

Struthers Burt on the Founding Fathers

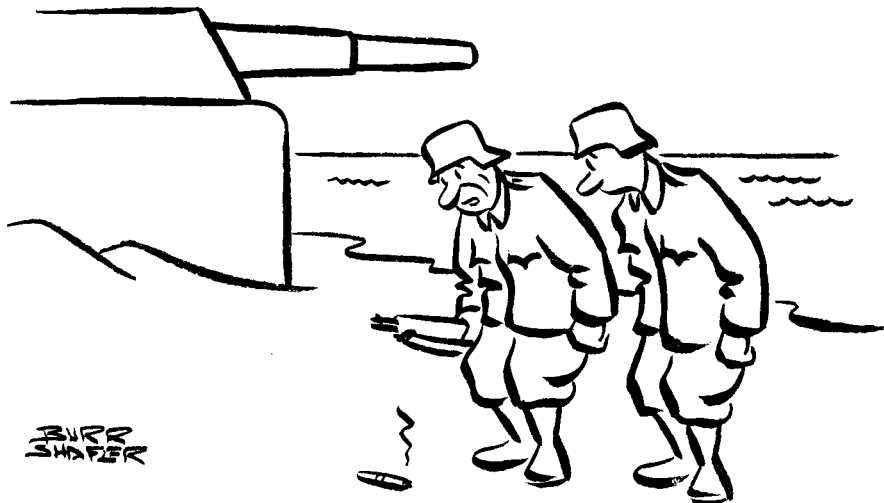
SIR: By their nature Americans are the most interesting historians in the world; by their nature, they are the most inaccurate. Because of his temperament, and perhaps the climate, practically every American when he sets out to write history, or a biography, or the fictionalized form of these, unconsciously or otherwise, adopts a thesis, and sticks to it through thick and thin. Even as scholarly a historian as Charles Beard does this.

The result is interest, if not always the truth, and so far as I am concerned, being an American, and therefore loving excitement and controversy, I am all in favor of history or biography with a thesis. It was James Truslow Adams, wasn't it, who said that "objective history was merely history without an object." So this is no attack upon the historian who has opinions. To hell with scholarship, and there aren't any real facts, anyway. But it is, as a rule, better to base one's opinions, right or wrong, upon a degree of intimate research.

A few years ago, and before Pearl Harbor, when it was still possible to convince certain otherwise fairly sane Americans that democracy didn't amount to much, and that the "mastermind of Italy" was "at least running trains on time," and that his partner in Germany had at least "abolished all labor troubles," there was a spate of novels, histories, and brochures proving that the Founding Fathers were pretty low-class, feckless fellows who didn't know much what they were doing, that Washington's army was indeed a rabble in arms, cowardly and shifty, and that practically every respectable man or woman in the Colonies was a Loyalist.

Times change. Exactly the same arguments are being used today, but the premises are diametrically opposed. Now you say that the Founding Fathers were pretty low-class, feckless fellows, that Washington's army was indeed a rabble in arms, and that practically every respectable man or woman on the Colonies was a loyalist, but you say it to prove that in all crises everyone who owns any property at all, or who washes his face, is by nature a traitor and a timid fool.

This latter premise appeals to me, for undoubtedly it is true that in the face of danger, political, social, or economic, or even of milder change, a certain number of the well-to-do—too many—are unbelievably stupid and wrong-headed, with the inevitable result that sooner or later they get their heads cut off, actually or symbolically. But it is equally true that no great advance has ever taken place unless formulated, led, and partly manned by the brothers, sons, or even fathers



"Himmel! Churchill's brand!"

of the very recusants we are talking about.

It is true that during the American Revolution opinion in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia was divided, unlike the South, where it was heavily patriotic. It is true that in Philadelphia was the added element of Quaker pacifism and caution, although there was also the magnificent element of the "Fighting Quakers." It is true, many Loyalist families left New York, Boston, and Philadelphia when the British evacuated those cities—3,000 Loyalists of all ages, both sexes, and all conditions of life, from Philadelphia alone. But all this recently has been grossly exaggerated, and usually to prove preconceived notions and to strengthen, on one side or the other, prejudices. For every De Lancey in New York there was a Morris or Livingston or Schuyler; for every Galloway or Bouché in Philadelphia, there was a Morris, a Franklin, a McLane, or a Clymer. Nor was the division a social one by any manner of means. Patriots and Loyalists were to be found in every class. Nor was the immigration of Loyalists from this country to Canada or the West Indies anywhere near as great as is now often stated and imagined. Many Loyalist families remained just where they were, unharmed and respected. It depended largely upon how they had behaved.

The men who signed the Declaration of Independence were the leading men of the Colonies in every way; men of position, of education, and of race. Washington's army as a whole was staffed and led by men of exactly the same calibre. The First and Second Congresses had a higher level of education, intelligence, and place than any Congresses that have followed them. And these statements are not matters of opinion, but matters of fact and research. It is also true—to assail another fallacy—that the descendants

of these men, with very few exceptions, are still leading Americans, and have maintained, little changed, their position.

It is not good for a country, especially in times like these, to believe that it was founded by rascals, marplots, and the dispossessed.

This outburst is occasioned by the review of a novel, "Treason," by Robert Gessner, which appeared in your May 20 issue. I have not read "Treason," which has to do with the behavior of Benedict Arnold, and it may be, as a novel, a very good book indeed. I hope to read it. But as history, if one is to judge by what the reviewer says, it must be not only inaccurate but fairly disastrous.

I quote the first sentences of the last paragraph of the review:

Much of the story takes place in Philadelphia, the most notorious Loyalist center. In Boston and New York practically all the upper class opposed the war, but in Pennsylvania the majority of people of all classes from the beginning to the end of the struggle opposed independence. . . .

With all due respect to Mr. Cordell, the reviewer, seldom in my life have I read such nonsense, and such dangerous nonsense at that. Every adjective he uses is untrue. To begin with, and very naturally, practically all Americans of any wisdom or goodwill hoped, if possible, to right their wrongs without recourse to actual revolution or entire separation from the mother country, and such Americans included Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Robert Morris, and John Adams. And why not? America did not begin in 1775. It was a century and a half old, a matter of six generations, when the First Provisional Congress met. George Washington's great-grandfather was the first American Washington, and Washington himself was a man of great position, great

power, and large property, and a mature man as well. And so were most of the leaders of the American Revolution. Unless you realize that, you cannot assess properly the courage and audacity of what happened. Nor can you achieve a decent or proper pride in your country.

I think this is very important psychologically, and I feel it at the moment more deeply historically, perhaps, than most, because for the last two years, much against my will, I have been engaged upon research having to do with the history of Philadelphia for a book just completed.

STRUTHERS BURT.

Southern Pines, N. C.

"The Illiteracy of Educators"

SIR: Mr. Philip Wylie's attack on the "intellectuo-liberals" in the "Strictly Personal" column recently instituted by the *Review* calls for an answer and a sharp one. Mr. Wylie in his spirited defense of the advertising boys in Washington, who long ago took over and killed the O.W.I.'s domestic branch, seems to feel it necessary to kick a long-dead corpse.

The original domestic branch of the O.W.I. was a gallant group of progressive Americans who were more interested in achieving democracy in this country than in turning out slogans like "Cut Logs—For Cash and Country." This courageous group of "intellectuo-liberals" actually had the effrontery to wish to dramatize for the people by large circulation pamphlet and poster publications the ideals on which our government is founded. Mr. Wylie castigates this group as "dreamers." Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and William James—thoughtful men who probably had no idea how to write Mr. Wylie's "corny wonderful ads"—were intellectual dreamers, too.

But there is something more serious here than meets the eye. When Mr. Wylie classes idealists and isolationists together as dreamers, he is using double-talk reminiscent of the most vicious reactionary political line used in this country. He is talking, whether he means to or not, like a Scripps-Howard editorial. He is attacking the liberals of the O.W.I. for psychological blunders when their every move was checkmated by the very advertising men whom Mr. Wylie seems to represent.

And now Mr. Wylie has the nerve to call it a "mixed-up war" and blame it on the defeated liberals. Advertising has taken over. We hear no more of the Four Freedoms. The "strong drink" we get now is being paid for by generous advertisers, who, with no products to sell, are having their kept men write reactionary copy, which (final irony!) the Government pays for. For this Mr. Wylie feels they should be congratulated.

Mr. Wylie, I am afraid, makes noises like an advertising man, and hides behind nice, sonorous words like freedom and dignity—but apparently he

advocates freedom of enterprise and the dignity of the corn-loving businessman.

Is this the same Mr. Wylie who wrote such a commendable piece on anti-semitism? He has thrown some of the dust into his own eyes. For shame, Mr. Wylie! Cornucopia!

BERNARD B. PERRY.

Tuckahoe, N. Y.

"What Has Become of the Limerick?"

SIR: Inspired by Carl Rider's excellent article on "What Has Become of the Limerick?," we are offering a small prize of ten dollars for the best limerick on Mark Twain the man, or his work, or both combined. The judges will be James Thurber, Frank Sullivan, and Clement Wood. All limericks must reach us by August first.

CYRIL CLEMENS.

Webster Groves, Mo.

Still "Little Willie"

SIR:

Little Izzy Izzenheimer
Thought he'd be a steeple climber
One day while climbing up a steeple
Fell to the ground, 'fore all those people.

Wasn't that the nicest game?
He broke the e-r off his name
Yes, father got there just in time
To pick up Izzy Izzenheim.

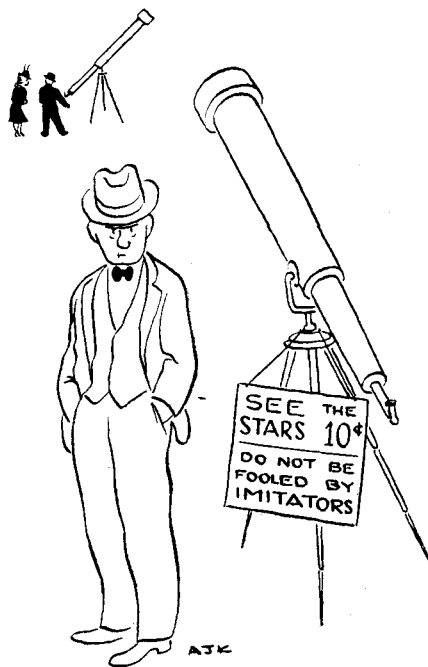
I think I should add here that I am only a twelve year old boy, but just the same, I read *SRL* and like it very much.

TONY ASTRACHAN.

Brooklyn, N. Y.

"The Most Beautiful Words"

SIR: In Bennett Cerf's column a few weeks ago I saw several lists of "the most beautiful words" in the English language. It reminded me of a list of the Ten Most Beautiful Words in the English Language which Wilfred Funk prepared and gave to the AP one dull day about twelve years ago. The list



appeared in the Sunday papers. That afternoon my assignment was to call up or visit various literary personages and get their opinions of the list—I don't remember what the ten words were.

By telephone I got hold of such people as Fannie Hurst (she plugged "madonna"), Dorothy Parker, and Hendrik Willem Van Loon. Miss Parker said the loveliest word in the language was "cellar-door." Van Loon, to my surprise, chose the same hyphenated honey. I told him Miss Parker had beaten him to it. He swore he did not know her but thought he ought to, after that.

I was living at the time with John Lardner and his cousin, Dick Tobin. Through them I got in touch with Ring Lardner, who was then at No Visitors (Doctors Hospital). He made up a list of ten words himself, and they, of course, took the headlines and were printed all over the country. Two of them were Lardner lovesies, complete with definitions: Blute—a man who smokes but does not inhale; Crene—a man who inhales but does not smoke. He also chose McNaboe, the name of a well-known State Senator, and Hickman Powell, our Albany correspondent at the time, told me that McNaboe took such an unmerciful kidding (his colleagues sent him flowers, candy, perfume, etc.) that he flung himself across the bed in his hotel room and burst into tears.

The story taught me a lesson, however—one I never forgot. About a month later, at Christmas, a beautiful nurse appeared at the door of our apartment and handed us a great package of fruit, nuts, food, etc., from Ring. In the basket was a special gift for me—an envelope containing all the clippings which Romeike had turned up for him on the Ten Words story. On the envelope was written: "Sixty-six clippings at .10 a clipping, \$6.60." Thus gently was I reminded that my request for his help on a Sunday story was really an imposition. He subscribed to the clipping service because he had to—syndicated writers thus check up on where their stuff is printed. I had boosted his bill just to get a good story for myself. He didn't need the publicity and didn't want it. Others, of course, did it often—O. O. McIntyre, for instance (at ten cents for every appearance of his stick it was no fun), but I did not offend again.

THOMAS SUGRUE.

Clearwater Beach, Fla.

"The Literary Fallacy"

SIR: If you have room for just a line or two more on the wonderful DeVoto—Lewis controversy, you may care to print the quotation which irrepressible impertinence led me to send to Mr. DeVoto himself:

"The other answered with a grin, 'Why, what a temper you are in!'"

L. W. HOPKINSON.

Cambridge, Mass.

"Abe Martin"—Hoosier Sage

A Rail-Fence Philosopher and His Aphorisms

JO HUBBARD CHAMBERLIN

I FIRST met Kin Hubbard when I was four years old.

With my hair combed flat and wearing a Buster Brown suit, I was sitting with my father in the Bellefontaine, Ohio, Opera House, while my mother acted in a home talent show. Between newspaper jobs, Kin Hubbard produced local entertainments. On a stage he had built a huge "sausage machine" in which local people were pushed through huge cotton rollers and emerged later on as "re-made" individuals—amid the laughter of the audience.

I sat quietly, down front, until I saw my mother disappear into the machine. My tribute to Kin's dramatic realism was a terrific howl, and I refused to shut up until my harassed father took me back stage. There my mother, miraculously alive, dried away my tears.

Although Kin gained world fame as a newspaper humorist, he was first of all a showman. As a boy, he saved his money, and unlike Horatio Alger's heroes, he did not bank it. Instead, he bought himself a tambourine and a pair of "mirth provokers"—long, wide-dancing shoes. He practised by the hour to become *Mistah Bones* in a minstrel show.

In fact, Kin's entire life was a complete refutation of the Horatio Alger theme. He spent twenty years drifting from one job to another. All his life he loved to loaf around theatres, cigar stores, and livery stables, and he remarked admiringly: "Some folks can look so busy doin' nothin' that they seem indispensable." He finally won fame by writing two sentences a day. He turned down huge radio and stage offers; he knew what he could do best, and he wanted leisure to carry on his struggle against the weeds in his lawn.

The pleasant pay-off is that these itinerant years gave Kin's quips a homely, authentic American touch that he could never have achieved by long hours of earnest effort. He *knew* people. Who else but Kin could have said, "When a feller says it hain't th' money but the principle o' th' thing, it's th' money." Or, "When a woman says, 'I don't wish to mention any names'—it ain't necessary."

Hubbard died in 1930 but such remarks as "Th' first robin is usually th' sign o' good sleighin'" have an imperishable flavor.

He put these words into the mouth

of a mythical Indiana farmer named "Abe Martin." Abe Martin is a sharp philosopher, on a rail fence: "There seems t' be an excess of everythin' 'cept parkin' space an' religion." Of an "Uncle Tom's Cabin" troupe he said, "Th' dogs were good, but they had poor support." Abe is a lover of small communities: "A hick town is one where even a hair-cut changes th' whole appearance o' the community," and Abe reflects the views of millions of farm and city folk alike when he says, "Th' hardest thing is t' disguise your feelin's when you put a lot o' relations on th' train for home."

Frank McKinney Hubbard was born in Bellefontaine, Ohio, in 1868, the son of the editor of *The Weekly Examiner*.

I was also born in Bellefontaine. "The town," said Kin, "can be identified by the two sparrows on the south end of the water tank near the Big Four station." I can certify, from many years of observation, that Kin's identification is quite correct—except that the two sparrows now on duty are great-grandchildren of the pair Kin knew.

Kin's first job was with a sign-painter, gilding the huge watches that jewelers hang in front of their stores. He learned typesetting in *The Examiner* shop. When his father, a Democrat, was appointed Postmaster during Grover Cleveland's first administration, Kin became a clerk, and swapped jokes through the window with everybody. But in Republican Logan County



in those days Democrats had a hard time. As Kin remarked, "A couple o' strangers wuz here this week talkin' up a cannin' factory. One was dressed like a Dimmycrat and t'other looked like he wuz in ordinary circumstances, too."

Kin was the official seat-duster of the Bellefontaine Opera House. After performances he would hurry home and make up like characters he had seen. He was, in a word, stage-struck.

He made two trips through the South as a silhouette artist—working at carnivals and country fairs—snipping out likenesses at a dime each. Stranded on one tour, he hired out at eight dollars a week in Tennessee to drive a bread wagon drawn by two white mules. Once a week he had to wash the red mud off the mules. Eventually, he walked back to Bellefontaine.

He went to art school in Detroit, but quit after three days, because in that time he had been allowed to draw nothing but one human ear. Besides Kin wanted to be an actor—and look it.

I bought a nifty suit of clothes, a loud plaid cape overcoat, a close-reefed brown derby and a massive buckhorn cane, and I remained in Detroit some months, stalling around. My hair was dark and long and unmanageable, and if I had been ten years older I would have passed for an actor of rare ability. That was the idea exactly. In the spring I returned to Bellefontaine and resumed my old position at the General Delivery window, wearing a new diamond banjo scarfpin and a pleasant smile for all.

THE next winter Kin organized the *Grand Bellefontaine Operatic Minstrels*. He wrote to a friend in Indianapolis, describing the show and sketching the scenes. The friend praised the sketches and urged Kin to seek a job on *The Indianapolis News*. He did, and went to work at twelve dollars a week. Kin sketched conventions, fires, clambakes, and high crimes. He could do good caricatures and comic drawings, but he knew little of formal drawing.

One spring day the editor asked him to draw a full-page Easter angel. Kin casually accepted the job—and then rushed out to find an art student who could do it. He turned in a fine angel. On the basis of this success, Kin was asked to produce a whole series of handsome drawings. Kin decided at that moment that it would be wise to leave.

Kin got a job on *The Cincinnati Tribune*—a splendid job; there were plenty of theater passes. But soon his paper merged with another, and Kin was out of work. For a summer he presided at the turnstile of an amusement park, decked out like a pros-