



The American Tradition In Literature

HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

TOO much has perhaps been said of new departures in American literature. Like the New Deal, they are new in America only in so far as twentieth century man has encountered new problems and invented new ways of thinking about them. This nation has been incredibly urbanized by the factory, the automobile, the moving picture, and the radio. Racial minorities, with traditions other than Anglo-Saxon, have become articulate and given to American literature, not so much a new accent, as new materials upon which the imagination can work. Yet it is questionable whether American literature owes much that is distinctively American to these influences. Joyce has worked more powerfully in our fiction than the radio broadcaster; New York Jews, Minnesota Scandinavians, Mississippi Negroes, Boston Irish, when they begin to write, prove to be more American than foreign, sometimes, I think often, more American than the Anglo-Saxon strain. If we are to seek for a national character in American literature, giving it qualities not dependent upon its English backgrounds and the doctrines of the twentieth century, it must be in the American tradition. This is not a dead hand reaching from out of our past, but a force that is alive and, like all living things, growing and changing, while preserving a pattern that can be recognized and defined.

There have been many attempts to define the American tradition, but the best have been protests against some other definition, and have suffered from oversimplification. Turner's fa-

mous exposition of the frontier spirit was a correction of an overemphasis upon our European origins; Parrington's study of democracy in American literature was an attack upon the New England successors of the Federalists, who had been indifferent to democracy. The recent Marxian school has lit obscure corners of economic influence without supplying any formula broad enough for an Emerson, a Cooper, or a Whitman. In a brief paper like this one, I cannot hope to analyze, and much less to challenge, all these explanations of what it means to be an American. Yet it is possible to break down some of this conflicting testimony, and describe a group of traits that we can all agree are distinctively American, and then see how far they continue to live in the vivid, vigorous, if often disorderly, and sometimes noisy, literature of our own contemporaries in the twenties, thirties, and forties.

I SHALL not try to be original in this portrait of the American tradition, unless in a fresh application to books and people of our time. Probably the job could be done with different classifications, and certainly more classifications are possible. That is not important. If the traits I describe are true and significant, they are enough for an experiment in literary criticism. If any one wishes to deny that the categories that follow are intensely American he will need a powerful argument. Some of them are English or French or Russian traits also, but not to the same degree, not in the same way, not so significantly. Taken together, they

spell in outline the name of our country when it thinks, feels, imagines, judges, expresses itself in literature.

The first and probably the most deep lying of these characteristics is expansiveness. With Jonathan Edwards, hell itself became expansive. "Rip Van Winkle" is a serio-comedy of expansiveness. Cooper's Natty Bumppo symbolizes the conflict between the expansive soul seeking the freedom of the wilderness, and an expanding civilization always at his heels. Emerson is a spiritualist expansionist. Thoreau wrote "Walden" to turn expansion inward. Mark Twain's boys are always going places, and Whitman's "Song of Myself" links Brooklyn, human nature, the West, and the universe.

But how vitally this trait persists in our literature today! If there is one trend, for example, in American fiction that has amounted almost to a folk lore in this decade, it is the historical novel, which has pushed for its sources backward and left and right across the continent. And note, that these novels, from "Northwest Passage" and the innumerable narratives of prairie settlers, to "Gone with the Wind," have been stories of expansion, of conflict, and of building. It is the re-creation, the expansion, of the new South after the war that is the original and memorable part of "Gone with the Wind," and both hero and heroine are identified with salvage and reconstruction, not with memory and loss. Note again the contrast of this school of history in fiction with the great European novelists of a century earlier. It is lost causes, defeated countries, or heroes in their last stand,

that Sir Walter Scott chooses for subjects. With him and with Dumas, the vane points always to the past. The theme in the American books is preparation for a future expansiveness.

Or let us choose an individual writer, regarded by many of the younger generation as their leader, Thomas Wolfe. Here is expansiveness incarnate, even as in Whitman, even as in the westward pioneers who lived for frontier experience and moved on when stability caught up with them. Wolfe could write only one book and that was his whole expanding life. His work has a beginning and many middles but no end anywhere. Its faults are apparent, its virtue is an insatiable zest for experience, an expanding ego to which every happening seems important because it happens to Tom Wolfe. Asheville, the railroad, the Harvard library, New York, and love and hate and human nature, all open ilimitably when he reaches them. Everything is continental to his view, and he is as immune to classical restraint as a Mohawk chieftain, or Anthony Wayne, or Colonel Sellers, or Moby Dick.

I dislike applying a term such as equalitarianism, with its strongly European connotations, to the next American trait to be discussed, but I can think of no other word so applicable. Nevertheless, American equalitarianism is very different, both in origins and in results from the European variety. Where so many have had—in the past at least—an opportunity to rise in the economic scale, there will be neither an aristocracy nor a plutocracy with that sense of security which produces a class. Equalitarianism and exclusiveness are mutually incompatible, and privilege, which has supported aristocracies elsewhere, becomes a reward of ability, not a heritable right. Our tradition has been bourgeois and our literature has had the bourgeois virtues, which are real and valuable. It has never been successfully heroic, although intellectually it has reached, especially in our earlier New England, formidable heights. But on the austere pinnacles of thinking an Emerson and a Thoreau, if not a Hawthorne, wrote definitely for the community of all men of good will, and believed them capable of good will. So did Jefferson, although himself a product of our Southern experiment in making an aristocracy by the plantation and slavery system, an experiment already failing in his time. It was, indeed, the so-called Virginia aristocracy which founded the political party which has made a political program of equalitarianism.

How strong this equalitarian *motif* is in the majority of American books need not be emphasized here. The difficulty is to find American books of

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vitality in which it is not a moving force. Poe, who belongs to another phase of the American tradition, is one example. Melville may be regarded as another, Hawthorne as a third, Henry James as a fourth. But Poe was a pathological romanticist, Melville and Hawthorne were skeptics, and James an internationalist. And even these men were all specialists in that inevitable accompaniment of bourgeois equalitarianism, the emphasis upon the individual and individualism. Far from having subsided with the closing of the frontier and the economic changes which have so clamped down on American opportunity, this trait has merely changed its metabolism in the imagination.

The novels of Sinclair Lewis, for example, are essentially studies in the pathology of American ambition. In every important story, from "Main Street" on, he has described the American passion to get on, to be as good as the current Joneses, to conform to success and share it. But the societies that Lewis describes have got their values wrong. They want, like Babbitt, tokens of success, which prove to be only tokens. They have lost sight of valuable ends in contriving efficient means. Or, as in "Arrow-smith" or "Elmer Gantry," they have paid a heavy price for an equality of low ideals and an unworthy success. It is never the right of the American to have what the best have, which Lewis questions. His heroes are all go-getters in their own right. But Americans have gone after the wrong values. He scorns them, *not* because they are going places, but because they have lost their way. In all of this, though with less satire and more philosophy, Thoreau, in "Walden," was his predecessor.

Picking and choosing among the other outstanding attributes of the American tradition, I take next its most puzzling element. Not puzzling in how and why it came about, but puzzling in its action and its unexpected strength and weakness. We are a humanitarian nation, even more so than the British—one might say, the tougher we are, the more humanitarian.

Our record for tough ruthlessness is not a pretty one. If fewer Indians were massacred in Anglo-Saxon than in Spanish territories, it is chiefly because there were fewer Indians to massacre. If we did not reduce the remainders to slavery, they were equally exploited and much more thoroughly dispossessed. The type bad-man of modern literature comes from our West. The gunman and gangster were American specialties until Germany capitalized them for political purposes. If the factory system at its be-

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John Buchan's "Great Loves"

PILGRIM'S WAY—AN ESSAY IN RECOLLECTION. By John Buchan, Lord Tweedsmuir. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1940. 342 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by OSWALD GARRISON VILLARD

THE late John Buchan loved nature, his country, and his people beyond all else, unless the exception was his fishing-rod. He has written in this volume, correctly termed an "essay in recollection," his memories of these great loves. It is needless to say that it has all the charm, the moving quality, that one had a right to expect of his gifted pen which ventured into so many fields; one could speak of its preciousness if the word did not exclude the robustness and manliness of the book and the man. Here are true and touching pictures of Scotland, England, South Africa, and the United States, made possible by an affection which verged on adoration. His was the seeing eye to which the outdoor world was revealed from earliest childhood. The mere sudden sight of a wood—enclosed meadow or pasture thrilled him to his depth, whether he stumbled on it in the high hills of Switzerland, on a Vermont hillside, or in a Canadian fastness. And that sight always remained with him; added to innumerable others it became a living part of him to be drawn on at need at all times for spiritual refreshment.

Like so many other English writer-statesmen he lived with the birds of his time and they came to mean so much to him that when their songs died away he felt alone and afraid. His service in Parliament was, he says, largely barren; he never was at ease there. But of one thing he was proud: he wrote and had passed a bill to prevent the sale of English song-birds! To these feathered friends of his life he was ever true, as true as to the hills, the dells, the rivers, the brooks, and rills of his Border country. Well may it set a monument to him.

As for his human friends, this is not merely an essay in recollection; here are portraits, appreciations, and tributes of affection of the highest rank. I know of none other to surpass his moving sketch of Raymond Asquith, to whom he gives eleven pages, and of those others he loved, including a brother who fell in the war that was the greatest failure in all history. Occasionally he says of them, as of that brother, that they were "made for the war," made to end spiritually in that struggle. Withal he is extremely mod-

est—as all through his book—as to these cameo-like modellings of the lives that he shared with such deep intimacy. Of T. E. Lawrence Buchan writes "there is no brush fine enough to catch the subtleties of his mind, no aerial view point high enough to bring into one picture the manifold of his character." Yet I have found no other painting of this amazing genius so full and satisfying as Buchan's; indeed his is the only explanation of the contradictions of that life that really explains it to me. Surely no finer tribute to Lawrence will ever be penned than this one. He feels that Lawrence was "a great writer who never quite wrote a great book." And he says

I am not a very tractable person or much of a hero worshipper, but I could have followed Lawrence over the edge of the world. I loved him for himself, and also because there seemed to be reborn in him all the lost friends of my youth. If genius be in Emerson's phrase, "a stellar and undiminshable something," whose origin is a mystery and whose essence cannot be defined, then he was the only man of genius I have ever known.

Exquisite as this book is, the reader will look in vain for a deep philosophy or for spiritual manna to help carry one through these terrible times. Lord Tweedsmuir had an enlightened vision of a post-bellum British Empire which he shared with Lawrence, as a voluntary association, with treaty states on a big scale attached to it. He thought the dictators had already served the democracies by awakening them to the value of what they might lose and the

true values of life. He rightly feared "decivilization" which is civilization gone rotten. He bewailed our inability to find the geniuses that exist and place them where they could serve and lead. He profoundly feared the shrinking of opportunities for young men. He held deeply to his religious faith, being of Blake's all too true view: "Man must and will have some religion; if he has not the religion of Jesus he will have the religion of Satan, and will erect a synagogue of Satan."

Buchan was obviously a man's man. No woman appears on these pages save the wife to whom his devotion was complete. He carried on well the noble British tradition that men of letters should or could have also public service careers, thus leading a doubly rich life. But one wonders whether he was not of the last of his species; whether any such bookish civil servant, surrounded by all the great English traditions and the rare embellishments of this double life, can possibly survive the war for Britain. If that wonder is correct all the more valuable is this essay in recollection which is history as well as art, and the record of a moving, sympathetic pilgrimage through a most happy life. How keen and faithful and rarely stocked Buchan's memory was appears on every page in a wealth of quotation invariably apt; innumerable evidences of extraordinary erudition make one wonder again how any human being leading as full and active a life could absorb so much and give forth so many books to win him lasting acclaim.



The Scottish Lowlands