

What Is an American?

THE AMERICAN: The Making of a New Man. By James Truslow Adams. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1943. 385 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by WILLIAM S. LYNCH

THE nature and character of the American have never ceased to fascinate both native and foreign historians. Crèvecoeur, a Frenchman in America, at the end of the Revolution, in his "Letters from an American Farmer," first posed the famous question, "What then is the American, this new man?" Since then, distinguished observers from Alexis de Tocqueville to Arthur Schlesinger have sought an answer. Now James Truslow Adams, author of the famous "Epic" and former Pulitzer Prize winner, picks up Crèvecoeur's phrase and essays his answer in a book which he subtitles "The Making of a New Man." "For my own interest I wanted to discover, if possible, what geographic, historical, and social forces have made the American different from the citizen of any other nation."

To discover these forces he re-examines the evolutionary sequence of events that comprise American history. He decries the intention of writing another history of America, but since his approach is that of the historian, in the nature of things he does do just that. His first Americans were the Englishmen who passed through the entrance of Chesapeake Bay on May 6, 1607, in three little vessels. They were the forerunners of the bulk of arrivals to these shores before 1700. They made the English language, law, and traditions the accepted ones in America. Despite the large number of Swedes, Dutch, and other nationals who came in the pre-Revolutionary period, he sees in the English, Germans, Scotch-Irish, and Negroes the main streams of immigrant influences that were to form the part of our national character which evolved then. Tracing immigrant influences into the post-Revolutionary phase of our history, he adds the Celtic Irish and the Germans of '48.

These are the peoples who were to intermingle and to form the New Man. On them and on the ideas they "carried in their knapsacks" the geographical environment of the new continent and the historic events of three centuries were to act to produce the American character, a character that could never be static, that always has been changing, and that always will change. This thought, however, is not followed to its logical conclusion for the author almost ignores the period since 1890, that key date which is gen-

erally recognized as the one for the closing of the Frontier. Why he should stop his analysis at that point is hard to understand. The reason implied in his remark that "... we are now within the range of events which are part of the memory and emotional life of the older generation" cannot be accepted as satisfactory justification for the omission of the last half century. The most casual acquaintance with recent history offers convincing evidence that very radical and far-reaching forces have been brought to bear on the nature and character of the American. This significant omission, together with a number of personal emphases, may cause some readers to suspect that Mr. Adams has a definite political bias and that at times he is grinding an axe. They will be left, therefore, with a sense of incompleteness and frustration.

But within the limits of Mr. Adams's terminal points there emerges the always fascinating picture of the unchanging American, varying from era to era and from section to section—an ingenious Yankee scrabbling to make a living from a rocky farm, an expansive planter living in lordly fashion on a great estate, a Mississippi boatman, "half-horse, half-alligator, with a cross of the wild-cat." These and hundreds of others as different and as diverse were alike in being American. That one common feature has always been easy to recognize but almost impossible to define. Each race, each section, each period has contributed to it, and in turn has been affected by it.

In an epilogue the author summarizes the various characteristics which he has found in his analysis of the development of the American.



—Harris and Ewins

James Truslow Adams

Most of the ones he enumerates have been pointed out by other observers, sometimes harshly, as by Dickens and Mrs. Trollope, sometimes sympathetically. The informed reader will recognize the familiar allegations that Americans have long been joiners, that they distrust foreigners, that they are versatile, restless, prodigal, and cocky, that they love a good joke, especially when it is their own. Mr. Adams's explanations of why some of these traits have become natural attributes of Americans are of interest. The lack of companionship that marked the lives of so many isolated settlers in the great trek Westward, for example, accounts for the gregariousness, the hospitality, and generosity which we identify as American. The position of women, by tradition pampered and placed on a pedestal, was the result of the old law of supply and demand operating first in primitive communities where the number of men was more often than not far in excess of the number of women. More striking are the qualifications on the influence of the frontier which historians since Frederick Jackson Turner have tended to exaggerate, Mr. Adams infers. So, too, he feels that Americans in how-ever radical a mood are always conservatives in times of constitutional crisis.

The complexity of Americans makes it hard and dangerous to generalize too far about common traits. But that complexity is never lost sight of. "... we have to set, for example, David Harum opposite Colonel Carter of Cartersville, and so on through an almost endless list of antitheses which could be made up from thumbing the pages of the twenty volumes of the 'Dictionary of American Biography.'"

On the whole, the book is disappointing. It is adequate and competent; but coming from an author whose ability to produce brilliant historical prose has been proved, that is not enough. Some day this theme will inspire a great historical study; some day there will be a book with the vivid eloquence of a Mark Twain discussing "Life on the Mississippi" and the rich scholarship of a Constance Rourke revealing the American humor. But this one is not it. This one belongs on a different shelf from Mr. Adams's "Epic of America" or his "Founding of New England."

Sholem Asch's "The Apostle: A Novel Based on the Life of St. Paul," has been chosen as an October selection of the Trade Book Clinic of the American Institute of Graphic Arts. The monthly selections are made on the basis of typography and general format.

The Season's Poetry

Same Old Favorite Among the New Titles

WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

THE books before me range all the way from the collected poems of Henry Thoreau, and the last brief book of the late Arthur Guiterman, to the latest long poem of Delmore Schwartz and "Cloth of the Tempest," by Kenneth Patchen, that distinctly wild and woolly modernist of escape. There is verse here of all kinds, to suit all tastes. There is some with which the present reviewer is in temperamental accord, and which suits his canons of taste and literary virtue, and there is some that strays quite far beyond his understanding. If you ask me to be perfectly frank, I will say that one single book here present has afforded me as much genuine pleasure as a number of others which obviously make good far greater claims to being poetry. This is a new edition of a book now a quarter of a century old, called "the lives and times of archy and mehitabel," by the late don marquis. george herriman's inimitable drawings for it enhance its value. It is a beautiful new little pocket book, and its cat and cockroach are immortal. Let me get that cleared up in advance. Now to go on to Poetry.

To begin with the writer most eminent, it was a good idea to bring out a definitive edition of "every available piece of verse that Henry Thoreau composed." Thoreau was a great man, though very far from being a great poet. Yet "Light-winged smoke, Icarian bird" is no mean poem; and the poem on "That Phaeton of Our Day," ending,

Who let him have the steeds he cannot steer?
Henceforth the sun will not shine for a year;
And we shall Ethiops all appear

is apt. Quirkily aphoristic is much of the rest, at its best in "Low-Anchored Cloud." Thoreau lovers take note!

Two fine men, and good poets, are gone in Will Percy and Arthur Guiterman. The leanings of William Alexander Percy were classically pagan to the end, but his verse also gained in sinew. His longer poems were well written, yet are to me hard reading. Of his monologues I like most "An Epistle from Corinth" and "A Letter from John Keats to Fanny Brawne." But occasionally Percy could write as fresh and pure a lyric as one would have. "A Ballad of St. Sebastien" is fine in an elder manner, and "The

Farm Again" reflects movingly his distinguished battle service in the last war. "In the Cold Bright Wind" is a really enchanted poem about Merlin. But really my favorite of all is—and has been for years—the lyric "The Unloved to His Beloved." It seems to me one that can stand for pure beauty with some of Poe's.

Could I pluck down Aldebaran
And haze the Pleiads in your hair
I could not add more burning to your beauty
Or lend a starrier coldness to your air.

If I were cleaving terrible waters
With death ahead on the visible sands
I could not turn and stretch my hands more wildly,
More vainly turn and stretch to you my hands.

Henry Van Dyke once spoke of Arthur Guiterman as "a first-rate popular poet." That is what he was; and I am glad he was popular, for he wrote good verse. He was never slipshod. He could pen as witty verse as any and he could do good ballads. Eleanor Graham has written an excellent introduction for his last book. He died bravely. He had lived with great enthusiasm and joy.

He wrote as good an epitaph as any could write for him. It is like something from the Greek Anthology:

Friends whom I loved to name,
Know, should you mourn for me,
I, that was not, became;
I, that am not, shall be.



Delmore Schwartz

It's good to have this final volume, full of things as pleasing as:

The skeleton is hiding in the closet as it should,
The needle's in the haystack and the trees are in the wood,
The fly is in the ointment and the froth is on the beer,
The bee is in the bonnet and the flea is in the ear.

I think that for generations his book will give pleasure to the many.

There's an English poet now first published here of whose verse in *Punch* I am reminded by Arthur's best. For Helen Parry Eden has long contributed to *Punch*, and is a fine craftsman. She is a Catholic poet whose "Bread and Circuses" and "Coal and Candlelight" came out at the time of the last Great War. She wrote delectably then of her small daughter, Betsey-Jane. She is also a poet of more serious verse who has an assured touch. Now her "Poems and Verses," published in this country, as was her "Whistles of Silver," can be heartily recommended to all who prize the genuinely rare. Particularly in this day will the beauty and humor of her integrated and adroit verse bring consolation and courage to mothers wherever they be. Her poetry has great variety. I shall quote the sestet of a sonnet that properly celebrates the art of cookery:

Then I who spend my life with casseroles
And copper, I whose incense, heaven-spiced,
Climbs from the lowliest altar's clear-blown coals
In simmering *pot-au-feu* and new-baked bread,
Shall, like a Greek or Roman victor, wear
Parsley or bay-leaves in my tireless hair.

Seldom has so fine a religious poet written also with so keen and humorous an eye for the Everyday.



Kenneth Fearing