

Twenty-five Years After

The Lost Generation Today

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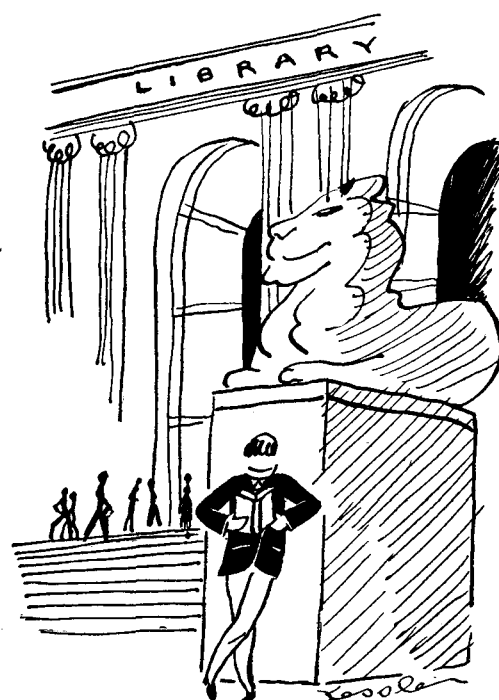
ONCE more people are talking about the writers of what is still called the lost generation: Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Hart Crane, and all the others. It was Gertrude Stein who first applied the phrase to them. "You are all a lost generation," she said to Ernest Hemingway in 1926, and Hemingway used the remark as an inscription for his first novel. "The Sun Also Rises" was a good novel and became a pattern of conduct. Young men tried to get as masterfully drunk as the hero; young women of good families took a succession of lovers in the same heart-broken fashion as the heroine; they all talked like Hemingway characters, and the name was there for the ages, or at least for twenty-five years.

In the beginning it was as useful as any half-accurate tag could be. It was useful to older persons because they had been looking for words to express their uneasy feeling that post-war youth—"flaming youth"—had a picture of life that was different from their own. Now they didn't have to be uneasy; they could read about the latest affront to social standards or literary conventions and merely say, "That's the lost generation." But in 1926 the phrase was also useful to the youngsters. They had grown up and gone to college during a period of rapid changes when two or three years' difference in age might mean a tremendous difference in outlook. Now at last they had a slogan that

expressed their feeling of separation from older persons and of kinship with one another.

In the slogan the noun was more important than the adjective. They might or might not be lost—the future would determine that point; but already they had had the common adventures and formed the common attitude that made it possible to describe them as a generation. Perhaps a better adjective would have been "uprooted" or "exiled," for at first a distinguishing mark of the generation was that it didn't feel at home in its own country. During World War I many of its members had enlisted in foreign armies, British, French, or Italian, and after the war most of them spent several years in Europe before returning to the United States. The European adventure, with all it implied in habits of life and literary standards, was in fact the central point in their common experience.

When we look back on their adventure after twenty-five years it seems to us now that they followed an old pattern of alienation and reintegration, or departure and return, that is repeated in scores of European myths and is continually re-enacted in life. A generation of American writers went out into the world like the children in Grimm's fairy tales who ran away from a cruel step-mother. They wandered for years in search of treasure and then came back like the grown children to dig for it at home. But the story in life was not so simple and it lacked the happy ending of fairy tales. Perhaps there was really a treasure, and perhaps it had been buried all the time in their father's garden, but the exiles did not find it there. They found only what



others were finding: work to do as best they could and families to support and educate. The adventure had ended, and once more they were a part of the common life.

FOR MOST of them the adventure had been divided into four stages. There was the first stage when young writers born at the turn of the century were detached from their native backgrounds and were led to think of themselves as exiles in fact even when living at home. There was the second stage when they went abroad, many of them with the intention of spending the rest of their lives in Europe. The voyage had an unexpected effect on most of them; it taught them to admire their own country if only for its picturesque qualities. But they still preferred to admire it from a distance, and many of the younger exiles would have agreed with the opinion that Hawthorne expressed to his publisher in 1858. "To confess the truth," he said in a letter from Italy, "I had rather be a sojourner in any other country than return to my own. The United States are fit for many excellent purposes, but they are certainly not fit to live in." Yet Hawthorne went home to Concord in 1860, whether or not it was a fit place for him to live, and the new generation of exiles came straggling back to New York.

They had entered a third stage of the adventure, one in which the physical exile had ended while they were still exiles in spirit. At home they continued to think of themselves as oppressed by the great colorless mass of American society and they tried to defend their own standards by living apart from society, as if on private

islands. They were, however, dependent on American business for their generally modest livelihoods and they were willing to leave their islands when they were invited to spend week ends with rich friends. In those days most young writers lived more simply than other college-bred Americans, because they had less money; but they allowed themselves to become involved by slow degrees in the frenzy of the boom years, with the result that they were also involved in the moral and economic collapse that followed. For some of them, like Hart Crane and Scott Fitzgerald, that was the end of the story.

There was a fourth stage for others, and it was their real homecoming. It took place against the background of the Depression, and its nature can be suggested here only in general terms. During the years when the exiles tried to stand apart from American society they had pictured it as a unified mass that was moving in a fixed direction and could not be turned aside by the efforts of any individual. The picture had to be changed after the Wall Street crash, for then the mass seemed to hesitate like a cloud in a cross wind. Instead of being fixed, its direction proved to be the result of a struggle among social groups with different aims and among social forces working against one another. The exiles learned that the struggle would affect everyone's future, including their own. When they took part in it on one side or another (but usually on the liberal side), when they tried to strengthen some of the forces and allied themselves with one or another of the groups they ceased to be exiles. They had acquired friends and enemies and purposes in the midst of society and thus wherever they lived in America they had found a home.

That is the pattern of the adventure as we look back at it after a quarter of a century. I think the pattern is true to history so long as it is stated in general terms, but it is less true when applied to individual writers. Not all the members of the lost generation saw military service during the First World War and not all of them spent their postwar years in Europe. My friend Kenneth Burke, for example, was rejected by the Army doctors and worked in a shipyard. In 1922 he bought an abandoned farm in the New Jersey hills and he lives there today; he has never been east of Maine. William Faulkner came home to Oxford, Mississippi, after serving in the Royal Air Force. He was postmaster at Oxford for about two years, then lost the job and went to New Orleans, where he was hired to pilot a cabin cruiser through the bayous with illegal cargoes of alcohol.

In the summer of 1925 he took a walking trip through France and Italy. It was his second visit to Europe and would be the last until he won the Nobel Prize in 1950.

Each life has its own pattern within the pattern of the age, and every individual is an exception. Katherine Anne Porter was a newspaper woman in the Southwest before she went to Mexico and worked for the Revolutionary Government; Mexico City was her Paris, and Taxco was her South of France. Thomas Wolfe was a shipyard worker, being too young for the Army. He spent two of his postwar years at Harvard studying the drama under George Pierce Baker and then became an instructor at Washington Square College. After 1925 he traveled widely in Europe but he differed from the other exiles in preferring Germany to France. Before the Nazis took over he felt more at home in Munich than he did in North Carolina.

John Dos Passos was the greatest traveler in a generation of ambulant writers. When he appeared in Paris he was always on his way to Spain or Russia or Istanbul or the Syrian desert. But his chief point of exception was to be a radical in the 1920's, when most of his friends were indifferent to politics, and to become increasingly conservative in the following decade, when many of his friends were becoming radical. Scott Fitzgerald is always described as a representative figure of the 1920's, but the point has

to be made that he represented the new generation of ambitious college men rising in the business world much more than he did the writers. He earned more money than other serious writers of his generation, lived far beyond their means—as well as living beyond his own—and paid a bigger price in remorse and suffering for his mistakes. Like the others, he followed his own path through life, and yet when all the paths are seen from a distance they seem to be interwoven into a larger pattern of exile (if only in spirit) and return from exile, of alienation and reintegration.

THE EXILES fled to Europe and then came back again. A decade was ending, and they didn't come back to quite the same country nor did they come back as the same men and women.

The country had changed in many ways, for better and worse, but the exiles were most impressed by the changed situation of American literature. In 1920 it had been a provincial literature, dependent on English standards even when it tried to defy them. Foreign countries regarded it as a sort of colonial currency that had to be assigned a value in pounds sterling before it could be accepted on the international exchange. By 1930 it had come to be valued for itself and studied like Spanish or German or Russian literature. There were now

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Thomas Wolfe, Katherine Anne Porter, Hart Crane, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald in the old days — "like the children in Grimm's fairy tales."

Arms & The Man. *With the United States at least ankle-deep in its eighth war, its martial tradition is becoming correspondingly richer. The four new volumes reviewed here suggest that our military literature is keeping pace. Willard M. Wallace's "Appeal to Arms" is by all odds the best military history of the Revolution available in small compass. Earl Schenck Miers employs the unusual method he developed in "Gettysburg" to tell the story of W. T. Sherman in "The General Who Marched to Hell." And the role in World War II of the "silent service," the submarine, is given its due in Cope and Karig's "Battle Submerged" and Lockwood's "Sink 'Em All." All these books use the vantage point of one or a few participants to report on war—a practice about which Colonel S.L.A. Marshall has some cogent things to say below.*

The First Modern General

THE GENERAL WHO MARCHED TO HELL. By Earl Schenck Miers. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 349 pp. \$4.50.

By S. L. A. MARSHALL

IN HIS study of W. T. Sherman and the military campaign with which history mainly associates him Earl Schenck Miers follows a method which he found profitable in writing "Gettysburg" and which he explains briefly in his introduction.

These are the words: "This is a book that, in attempting to recapture the immediacy of feeling at a precise moment, is more concerned with the impression of facts than with the facts themselves. Only historical research can afford to deal with the whole truth; history as it is lived must contend with the partial truth by which men fight and bleed and die."

Because he is an artist with words, with an ideal sense of what will fire the average imagination and touch the common heart, Mr. Miers is able to hew to this line in his research and come forth with a chronicle of General Sherman, his March to the Sea, and the general circumstances attending the man and the event, which will

enthrall anyone who reads his book.

This is also what he did with "Gettysburg." No doubt it is what he will continue to do with books yet to follow. As a technique for the writing of books which will sell and will be treasured by those who read (two quite valid objects) it has proved successful when applied by such a craftsman.

But a question arises when contemporaries mistake the technique for more than it is and hail the results as "a new realism." That was what happened when "Gettysburg" was published. Critics fairly swooned over its stark delineation of the battlefield, concluding it was objective because it was based on words spoken or written about things done and seen at or near the time. But the fact remained that Mr. Miers described actions during those fateful days which could not possibly have occurred on a field dominated by the rifle bullet. There are limits which are imposed by human nature; the difference between what men are capable of doing under pressure and their heroic recollections of what they did only a few days afterward is almost infinite.

We know this now better than we ever knew it before. During World

War II we made experimental search in the European theatre on this very point. The historian would be on the field with the troops and the commander. With all of the actors present and all pertinent documents available the account of action would then be composed until no gaps remained. Three months later with no reference to the basic document we quizzed the same commander on his memory of the event. Only exceptionally objective men were chosen for this test. Yet the deviations between the two accounts were so radical as to suggest that the man was thinking about another battle.

As for the importance of contemporary "impression of fact," once I researched the files to see how the American press reacted to major events in World War I. It was found that without exception the correspondents had missed the significance of the first battle of the Marne, none had understood the race to the North Sea while it was in progress, and when the Germans issued their official report on Tannenberg some newspapers mistook it for news that a second battle had occurred at the same point.

From these and many similar experiences the conclusion was unavoidable that military memoirs are highly unreliable, that most battlefield history of the past is a tissue of myths, and that contemporary impressions are of chief interest because of the manner in which the flooding-in of misinformation obstructs clear action.

As to battle itself, our total World War II experience proved that there is no substitute for complete search at the time. That is surely within the means not only of the historians but of the correspondents, though the former are first to see the light. Sound history fundamentally is the product of sound reporting. Mr. Miers is so very right in his theme that history lives, that it is not a dead science to be served mainly by the archivists.

His story of Sherman is not the book which military students have been awaiting—an analysis which would take this man apart and explain by what logic and conditioning he became the First Modern General.

Why did Sherman see earlier than anyone else that war in the industrial age would have to be waged against the heart of society itself? By what staff magic, tactical secret, or accident was he able to keep his battle losses consistently in ratio less than half those of Grant, Lee, Johnston, and others? How did he win men to him when his mien and manner were not engaging and he had no record of success?

These are a few of the puzzling



—By Robert Lawson, from "Watchwords of Liberty."