "He depended on me to provide in our home a suitable and quiet and orderly background to which he could return at the end of the day for relaxation and contentment. That has always seemed to me to be the woman's primary job."

Whether that is a woman's primary job or not, Mrs. Odum was swept from it by circumstance. Her husband, a banker, found himself stuck with Bonwit Teller when it was a total flop. She wasn't very busy at home, since the children were grown and the home established, so she went into the store—and made it over.

This book is rather stiffly written and dull in spots, but taken in relation to Miss Hamburger's book, and to the problem of a woman's place in life, it proves quite fascinating. Coming into a store to work as a mature woman, Mrs. Odum put her finger on the sore spot—the spot which throws a lot of stores. Mrs. Odum was primarily interested in the consumer, the woman who was trying to buy what she wanted and needed. Fantastic as it seems, the consumer is usually the last thought of any store. Miss Hamburger, I believe, never once mentions the consumer in relation to the advertising, except to say that, in the early days, R. H. Macy's advertising department of three people hadn't the foggiest idea who really read the ads.

The dream-store which Mrs. Odum conjures up as being Bonwit Teller ought to bring them a lot of customers

—and if Bonwit Teller weren't more satisfactory to women than a lot of other stores, their success wouldn't be increasing as it is. However, the perfect department store is still on the other side of the rainbow whatever the ideals may be. Mrs. Odum's ideals are fine. She gives out a lot of good common-sense advice on the subject of dressing.

Whereas Miss Hamburger's book is one for the fiery young zealot who is consumed with a desire for action, Mrs. Odum's book can well be read by the older generation. She went into a job latish in life and she is doing the job successfully. She had inordinate luck in getting the job, but none the less, her experience will encourage those older women who find themselves forced into business when their first fine frenzies are over.

## Spokesman of a Nation

(Continued from page 4)

maker and profiteer, lunches with government officials; Jerphanion, in one of the best but least novelistic passages in the whole volume, analyzes with his former classmate Jallez his impressions of the front; Mareil makes love to Germaine Baader. All our old friends among the characters remain remarkably consistent despite the events. Jallez and Jerphanion continue to discuss everything in their often ponderous *Normalien* manner; Quinette is still riding on the subway, meditating new murders behind a dignified full beard; Clanricard is still grappling with moral problems, though in a trench where men are dying like flies; Gurau is still struggling against corruption and ignorance to save his country. The only familiar character who succumbs in the war so far is Wazemmes, whom we saw start life as an apprentice in a painting establishment of the rue Montmartre; Romain is obviously reluctant to kill his characters in the war, although verisimilitude will not permit them all to survive. He knows as well as anyone the terrible toll which the first years of the war took among young intellectuals who had the rank of officers, and in the next volume he will doubtless have to sacrifice Clanricard in order to spare Jallez and Jerphanion, his chief mouthpieces.

Despite the mass of detailed documentation that lies behind this recreation of the first world war (French military experts have been unable to find any serious inaccuracies in the novel), Romain's point of view is rather that of a civilian than that of a military man. This is fortunate, since the public is made up largely of civilians. Instead of yielding to