

# Public Opinion Is Big Business

*WHAT AMERICA THINKS.* By William A. Lydgate. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co. 1944. 167 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GERALD W. JOHNSON

**M**R. LYDGATE is the man who thinks up the questions for the Gallup poll and it is his experience in that activity and in examining the tabulated answers that makes him think he knows what America thinks. Perhaps, indeed, he does. In any event, he has written a most interesting book, in which he wanders to and fro, hither and thither, upsetting applecarts in a liberal, even lavish, manner that will delight the contumacious of all sects and factions. By the same token, he will outrage the traditionalists. Whether the delighted will be more than the outraged is a question; but hardly anybody will be bored, so if the first duty of a book is to be interesting this one may be deemed a success.

Mr. Lydgate's own attitude is neatly summed up in a line he quotes from Raymond Clapper: "Never overestimate the people's knowledge nor underestimate their intelligence." Then he proceeds to present an impressive body of evidence supporting the theory that you can hardly underestimate their knowledge or overestimate their intelligence. Yet that is what our putative leaders of public opinion are constantly doing.

Thus the book evolves into a severe castigation of editorial writers, columnists, commentators, and schoolteachers. It is not an outburst of moral indignation; Mr. Lydgate's objection to these worthies is not that they are wicked, but simply that they don't know their own business. Assuming to impart their wisdom to the people, they address them in what might as well be Choctaw.

For example, the Gallup samplings indicate that to 24 per cent of the American public the term "liberal," in its political sense, means the opposite of a tightwad. If a man spends money readily, i.e., liberally, he is a liberal, regardless of his views on civil rights. Even worse is the showing with regard to another favorite of those who constantly admonish the unlearned, "free enterprise." Hardly three Americans out of ten have a clear conception of the dictionary meaning of the term, and of the confused 70 per cent a very large proportion believes that it means freedom to put over a fast one in a business deal, if you can.

This is a real stunner. Today numbers of conscientious American editors

identify free enterprise with business morality and regard their crusading in its behalf as in the nature of a holy war. It should interest them greatly to learn that perhaps half of their readers believe that when they shout for free enterprise they are consciously advocating immorality. If that situation prevails generally, it need astonish no one to learn that the most careful estimate of the weight of editorial opinion thus far made indicates that it may influence a maximum of 1.5 per cent of the total vote.

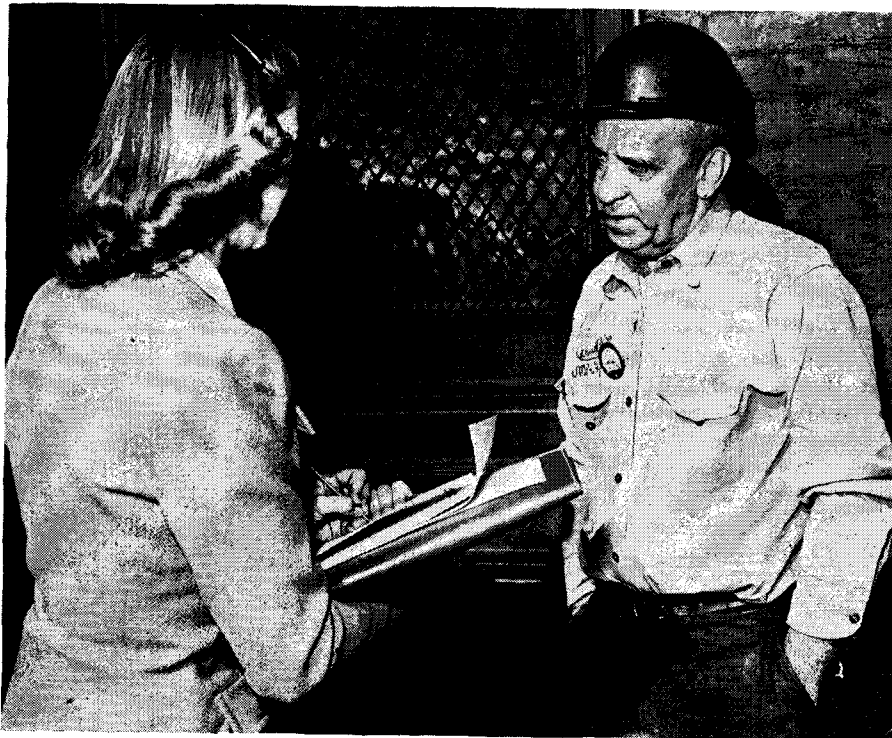
But why are the American people so startlingly ignorant of the conventional definitions of quite common words? Here is where the pedagogues get a sideswipe. Formal education, asserts Mr. Lydgate, has been made so dismally dull in the public schools that the American frequently emerges from them not merely uneducated, but highly immunized against infection by any book-learning.

Yet Mr. Lydgate has said that the people, as a whole, are intelligent, thereby posing once more the question that is beyond the comprehension of our verbal-minded intelligentsia. The question is how can a man who does not understand a simple word yet manage to grasp a relatively complex idea? The fact that he does is abundantly proved by the experience of the poll-takers; many of the very people who defined a liberal as closely akin to a spendthrift and free enterprise as much like freebooting under-

stood clearly the efficacy of broadening the base of income taxation in reducing the danger of inflation and favored broadening the base long before the politicians in Congress.

Indeed, Mr. Lydgate asserts flatly that the astounding success of the Democratic Party for the past twelve years is due to its ability to reach a conclusion only a few months after most of the people have already reached it, whereas the Republicans have usually taken from six months to two years to get there. The broadening of the income tax base is only one instance of many he cites in which the phenomena followed the same order: first, the Gallup poll, or another, reported a majority of the people in favor of an idea before any prominent politician of any party had taken it up; second, a couple of months—in extreme cases, six months—later some prominent Democrat leaped into greater prominence by whooping for the idea; and, third, after an interval lasting sometimes two or three years, the Republicans came around. This is conspicuously true of the more important war measures, draft, lend-lease, wage-price control, and so on. This leads to the curious conclusion that Mr. Roosevelt is the leader of the Republicans only; he accompanies the Democrats and follows the people—a conclusion well designed to displease everybody.

The book overflows with weird notions that are prevalent in the republic—that on the scale of animate nature, for instance, Danes stand very high, but Mexicans are only a step above Japanese; that rich men don't



A voter being interviewed by a reporter for the Gallup poll.

like eggs; that the poor think the extremely rich are taxed too heavily; and many others only less astonishing.

Finally, Mr. Lydgate thinks, and he thinks America thinks, that his activities and those of his compeers—I decline the less elegant term competitors in so high-toned a discussion—are socially and politically valuable. Here, too, he may be right; but the answer must not be given without important qualifications.

Sometimes a man in public life ought to take the unpopular side. If he cherishes some faint hope that it may not be as unpopular as it looks, it is easier for him to do his duty. But if public opinion were always measured precisely, no such doubt could linger and a heavier burden would be laid upon the man who must do what is right in spite of the wrath of his constituents. For the public, be it remembered, if it is always intelligent is always to a large extent misin-

formed, and therefore may be wrong in its decision.

In the second place, while it is true that the sampling method, applied by a statistically correct technique, gives highly accurate results, it is equally true that a statistically correct technique is enormously difficult. This lays the field wide open to sincere quacks, who are the deadliest kind. Proving that Mr. Roosevelt is really the Republican leader is nothing by comparison with what statistics carelessly or incompetently applied are capable of doing. The social and political desirability of samplings depends, therefore, on their reliability, which in turn depends upon such extreme care that it may be wrecked by a very small intrusion of bad luck.

However, their entertainment value is beyond question. If this book had nothing else commendable it would have merit simply because its entertainment value is beyond debate.

mighty glad to have peace come along after the end of the war." Who is to gainsay the fact that history, thus presented, might not win the approval of college students the country over?

It is the final chapter entitled, "We've Still Got Heroes" that marks Mr. Blair as the fine humorist. Real humor has a philosophy all its own; Mark Twain, Finley Peter Dunne, Clarence Day, Roark Bradford, Dorothy Parker, O. Henry—all used their humor as a means to an end. If the unexpected ending, the unique twist to a circumstance, causes a spontaneous laugh to burst forth, it makes all the more palatable and convincing the serious element and purpose behind the story. Like all true humorists, Walter Blair is not a mere gatherer of jokes and puns; his stories have a relevancy to the contemporary scene that makes itself subtly (though humorously) felt.

The author has accomplished this step deftly and superbly in his final chapter. When the visitor to the Pentagon Building urges that this war be won by finding heroes as great as these whose tall tales have been told within the pages of the book, the officer whom he addresses matches their fabulous deeds with real stories of this war: "Out on the Pacific Coast there is a fellow, this war, that runs some shipyards, and you never saw the way ships get built out there . . . As to (a) bridge across the Channel—well, we've got enough ships and men to build a bridge of ships." He tells the story of the enemy force that dared to charge a hill because they were told there was but one Marine on top of it. But when asked why they were running down the hill, they cried, "You lied to us—there are *two* Marines up there."

In an effective manner this book ends in a burst of tribute to American deeds and courage that leaves the reader in a mellow and proud spirit. The lesson of our country is well set forth: we are guilty of telling tall tales, yes—but we have made many a tall tale dream come true.

## Don't Stop Me If You've Heard This One

*TALL TALE AMERICA.* By Walter Blair. New York: Coward-McCann. 1944. 262 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by HAROLD FIELDS

CARL VAN DOREN once wrote about Baron Munchausen and his ilk that, "they lie for the joy they get from it and the fun they give by it." Walter Blair has followed through that approach and has given us a volume of tall stories that puts the story of the American beet, that was so large that a whole platoon of police could sleep on it, in the dark. He has taken the elements—geographical and historical—in the growth of this country and woven about them "tall tales"—worse, very tall tales.

The desire to create fun and amusement for others fits into the needs of our times. To review a book like this in serious vein is, at first thought, incongruous; yet even such treatment is deserving because there is an art in telling stories that belie belief. As the author himself says of his characters, "More than two-thirds of the lies they told, weren't true at all." To tell tales like those found in this book requires not only an appealing style and a seemingly-logical continuity, but an imagination that can soar to undiscovered (and I hope, undiscoverable) heights. Thus one of the fictitious, factitious, and factious characters yclept Febold describes a fog he helped remove in these words:

There was a little fog at first, then more and more of it, until taking a walk alone was impossible. At least two people would be needed

so one could part the fog and hold it apart while the other one walked through. Cattle didn't have to be watered, because they could drink the fog. But the dirt farmers were scared speechless, because their crops were in a bad way. You see, some of the seeds had figured that the closest sunshine was in China, and had started growing downward.

"Tall Tale America" is a series of exaggerated stories that are set within the framework of American development. Although each hero is associated in time with some area or person in our history, history itself is relegated to the background. Thus, Windwagon Smith rates a full chapter, as does each of the other heroes, but the Civil War period in which Windwagon's activities take place, is condensed into the following words: "The (war) came closer and closer. After a while it began, and after a while it ended. As usual, people were



—From the book "Art in Federal Buildings"

From a mural by Lorin Thompson.