

# John D. and His Era

**JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER:** *The Heroic Age of American Enterprise.* By Allan Nevins. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1940. 2 volumes. 1430 pages, with index. \$7.50.

Reviewed by NORMAN COUSINS

THE favorable reception this biography is almost certain to be accorded may be a reflection of the national willingness to forgive or forget or both. If it had appeared a quarter of a century ago—or even fifteen years ago—it might have been called “inspired whitewashing” at worst, or “warmly sympathetic” at best. Standard Oil in those days stood about as high in public favor as the Kaiser, and anyone who said anything kindly about Mr. Rockefeller was thought to be in his pay or in his family. But 1940 has its own assortment of arch villains, and people have all they can do to spread their hates and dislikes over a wide current field of rogues without going back to history for more.

In a sense, then, time has collaborated with Mr. Nevins in this book. Both of them have produced a far more commendable figure than would have been thought possible only a few years back. Allan Nevins, in writing this amplitudinous two-volume life story of John D. Rockefeller, has, in effect, submitted for the consideration of posterity a vastly more eminent, more likeable, more scrupulous person than had been painted for us by the Tarbells and the Flynns. This is not to say that Mr. Nevins's paint is allwhite, any more than the Tarbell's and the Flynn's is allblack. But he has found enough in his five-year study to soften the prominence of the dark colors, and to give greater play to the light; the resulting portrait, though interesting and even convincing in the main, still seems a little rough along the edges.

Mr. Nevins suggests, for example, that while “some of his methods were open to criticism, Rockefeller *had to use the weapons and implements of his time.*” (Italics ours.) There is no intimation that these weapons and implements had to be invented before they could be used, or that Mr. Rockefeller's ingenuity was turned toward the creation of devices as much as toward their use. Mr. Nevins thinks that any appraisal of Rockefeller's tactics should take into consideration the peculiar nature of the age in which he built his fortune—the “heroic age of American enterprise,” as he subtitles his book. It was an age in which a certain “laxity” in business ethics seemed inevita-

ble because of the rapid rate of the country's growth and the general free-for-all of a boom period. Whether this is a sufficiently extenuating circumstance to soften our attitude toward the introduction of reprehensible business practices, or the destruction of business rivals, is a point which the descendants of those business victims will be in an excellent position to judge. Similarly, the descendants of the Colorado coal-miners killed in 1914 when guardsmen fired into tents sheltering strikers's families might wonder at the elasticity in the word “laxity.” In regard to this particular instance, Mr. Nevins points out that John D. Rockefeller owned only a part interest in the mine, although the manager of the mine, who was later replaced, is quoted as saying he had a “perfect understanding” with Mr. Rockefeller on labor policy.

Labor relations as an aspect of the history of Standard Oil receives comparatively little attention in this study, although there was an opportunity for Mr. Nevins, in discussing Rockefeller's theory that industrial organization of capital was the best and quickest way to make money, to point out that efforts by labor to adopt the same type of organization for its own problems was paradoxically rebuffed by Mr. Rockefeller as not in keeping with its own interest.

Concerning rebate contracts, which stirred so much public feeling before the turn of the century, Mr. Nevins concludes they were “deplorable,” adding that the “massacre” of the independent refineries had “indefensible features.” “To have been ultra-moral,” says Mr. Nevins, “would have invited catastrophe.” Elsewhere Mr. Nevins says that whatever we may think of Rockefeller's vision, he was true to it.

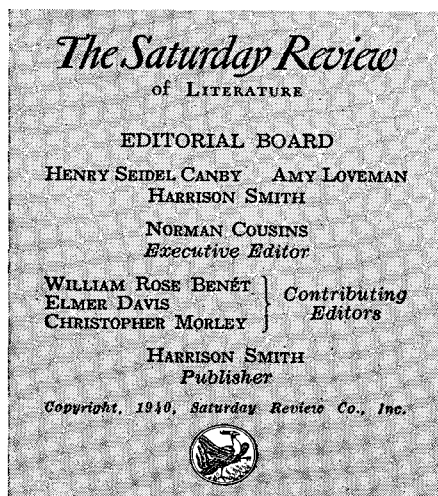
In evaluating this biography, it must be borne in mind that Mr. Nevins had access to an infinite amount of material heretofore kept under cover. Members of the Rockefeller family cooperated with him in supplying research materials and other data pertinent to his study. Though this is not a family biography in any sense of the term, the Rockefeller family approached Mr. Nevins through Nicholas Murray Butler, president of the Columbia University, some years ago and offered to turn over to him the family papers if he would undertake the biography. Mr. Nevins was selected over a wide field of biographers because it was felt that he would be best able to write a definitive, objective account. The task confronting Mr. Nevins was perhaps one of the most difficult any



American biographer has ever undertaken: he was asked to write the biography of a figure whose life-time embraced two-thirds the history of the United States, a figure whose activities ranged over an area so huge that just the chronological record would have filled dozens of library shelves, let alone two volumes. So that the finished biography represents an achievement in condensation and selection perhaps even greater than an achievement in construction.

For the magnificent detail going into this book, the skilled organization of material, the fascinating step-by-step development of Rockefeller's life story, the remarkable integration of the account of his life with the larger story of our own history—there can be only the highest praise. Mr. Nevins may or may not be a sympathetic biographer, but there is no question that the subject emerging from these pages is a sympathetic one. From the early history of the Rockefeller family in western New York in a town called, appropriately enough, Richford, through the days when Rockefeller enterprise reached its most torrential heights, to the death of John D. Rockefeller in 1937, the cumulative effect is strongly favorable. The central figure comes to life as a romantic but undramatic, enterprising but conservative, determined but retiring person who early in life said his burning ambition was for “achievement” and wealth. He inherited his enterprise and his ability to make contracts from his father, who, while shrewd in business dealings and a highly personable man, was responsible for most of the skeletons that have been rattling around in the family closets. William Avery Rockefeller was a medicine man—a “pitch” as he was called in those days—who would barnstorm the country on cancer-curing tours, dispensing quackery in large if not quali-

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## THE WRITER'S OPPORTUNITY

IT IS inevitable, if anomalous, that the more spectacular world affairs become, the more circumscribed becomes the interest of the observer in the nations that are making history. All our attention, our most passionate fears, our eagerest hopes, are centered on the tragic drama that is daily unfolding; we have no inclination for study of the Europe that lies behind the battle front, for the civilization that once to Americans was more stirring, and not as now more terrible, than an army with banners, that in Germany lies sick to death in the camp of the dictators, in Italy is become a mockery in the mouthings of a Virginio Gayda, in France is submerged in the bitterness of Nazi conquest. That it should have come to this catastrophic eclipse is to turn to wryness that nostalgic longing which every travelled American carried in his heart for the Old World and to blot from the imagination of the untravelled the prospect on which his fancy had fed. Once it was said, every good American, when he died, went to Paris. Today there are thousands upon thousands who so long as Germany holds it would never again willingly put foot in that city, while as for London, none of us, alas, will ever see that capital as the past has known it. But for all the living generations of Americans, something has been torn from life with the rise of authoritarian Europe beyond buildings and cities, beyond even political institutions,—an image, a romantic vision which forever lay on the horizon of monotonous existence, the embodiment of man's achievements throughout the ages.

It is frequently said today—we have touched on it often in these columns—that the creative writer is one of the most general casualties of the war. Events have overwhelmed him and made paltry the problems and relationships which are the stuff of his art. Being by the token of his calling a man of specially sensitive percep-

tions, he is also particularly vulnerable to the maladjustments of his world. The calamities he is daily called on to read of have discouraged as well as sickened him. He feels himself at an impasse with his art. Or, perhaps, it would be more correct to say that he has hitherto felt himself at an impasse with it. For as time goes on, one thing seems to be becoming clearer daily, and that is that the creative writer, by the very reason of his absorption in a world of sensitivity and psychological subtleties and underlying human relationships is dealing with the only universals which war cannot alter, and where understanding and compassion and good will still count as shaping forces. It is more constantly evident with each day that passes that what he has to give the world, his interpretation of things of the spirit, his portrayal of the human comedy, his attempt to effect a reconciliation with life, are of infinite need in fortifying society against the encompassing horror.

Men in the mass have made a shambles of humanity; man the individual is still a creature of reason and patience and good intention, tragic, to

be sure, in his lapses, but capable of rising to the heights. It is with the individual that the creative writer deals, and through him that he becomes the common agent of humanity. For the individual in every land is essentially the same, warped from the right though he may be by circumstance and suffering, led astray by vicious leadership, overwhelmed by defeat and despair. If ever, when war is over, and some day it must be over, the world is to come to better things, it will be because society arrives at a realization of the fact that the welfare of each of its members is the welfare of all of its members. And now while the war is still on, the creative writer can help that realization by taking up his pen again to depict men in their universal reactions to problems and situations. Let him denounce as he will the theories and policies, acts and personalities which all right-minded men abhor—and he will not be worth his salt if he does not—so long as he depicts the individual everywhere as he is. And if he does, that dream of Europe which is lost to us today may reappear in the morrow of peace with some of its brightness undimmed. A. L.

## Gentlemen, Be Abolished!

By Irwin Edman

The "Gentlemen" to be abolished:—

*Dr. Alfred Rosenberg in The Voelkischer Beobachter*

THE gentleman, when once we win  
Shall be abolished, says Berlin.  
The Reich could never tolerate  
Morals or manners in the state.  
Surely nothing could be clearer,  
Kindness ill becomes a Fuehrer,  
Courtesy cannot pass muster  
Where honor goes to brutes who bluster.  
Brave crude world where no soft arts  
Can speak to men with gentle hearts.  
A Nazi should do all he can  
Not to be thought a gentleman.  
He must, in an uncourtly way.  
Bomb, strangle, burn, destroy, betray.

In old decaying Europe when  
Men tried oft to be gentlemen,  
It was considered decent, quite,  
To be humane, at times polite;  
Honest sons and loyal mothers  
Thought—sometimes—of the rights of others.  
In England, vilely democratic,  
Men were so chivalro-erratic  
They listened even to the views  
Of laborites, cardinals and Jews.  
Men printed what they had a mind to,  
Found none too alien to be kind to.  
All that is over now, thank Hitler;  
We Nazis now are narrower, littler.  
No human standards stain our banners;  
And even less so truth or manners.