

# America in Guide Books<sup>\*</sup>

FREDERICK GUTHEIM

WITH the publication this fall of "Oklahoma," the last of the forty-eight states will have been covered by the American Guide Series. Since its inception in 1935, this monumental project has been the principal occupation of the WPA Federal Writers Project, and although it has produced more than 700 city and local guidebooks and other writings that for the most part have been by-products of this enterprise, the guide to the forty-eight states are the principal goal, the main achievement.

Oklahoma is a new state, almost without history as American states go, and with few outstanding points of interest, and it would not ordinarily seem a very promising subject for a guidebook. Yet the importance of Oklahoma in the scheme of things American is already undeniable, and the interest of its guide is a token of the most outstanding characteristic of these guides to our states: their interest in things living as well as things dead, their description of the important as well as the picturesque, their concern with the common man as well as the personages and the landscape of industry and agriculture as well as scars on the environment made by the rich. In this vast seven-foot shelf panorama of our land a lasting monument to the America we know has been created, one to which future generations may well turn as we now turn to the Doomsday book or the yellowed pages of "Niles's Register."

Travel in America is now almost the only possible kind of travel, and the appearance of the Guide Series is providential to Americans who have just begun to get acquainted with their own continental richness and variety. Although we have been a nation of travellers, our literature of topographic description has been meagre and even its

high points are almost unread. Timothy Dwight's four volume "Travels in New England and New York," of course, is really a guidebook and a grand one, too. Olmstead covered the Southern states in a fat and invaluable narrative. Clarence King wrote a description of the Sierras probably more lasting than some of the peaks of that young range. Audubon travelled more widely and loved the land better than almost any professional man of letters. But on the whole American writers have not been generous in describing their native land.

Perhaps it is well to recall that the beginning of the fight against the depression and the growing recognition of social evils in the fabric of our civilization coincided with the revival of interest in American things. It may not be too much to say that the American Guide Series (and the many other enticing series on the rivers, the sea-ports, the folk regions, and other aspects of America, which have followed it with scant thanks) all owe their inspiration to the early efforts of Brooks, Mencken, Bourne, Mumford, and the other critics who helped make us conscious and proud of our own strength, our own resources, our own achievements, and our own traditions. Like the writers, even American painters came back from Paris and began to paint the American scene before the devaluation of the dollar. This was an "American renaissance" in the

most important sense of the term.

This renaissance changed our values. It changed the things our writers and our artists saw, and the way they looked at those things. You see this in the Guide Series not so much in the volumes on Vermont, California, or Florida where there is a well established and well commercialized line of tourist interest, or in Virginia and Maryland where there is a strong historical tradition which determines the organization of the guides; you see it in Wisconsin, Missouri, or Kentucky, the newer states, the indeterminate states, the big, square states between the mountain ranges whose history is fresh, whose people face the future, and where you are more likely to find "the typical American." This renaissance has made it possible for a series of American guide books to be written in which the decorous description of the architecture of a Southern plantation appears on the same page with the analysis of a rural electrification coöperative, where the dulcimer is orchestrated with the juke-box. Old Karl Baedeker must be turning pinwheels in his grave!

There is certainly little of Baedeker in the American Guide Series. They are the guides for the motor age. Nearly half of each guide is composed of tours, not the thorough take-you-by-the hand expeditions among the ruins of antiquity of the continental guides, or the pensive descriptions of the picturesque that characterized

their predecessors, but the brisk, steady fifty mile an hour pace of the modern highway that gives it to you in short, meaty sentences and tenths of miles. Without the tours the guides would be mere collections of essays on various aspects of the states. The tours unite them to the great guidebooks of the past; they are the distinguishing characteristic.

I have travelled about fifteen thousand miles with the various Guides since they began to appear, and



From "Colorado: A Guide to the Highest State."

<sup>\*</sup>American Guide Series. Writers' Project of the Works Project Administration.

read substantial sections of every one of them, mostly at night in hotels and on my lap in automobiles and in trains. I will certify that travel with and without the Guides is like dentistry before and after the x-ray. Like the invention of the microscope, the unseen worlds of history, or personality, of fact, are brought into focus for the traveller. Behind the dreary store fronts and monotonous elm-lined mid-nineteenth century streets of small towns everywhere we see a new life.

In their general pattern the Guides are very similar. We get the condensed general information, telling us what to wear on a dude ranch or how to buy a fishing license, and a calendar of events during the year. The first main section of each guide is devoted to a collection of essays describing various aspects of the state. Varying from state to state, according to need, these essays deal generally with the geography, history, economic and social structure, and culture of the state. In some cases *expertise* runs away with an essay, and again the sense of the whole is sacrificed in the multiplicity of parts, but by and large these essays form invaluable introductions to the state as a whole and their separate subjects. The writers on geology and archaeology have done a sensationally fine piece of work, and much remarkable and original writing has been done in the difficult pioneering aspects of local culture and folklore. The second main section of each guide is organized by cities and towns, each being described as a whole, with particular reference to the points of interest. Excellent maps strengthen this presentation. The third main section of each volume guides the traveller up and down and across the state along carefully chosen routes. These may vary from the eight lane main highways along the edge of the Pacific to the sandy banks of Cape Hatteras, where the tour is plainly marked "For the Adventurous." In a final section one finds a chronology, where the historical scraps that have been gleaned in these fascinating pages are gathered together in orderly fashion, a bibliography for the still curious reader, and an index, altogether the weakest and least successful part of all the Guides.

The logic of this organization is transparent. First, the organizers of the American Guide Series seem to have said, the reader will sit quietly at home and read the essays. He will try to understand the district through which he proposes to travel; or perhaps he is simply trying to come to terms with a state with no idea of travelling. Then he may plan his trip. He can decide which cities he would like to visit, and the most interesting routes over which he might travel in order

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THE SATURDAY REVIEW OF LITERATURE, published weekly by the Saturday Review Company, Inc., 25 West 45th Street, New York, N. Y. Harrison Smith, President; James Nelson, Vice-President and Treasurer; Amy Loveman, Secretary; George Dilkes, Business Manager. Subscription, \$4 a year; \$4.50 in Canada; \$5 in other countries. At least 3 weeks' notice required for changes of address; both old and new addresses must be given. Printed in U. S. A. Vol. XXIV, No. 8, June 14, 1941. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. THE SATURDAY REVIEW is indexed in the "Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature."

to get from place to place. He can also determine the best season of year for his holiday, the price of admission to parks and historie houses, or where he can rent a canoe. Then he will set out on his travels, referring to the guide as he wishes to refresh his memory, but leaving it, for the most part in the glove pocket of his car, or on that convenient shelf streamlining has bequeathed us behind the rear seat. This is a guide for the motor age, not a flabby unreadable book on bible paper to stuff in one's pocket and con when one should be soaking up the real thing.

Perhaps this is not the way you want to use a Guidebook. To that the only reply is that it would be worth your while to try it once and watch the results. You will have some reflections on the difference between travel in a compact history-ridden European country, and travel in the windy continental stretches of a still young America, the difference between eight miles an hour on a bicycle and fifty miles an hour in a V-8. When I first began using the Guides I thought I ought to have a caddy; now I am convinced they are the Guides of Tomorrow.

The literary genre of guidebooks has more in common with art criticism than literary criticism. Essentially guides explain something you see, a physical fact rather than an idea or a state of mind. On the whole, guides are less concerned with people and personalities than with sticks and stones. Give a guide book writer a house where—to quote the Virginia guide—"that most famous overnight guest" slept, and he should be in his element. Give him a piece of local history and he is usually at a loss unless he can button it down to the very spot where it happened. This "X marks the spot" philosophy is the hall-mark of every guidebook. When I think of the number of times an event has been buttoned to a specific place for the first time it makes my editorial head reel. That certainly is one thing that the historian should be grateful for—although as the late Joseph Schafer's begrudging introduction to the Wisconsin Guide shows, the professional snobbery of the historian prevents its recognition now.

A bookworm on this shelf is in a quandary. When I began this article I collected orderly notes on utopias, screwy houses, eccentrics, inventions, odd crops, American ruins, crazy sculpture, names of towns, Indian massacres, White massacres, believe-it-or-nots, and several dozen other promising topics for a reviewer to write about. After a while I threw them all away. For while I am interested in Washington, Arkansas, where the bowie knives of legendary keenness were first



made, and that delectable and extraordinary chef, Louis de Puy, proprietor of the Hotel de Paris, in Georgetown, Colorado, this does not seem the essential subject matter of the guides. There is plenty of tourists' allspice in these books, but it is embedded in the marl of history, census statistics, geology, names, and dates, as it should be. The tall tales of Sergeant O'Keefe, the signal officer who described the volcanic eruption of Pike's Peak, or Will Rice, of St. Joe, Arkansas, in his weekly syndicated column, bring the books to life, but it's the hardness that makes the diamond, not the glitter. Dan Scullen, the Iowa locomotive engineer who used to cook his corn by stuffing two ears in the steam whistle of his engine, and S. P. Dinsmoor, the concrete artist who fashioned a concrete log cabin, scores of concrete figures, and a concrete coffin for himself near Lucas, Kansas, belong in the recognizable frame of ingenious frontiersmen. You will find a lot like them, sandwiched in between the merely curious, that underline the great traditions of the national character or provide the tiny facts that prick the tragic generalizations of our historians.

Reading the guides you get some strange and eerie feelings, and you find yourself with that same sense of contradiction you often feel in a laboratory or wherever else you run into masses of raw facts. This is not the well selected, carefully sculptured mosaic of formal history or geographical description: it is the profuse disorder of nature and life, the dadaist jumble of the daily newspaper. It gets in your blood and sends you crowing from oddity to anecdote, from curiosity to the dazzling illumination of a single fact. Aldous Huxley once wrote a fine justi-



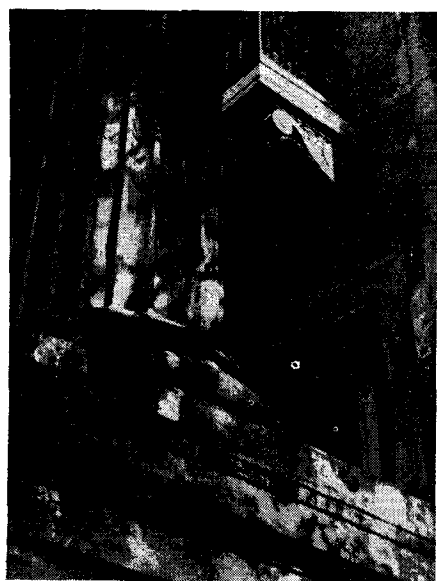
Etching by F. Townsend Morgan, from "Key West Guide."  
Thompson's Dock, Key West.

fication for a single volume of the encyclopedia as the ideal literature to read while travelling: the Guides have some of that haphazard charm. You read, for example, about the town of Oberlin, Kansas, that awoke one morning in February, 1909, to find itself buried in Russian thistles, one house twenty feet deep before the wind shifted. Or you learn that the highest post office in the United States distinguishes Climax, Colorado (11,320 ft.). What patient prying dug this up?

These books are guides to the real America, not the tourist America. The tourist America is there all right, the famous gardens of the Carolina low country, the fishing camps of northern Minnesota and Michigan, Natchez and the French Quarter of New Orleans, Monterey and the Torrey Pines, the plantations along the James—sometimes a little roughly handled, but there in all their real or tinselled glory. But here is the rest of America, the towns and counties we live in and pass through on the quickest, shortest trip. What of that America? It assumes a strange and unexpected aspect in the guides: take Elizabethtown, Kentucky. What does the writer see in this country town (pop. 2590)? There is a pat description of the town plan and its general appearance, with a note on economic and social life. The founding in 1780 is sketched and we learn that the town was named after the founder's wife. A picturesque anecdote from the early life of the community and a Civil War incident are followed by two meaty paragraphs of Lincolniana. In 1806, the town had twenty-two lawyers, five of whom attained national prominence. Two paragraphs devoted to the Helm family, closely connected with Lincoln's life, close the sketch. Details are given

of the Lincoln room in the Court House, and the house where General Custer wrote "My Life on the Plains" is indicated with an apt characterization thrown in for good measure. All this in a little more than two pages. That gives some idea of the compressed writing of the better guides and the degree to which they can make convincing three-dimensional stage sets out of two-dimensional store fronts in a country town.

A similar quality characterizes many of the essays. That on Wisconsin architecture explains silos and round barns as well as the set pieces in the state's building chronicles. The essay on Literature in the Arkansas guide does not scorn to quote that classic of American rhetoric "Change the Name of Arkansas." Folksy as a colored post card in places, the whole picture generally comes through. There is an effort to tell the truth that a lot of books about places and people lack. If the fascinating Utah guide soft pedals the necessitous glee with which the Mormons gouged travellers scurrying to the California gold strikes, Arkansas can quote the disappointed settler who took one look at a corner of the state and remarked "Arkansas is not part of the world for which Jesus Christ died—I want none of it!" Where the Chamber of Commerce point of view rears its inky head it is often handled with a dry skepticism, as in the account of Barbara Fritchie in the Maryland guide. The Writers' Project may have been politically driven to the water, but it only gargled. Most of the sacred cows in the stable are phonies, or else they are being fed sawdust. This between-the-lines approach works both ways,  
(Continued on page 15)



Mydams: FSA.

Bellegrave, on the Mississippi, near White Castle.  
—From "Louisiana State Guide"

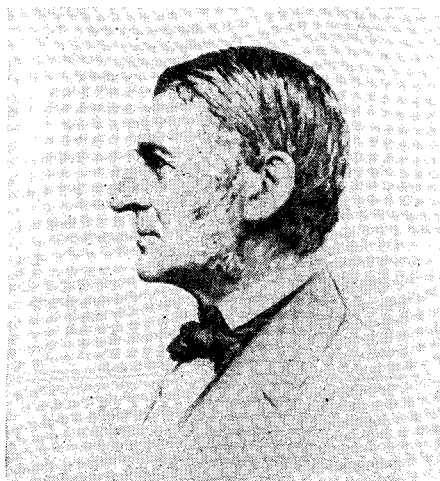
# Emerson & Co.

*AMERICAN RENAISSANCE. Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman. By F. O. Matthiessen. New York: Oxford University Press. 1941. 678 pp., with index. \$5.*

Reviewed by ROBERT E. SPILLER

THE appearance of another critical estimate of the literary great of our past century will be greeted with enthusiasm or alarm or weariness depending upon the mood of the reader. There is no shortage of such works. Separate biographies and criticisms of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman line our library shelves; and syntheses of the facts and theories which surround their works have been many, from Mumford's "The Golden Day" to Brooks's "The Flowering of New England." The reasons for another such study, especially for one of more than six hundred pages, must be convincing.

The chief reasons are two, a need and its answer, and together they are extremely convincing. In an era of crisis, a people naturally turns to its historians and critics and prophets for reassurance of its faith in its own destiny. Mr. Matthiessen combines some of the characteristics of all three types of leader. He knows and has meditated long and profoundly on the literary history of America and its antecedents in western European culture; he has developed his own technique of literary criticism under the best of contemporary masters, Brooks, Eliot, Lowes, and many others; and because he is ultimately concerned with values rather than with mere facts, the robe of the prophet falls upon his shoulders whether he will or not. The result is perhaps the most profound work of literary criticism on historical principles by any modern American with the possible exception of Lowes's "Road to Xanadu."

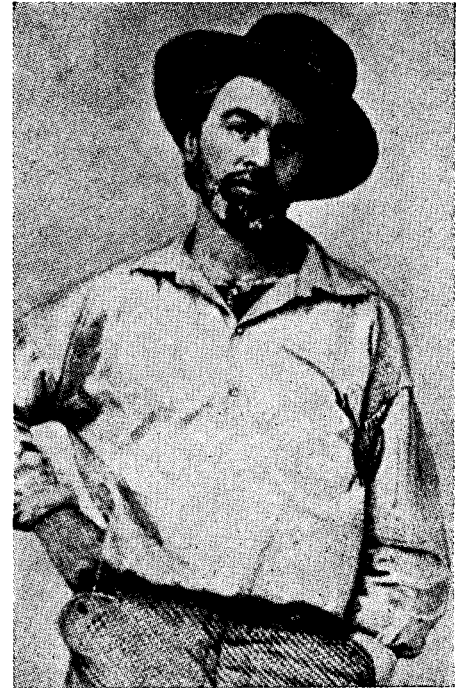


Ralph Waldo Emerson

The association of the titles of these two books here is not an accident. The training and equipment of the two authors is similar in kind and degree, the problems with which they deal both arise from Coleridge's organic theory of the imagination, and the methods of their criticisms are kindred. The subjects alone are markedly different. Both books are evidences of what happens when long hours of research of the traditional objective sort are fused and ignited by the critical imagination. It seems strange that Mr. Matthiessen, in acknowledging so frankly his indebtednesses, has not mentioned this work of his colleague.

"American Renaissance" is a book with a thesis supported by an overwhelming mass of selected and interpreted evidence. But because its author keeps his thesis malleable and carefully avoids dogmatism, it would not be fair to tie it down to a single statement. Brooks, Mumford, and others have pointed out that American culture in some mysterious way flowered during the short period 1850-55, mainly though not exclusively in New England. Mr. Matthiessen sets himself the task of analyzing the nature of that flowering by a close examination of the works of five major authors who during that period issued a part of their most profound and characteristic work. He establishes two chief poles of reference: Coleridge's "Aids to Reflection," the American edition of which appeared in 1829, and T. S. Eliot's "Selected Essays, 1917-1932," perhaps the most influential of contemporary literary criticisms. Looking forward from Coleridge, he traces the direct impact of the organic theory on Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, and its derivative effect in the development of a theory of tragedy by Hawthorne and Melville. Looking backward from Eliot, he sees his American Renaissance in the light of the metaphysical poetry of the seventeenth century and its antecedents in Shakespeare and the Elizabethans. From these two poles, his lines of critical investigation move, in terms of dominant themes, inward to a detailed analysis of a dozen or more books by five American authors, in themselves and in relationship to each other, their authors, and their backgrounds, and outward to the limits of cultural history from ancient Greece to modern America.

There is no single conclusion that can be drawn from this mass of evidence, much of it subjective, and its critical synthesis and interpretation. The scholar may be most impressed by the first ambitious application of



Walt Whitman

a current theory of historical criticism, the specialist by the new knowledge of the writings of one or more of the authors concerned. For example, this is the first full and accurate record of the friendship between Hawthorne and Melville, and corrects, by an examination of Melville's markings in his own copies of Hawthorne's books, the erroneous impressions left by Mumford's treatment of the problem.

For the reader who is not concerned with such technical questions, however, the book presents at least one important lesson: that even in our short century and a half of national existence, we have created a native myth of the democratic man, capable of all the range of experience of truth and error, good and evil, of the traditional heroic man, and that American literature has at least once explored and expressed the eternal verities of that myth. In a time of crisis this is the sort of assurance that we need.

## SOLUTION OF LAST WEEK'S DOUBLE-CROSTIC (No. 376)

TRUMBULL:

### PROGRESS OF DULNESS

Ye parents, . . . . .  
Say, can ye think that forms so  
fine  
Were made for nothing but to  
shine,  
With lips of rose and cheeks of  
cherry  
Outdo the works of statuary?  
. . . . .  
Can female sense no trophies raise?  
Are dress and beauty all their  
praise?