

It's the English in Us

GERALD W. JOHNSON



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THE American people, as the twentieth century approaches its half-way mark, are certainly not English. This seems to be a matter of perpetual astonishment to Englishmen who live at home and they are still incredulous despite a multitude of witnesses. The Frenchman Crèvecoeur told them so 175 years ago; but if they reject him as full of Gallic prejudice, they have the evidence of an impressive list of British observers, beginning with Lord Bryce, including Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells, and coming down to John Buchan, D. W. Brogan, and Harold Laski. All agree that the American is something quite different from the Englishman.

But what is he? The question puzzled Crèvecoeur in 1782, and it puzzled Laski no less in 1948. His name may be Roosevelt, contracted from Martenzen van Rosenvelt, which is emphatically non-English; he may have French, Italian, Flemish, Swedish, and Scottish blood, and yet be so nearly the model of an English gentleman that his enemies will accuse him of being practically a subject of the King; or he may be named Best, a native of a state with almost no intermixture of foreign blood, and yet be imprisoned for adhering to the common enemy of the United States and England. Obviously, the racial origin of an American doesn't tell much about him.

From this uncertainty has sprung in recent years a theory that since the country is no longer predominantly English, therefore it isn't English at all, or not to any important extent. It is a theory held tenaciously and hopefully by all who for highly emotional or severely rational reasons consider English influence derogatory to the country.

Statistically and theoretically there is a good deal to support it. For two generations before the quota system shut it off the great flood of immigration had come from non-English-speaking countries. Add twelve million Negroes and statisticians arrive at a figure of about fifty-one per cent for the non-British part of the population, and the British figure includes the Scotch, Welsh, and North Irish elements.

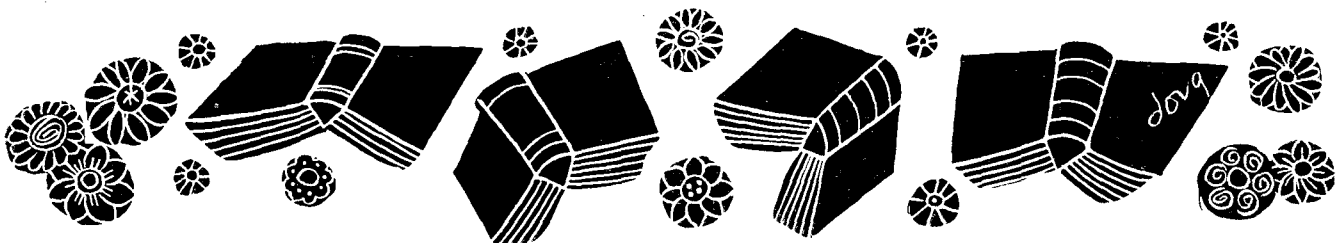
But there is an imponderable factor that doesn't appear in statistical tables. It is the English power of transmutation, which is very considerable indeed, the indefinable process whereby a Swedish-French-Italian-Scottish-Flemish-Dutch combination touched by English influence may become so remarkably like an Englishman as to command the enthusiastic loyalty of the English. During his wartime visit to London, Wendell Willkie was equally popular in West End clubs and in Limehouse. German-American he may have been by blood, but he was a good enough Englishman to be acceptable in London, whether among the aristocracy or among the proletariat.

It does not follow that when an American, affected by this power of transmutation, takes on some English coloration he is necessarily improved.

We assimilate their bad qualities as well as the better ones; in particular there is only too much reason to believe that we are pretty well saturated with the worst of all English traits, one which is as conspicuous in them as it is in the Germans and the Jews and which has made all three groups bitterly hated.

THIS is the deadly heresy of the *Herrenvolk*, the Chosen People, the race whose merits are so conspicuous that even God is forced to recognize them and to take the race under His special protection. It may be argued with some plausibility that the English are worse infected with this disease than either the Germans or the Jews, simply because they proclaim it less vociferously. Their relative silence on the subject is attributable, not to any doubt of their own superiority, but to a confidence in it so sublime that they tacitly assume that all the world shares it. This assumption was never made by any other group that cherishes the same delusion of its own superiority. Therefore the others insist on proclamations that lay them open to ridicule, while the Englishman is so blandly certain of his membership in the Master Race that he considers it not worth while to make any effort to impress "lesser breeds without the law."

A hundred years ago Americans developed a virulent case of this malady and it is interesting to note that one of the correctives applied consisted of the comment of English writers, notably Charles Dickens, Harriet Martineau, and the female Trollope. The satire in "Martin



Chuzzlewit," like many strong poisons, had a powerful germicidal effect when applied to a nationalism already inflamed and threatening to turn gangrenous.

The infection subsided for a while, but it has never been wholly eliminated and two conditions of modern American life are favorable to another flare-up. These are the simultaneous possession of great wealth and great military power. It would be fatuous to deny that it is easily possible for the American people, in the years immediately ahead, to generate an arrogance which would make that of the British seem almost a virtue by comparison.

But we are to some extent aware of the danger, and there is in existence some disposition to resist it. If the pattern of our national life is set by influences we know we should resist, then we are a failure as a nation. What is better worth considering here is the influence of those factors that are accepted and approved, sometimes unwittingly, but never consciously resisted.

In Scripture it is written that "as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." As a rule, a man thinketh in his heart in the terms that he acquired when he first began to think at all, that is, in his youth when he was under formal instruction by professional educators. If he is an American, that formal instruction was given in the English language, and English literature was the medium used to give shape and expression to his notions of the sublime and the beautiful. Poetry he first learned as English poetry and even non-English thought, the philosophy of Plato, for example, came to him in the words of Benjamin Jowett.

His forefathers may have lived in Hungary, or Japan, or Mexico, or anywhere else, yet "if there be any virtue and there be any praise" in the thoughts of his heart and if these things come to him expressed in the English language, he is somewhat English regardless of race, or nationality, or residence in the midst of the Mississippi Valley. We are not English and our minds are not English minds, but as long as we can pick up a book of verse from London and be stirred instantly "there is some corner of a foreign field that is forever England."

The fact is immutable. It may be regretted, but it cannot be changed and it is folly to ignore it. That is the philosophy that really counts. The writings of the learned doctors may agitate the schools and fill the columns of the reviews and the more stately newspapers, but what moves the people is the intangible influence of a thousand years of English thought

and English struggle. To attempt to measure it with any degree of precision is hopeless, for the people are not aware of it and cannot report it to others. As far as their conscious thought is concerned they may be anti-English and consider themselves anti-English to the bone; but it is not true.

Walking up Charles Street in Baltimore in the spring of 1939 I encountered a crowd of rather dilapidated youth streaming out of a church and into buses decorated with large cloth banners denouncing war and British imperialism. The young people were singing a dismal chant and bored-looking policemen stood around keeping the sidewalks clear.

"What goes on?" I asked the biggest and most bored.

"Some sort of pacifist outfit," he answered, twirling what elsewhere is called a nightstick, but in Baltimore an espantoon.

"That's all very well," he added suddenly, "until old England gets in trouble again, but then—." He spat and twirled his espantoon and looked silently down the street, closing the interview.

Not six months later the war was on and his words were justified; but to assume that the policeman was bribed by British gold, or deceived by British propaganda, would be nonsensical. He simply recognized the power of British tradition, which is for the most part English tradition, and knew what it could do.

There is no reasonable doubt that
(Continued on page 35)

Literally Speaking

By George Cole and David West



John Milton: "Comus"

A HIDDEN strength . . .
Which if Heav'n gave it, may be term'd her own:
'Tis chastity, my brother, chastity:
She that has that, is clad in compleat steel,
And like a quiver'd Nymph with Arrows keen
May trace huge Forests, and unharbour'd Heaths,
Infamous Hills, and sandy perilous wildes,
Where through the sacred rays of Chastity,
No savage fierce, Bendite, or mountaneer
Will dare to soyl her Virgin purity,
Yea there, where very desolation dwels
By grots, and caverns shag'd with horrid shades,
She may pass on with unblench't majesty . . .

Fiction. *The most significant of the books reviewed this week is "The Track of the Cat." by Walter Van Tilburg Clark, author of the well-remembered "The Ox-Bow Incident." Mr. Clark, in a dramatic story uses a panther ravaging the cattle on a remote Nevada ranch as a symbol of the evil forces that implacably pursue man. From the other side of the world come two satirical novels of English life. In "Two Worlds and Their Ways" I. Compton-Burnett, that unique and brilliant delineator of English upper-class life, portrays the middle-aged men and women who today are clinging desperately to their old traditions. Marghanita Laski's "Toasted English" is a robust fantasy of the kind of England that characters escaped from a Wodehouse story might like to live in. Robert Wernick's "The Freebooters" could come only from America. There is a nightmare quality in this acid novel, in which the lost generation of the Second World War is viewed riding on the road to nowhere.*

Man Against Relentless Evil

THE TRACK OF THE CAT. By Walter Van Tilburg Clark. New York: Random House. 404 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by EDMUND FULLER

WALTER VAN TILBURG CLARK is working again in the vein of "The Ox-Bow Incident." When that brilliant first novel was published in 1940 there was immediate recognition of an outstanding talent in American fiction. Yet it was the kind of remarkable performance that inspires trepidation. Clifton Fadiman cagily refrained from predictions, remarking, "The thing is so perfect that it seems to deny the possibility of growth on the part of the author."

"The City of Trembling Leaves," in 1945, seemed to endorse the Fadiman observation. It was not good, at any rate not for the author of "The Ox-Bow." It would have made a notable first novel (and there were guesses that in some senses it was such). Although it was not literally autobiographical it was a personal chronicle of youth and of the emergent creative power. Accordingly it had some of the characteristics of compulsion writing, or of "the book he had to write." It was sprawling and awkward and generally failed of realizing its aims though it displayed many of his gifts.

But the growth that seemed hard to expect after the first book, that did not appear in the second, is here in the third. It is true that it is less "perfect," but it is of larger scope. "The Ox-Bow Incident" was a compact social drama, remarkable for the skilful way in which it was isolated and brought under penetrating observation. It had a classical unity and simplicity of organization.

Possibly some readers will object

to the fact that the new book is not as precisely schematized socially as the first, in which every peg fitted miraculously into its little hole. There is no overt, pointed social comment. He is looking in upon, rather than out upon, the world. For my part, I see it as a case of Mr. Clark cutting himself loose from formalistic or schematic constraints. There is artistic unity and simplicity in "The Track of the Cat," but there is also some of

the looseness and apparent capriciousness of events which are in life. The actions have implications that go far beyond their limited context. He makes skilful use of the dream, for instance, to relate the fears and insecurities of his characters in their special dilemmas to the psychic disorders to which we all are susceptible in this increasingly fear-haunted society. The sense of doom, or of the relentless Evil Principle, which comes to the Indian Joe Sam as a supernatural black panther comes to many modern men in one image or another and often ends by working most powerfully on the minds of those who most deride it. The track of the cat sometimes crosses all our lives.

The scene is a remote valley in Nevada and its adjacent mountains. The time span is about three days. The action involves not only the relationships of men to one another, but also their relationships to forces of natural environment, and to mystic elements of destiny, fate, and Nemesis.

Three brothers, Arthur, Curt, and Harold Bridges, awaken before dawn on an October morning. The first snow of the year is falling. The driving wind accompanying it has brought to them the faint bellowing of the cattle on the range, a melancholy sound "like the faraway blowing of several horns not quite tuned together and not quite steady." Something, pre-



THE AUTHOR: The English in us to the contrary (see page 7), Walter Van Tilburg Clark finds in our overseas cultural heritage "a kind of borrowed depth that will not serve us very well. . . . The Indian increasingly takes on for me the importance of the real human product of this hemisphere, the race in which we can observe the characteristics which the land will, to some extent at least, finally produce in the white man, too. Joe Sam in 'The Track of the Cat' is the first considerable result of this bent."

The "Cat" had its origin fifteen years ago in a narrative poem, was retracted in a discarded novel, and was finally groomed for publication in the loft of an old apple-house on the ranch where Clark lives, seven miles from Carson City. In the interim he taught and coached basketball for a decade in Cazenovia, N. Y., wrote "The Ox-Bow Incident," "The City of Trembling Leaves," numerous short stories, and poems. For the past few years his literary work has been interrupted only by lecturing and reading at three writers' conferences.

"What kind of life is that, cooped up all day with a pencil and a sheet of paper?" the neighbors sometimes ask, but Nevada is his home—a Maine crib notwithstanding—and "those who know me know that I've been writing something or other since I was about eighteen. My other activities are mostly normal enough: I poke around the hills, wield a middling racket for the Reno Tennis Club, play a violin—never publicly. I'm very fond of ballads, though mostly I just moan them gently around the place—'Molly Malone,' 'Sweet Betsy from Pike'. . . . And when I'm haunted by my work and yet the haunting is producing no wanted spook, a game of chess will do the trick." He is working on some short pieces now, will probably begin another novel next fall but can't tell yet which of three already well-spooked plots is "nearest to ripe."—R. G.