

# A Farewell to the Republic

*A BASIC HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES. By Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1944. 554 pp. \$3.50.*

Reviewed by DIXON WECTER

FOR some forty years the name of the Beards has been a hallmark of thoughtful interpretation in modern history, economics, and politics. With quiet purpose and integrity, illuminated by flashes of irony or dry humor, they have recorded in many books their view of American life, and the motives that underlie its passing show. By their own statement, this "Basic History" brings to a close these coöperative efforts. One would like to hail it as the keystone of their distinguished career, but to do so would be exaggeration. The book is able and workmanlike, but routine. Perhaps the self-imposed limitation of space bars the richness of detail, comment, and creative imagination needed to lift this book out of the category of another textbook. In its cheaper edition in The New Home Library, even more than in this edition, it will serve a worthy purpose in adult education, among an increasing public for whom the label of Beard offers an attractive invitation to learning. Nevertheless, it lacks the vivacity and powerful sweep of "The Rise of American Civilization," undoubtedly the Beards' masterpiece for the general reader; while Charles Beard's early "Economic Interpretation of the Constitution" still looms as his most significant book in blazing trails for a whole generation of historians. In fact, that book must rank with Frederick Jackson Turner's first essay on the frontier as pivotal in the writing of our history.

Any elder friend or enemy of the Beards who opens this book expecting to find the economic interpretation of history running as the golden thread, or the red Marxist skein, through the whole design, will have his preconceptions dashed. Since those stormy days after the publication in 1913 of Professor Beard's book on the Constitution, both author and public have gradually changed. Following the age of debunkery in American history and biography—which by pointing out Washington's speculative interest in Western lands, and Grant's disasters among the Wall Street bucket-shops, ventured somewhat unfairly to claim Beard as its sire—and those subsequent years of critical thunder on the Left, Beard's discovery that the Founding Fathers were men of property seems now a heresy mild as milk. On the other hand, Beard himself reveals at

many points—in last year's "The Republic" as well as the "Basic History"—his ripe conviction that ideas are probably as vital as property interests in shaping man's behavior. Over many a public issue the citizen may not even know where his shrewdest self-interest lies, but he is almost never free from the compulsion of those emotion-tinged concepts which he carries about inside his head. Hence the importance which the Beards in this book attach to semantics—to the development of key words in an American context, like "republic," "democracy," "nation," "individualism," and perhaps their favorite word "civilization." Such analyses through a range of time help greatly to point up the meaning of American institutions, and in this field the Beards stand unexcelled.

Moreover, far from having lost respect for the Constitution—whose makers he once dissected, in quest of the pocketbook nerve—Professor Beard has come to accept this symbol of government with deep devotion. "The survival of constitutional government," under regimentation of the New Deal and of global war, is, according to the closing pages of the "Basic History," probably the gravest problem of our future—far transcending "shadowy plans for a world order and for enforcing the four freedoms throughout the world in the 'century of the common man'." In the Beards' eyes, constitutional government is a point of fixity in a world of centrifugal chaos and dangerous experiment. The Constitution is to Beard somewhat as the Catholic Church to Santayana, when rough and conflicting winds of doctrine blow the skeptic back to haven.



—From the book  
**Bargains in human flesh, from the painting by Joseph Boggs Beale.**

"A Basic History" contains some strong chapters. In the world of Washington, Jefferson, and Monroe the Beards are probably at their best, because they feel most at home. Generally speaking, chronology is subordinate to topical structure in this book. The Beards' account of the social and intellectual growth of the Colonies, of the republican way of life, and of what the authors call "a broadening and deepening sense of civilization," are sound and discerning. Thanks in large measure to the Beards themselves, American history as it is written ceased some time ago to be a mere chronicle of battles, treaties, dates, and Presidentiads. Plainly enough, economic and social forces, problems agricultural and industrial, invention, education, and the growth of American thought, all these things interest the Beards far more than drums and trumpets. For a short general history this is as it should be—though for sheer readability this reviewer would rank the "Basic History" below introductions to the same field by Morison and Commager, Schlesinger, and Nevins and Commager.

Here and there the Beards, like all historians, give the hobby horse his head—for instance allotting generous space to feminism, but almost wholly forgetting to mention that equally significant American crusade, temperance. In praising Hoover for acting "energetically and creatively" to combat the Depression, while Democrats in Congress contented themselves mainly with "obstructing and harassing" him, the Beards credit him with two notable relief measures: the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, to assist banks, insurance companies, and the like, and secondly "the Home Owners' Loan Corporation to aid people in peril of losing their homes under foreclosure of mortgages." The R.F.C. rightly belongs to Hoover's sponsorship, but to keep the record straight one might remark that it was set up not during the Republican heyday in Congress, but by act of a prevailingly Democratic Congress in January, 1932. The H.O.L.C., however, was not created until June 13, 1933, being a New Deal agency from start to finish.

Of our participation in World Wars I and II one gathers that the Beards still take a poor view. Under the guise of opinions ascribed to "many Americans," "countless Americans," or "literate Americans," they reveal what seems to be their steadfast belief that in the international sphere we have been moral meddlers. Trying to have our cake and eat it too, we have generally wound up with only the bellyache. Here one catches a last gleam of the old Beardian economic motive, in interpreting the last war doggedly

in terms of the Merchants of Death and Mr. Morgan's chestnuts. Today this seems a little quaint. If Professor Beard in dealing with our earlier history is less sure than formerly that a man of property is a puppet moved by the profit motive, in our later history he is still convinced that every advocate of war is a warmonger. From the 1890's up to 1944, America's increasing role in world affairs is branded as imperialistic, darkening "the outlook for world peace." Both Republicans and Democrats, he believes, are to blame for a drift which he described in September, 1939, by the phrase "giddy minds and foreign quarrels." Of course Beard the liberal holds no brief for the Imperial Germany of 1914 or the Axis today. But, as he has avowed many times, hemispheric defense was good enough for Washington and Monroe, and is good enough for him. (One misses, among discussions of new technologies in the "Basic History," an analysis of the effect of air power upon America's foreign policy.)

In one respect, perhaps, the Beards have slightly shifted ground since the start of World War II. In "The Rise of American Civilization," penned in the high noon of "revisionism" (when the Beards called German guilt "a story for babes"), it was asserted that the election of 1920 was a popular referendum on the League, showing its rejection by the American people. Now, more prudently, they admit doubt as to what "the election returns of 1920 actually did imply, as a verdict for or against the League." At heart, however, they remain isolationists, certain that our leadership from 1937 to Pearl Harbor followed the same wilful road to war pursued by Wilson (an ambitious man, say the Beards, who about 1910 abruptly switched from conservatism to liberalism because he sensed that tides of opinion were flowing that way). Here the partisan snatches the historian's pen.

And strangely enough the Beards report that this war, through the Alien Registration Act and other policies, has served to curb free speech and dangerously to infringe upon our liberties "for the first time" in the style of the European state-police system. In view of the tender treatment of defendants at the recent Sedition Trials, the scrupulous handling of conscientious objectors, and the testimony of the Civil Liberties Union that in these times they have virtually no bills of complaint, Professor Beard's alarm strikes one as exaggerated. Perhaps his experiences at the Columbia University of 1917 have left him with a lasting psychosis about free speech in wartime. Those who regard the present as the best-run war in American history—whether in military efficiency,

calmer emotional tone, or respect for civil rights—will register dissent from his gloom.

Indeed, the lingering mood left by the latter pages of "A Basic History" is one of gentle despair. The Beards see the Great Republic—which they have loved long and sincerely, as only those who have given a lifetime of study can love it—moving darkly and inexorably toward greater centralization of government and more reckless waste of its vital energies and resources, until at last they join hands with Henry Adams in sensing its dis-

integration and doom. We are turning toward the second law of thermodynamics, as about us falls the hoar frost of the Ice Age. But perhaps theirs is only the pessimism of age, grieving at the erasure of old landmarks, the comfortable fit of habit, the disappearance of ancient horizons of home. To others, this sense of inevitable change may mean not sadness but challenge. The old Republic was good. But isn't it possible that we can make a still better one? Its Founders, in their time, were not unduly reverential of the past.

## The Fight for Recognition

*THE COTTON MILL WORKER.* By Herbert J. Lahne. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1944. 278 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by MANYA GORDON

**T**HIS is the fourth volume in the Labor in Twentieth Century America Series. It deals with our oldest industry in which machinery was employed from the very beginning and in which the first corporate enterprise appeared. The Boston Manufacturing Company was launched in 1813. Mr. Lahne describes the initial phases of the cotton industry in New England, its gradual extension to the South and other parts of the country, and its growth in output and number of wage earners.

On the human side it has been a tale of overseas expansion in reverse. First the cotton mills were staffed with native farm labor. These were succeeded by Irish workers. They in turn were followed by French Canadians, Portuguese, Greeks, Poles, Italians, Turks, Armenians, Scandinavians, Germans, Jews, Lithuanians; and as the mills moved so did the workers.



The mill owners were aware of the low standard of living to which the immigrants were accustomed and made every effort to keep them at that level. "The mill house and the company store were potent weapons in the industrial conflicts. The worker who lived in a mill house and traded in a company store found when a strike came that he was likely to be evicted from the mill house and his credit cut off at the company store."

Workers who dwelled in non-company houses were more independent and helped more readily in the unionization of the industry. This was in New England. In the Southern mill towns the employers owned everything: the dwellings that the workers lived in, the stores where they were compelled to trade, the schools their children attended when they were not wanted at the mills, the church where they were christened and married and from where they went to their final rest. Any trade union activity exposed the workers not only to all manner of privation but to the heavy hand of the state militia and other forms of intimidation. Mr. Lahne is rigidly objective; and he tells the mill owner's side of the story with rare fairness. For all that the picture which emerges of conditions in the Southern mill towns until very recently is more akin to feudalism than "paternalism."

The history of the unionization of the cotton mill workers is the real theme of the present volume. It is thoroughly documented and should be prescribed reading for all those who fear the power of organized labor and overlook or refuse to acknowledge the arbitrary power of industrial autocrats. At the same time the reader gets a very fair notion of the complexity of the industrial life of the country as a whole and the sensitive reaction of the cotton industry to changes in transportation or to general commercial and manufacturing