

Creators and Cranks

"Dreamers of the American Dream," by **Stewart H. Holbrook** (Doubleday, 369 pp. \$5.75), is a study of the visionaries, the saints, and the fools of historic American reform movements. John A. Garraty, professor of history at Michigan State University, who reviews it here, is the author of a newly published book entitled *"The Nature of Biography."*

By John A. Garraty

OVER the past twenty years, Stewart H. Holbrook has made a considerable reputation as a popularizer of American social and economic history. He has chronicled the lumbering, the railroad, and the iron and steel industries; he has traced the westward migration of New England culture and written biographies of Ethan Allen and James J. Hill. Most recently, in *"The Age of the Moguls,"* he has told the story of the "robber barons." Now, in *"Dreamers of the American Dream,"* he deals with a galaxy of American reform movements and with the cranks, crackpots, geniuses, saints, and fools of both sexes who took part in them.

In his many books, Mr. Holbrook does not pretend to make what scholars call "a contribution." Indeed, his very unpretentiousness is his greatest asset. This new book is typical in that it is written in deceptively simple prose and liberally (but not excessively) interlarded with jaunty colloquial expressions. A group of reformed drunkards are referred to as "six admitted old soaks," an orator becomes "a speaker of tremendous horsepower," a Wichita bartender is said to have "lammed through the rear doorway" at the approach of the formidable Carrie Nation, an agrarian radical is reported as having "scared all hell" out of conventional conservatives. Such phrases are obviously intended to make the material more palatable to the reader. If they do so, they are to be commended; in any case they do no serious harm. In the same way, Mr. Holbrook does not try to overpower either himself or his readers with deep investigations of every aspect of his subjects. In this book he deals principally with various utopian movements, with land reformers, Prohibitionists, crusaders for the rights of women, prison reformers, educators of the deaf and the blind, and with radical labor movements. He tells a lively story and avoids detailed analyses of cause and



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effect. When he offers interpretations they are usually the interpretations of others (and admittedly so, for Mr. Holbrook is scrupulous in giving credit wherever it is due). His account is unfailingly interesting, partly because of his gift for narration, partly because he emphasizes the unusual, the exotic, and the ridiculous aspects of the reform movements wherever possible.

The reader is sure to find something to make him chuckle in Mr. Holbrook's pages. Perhaps it will be Samuel Thomson, the "Botanic Man," who will catch his eye, or Anson Fowler, inventor of the octagonal house, or perhaps Dr. Dioclesian Lewis, author of "New Gymnastics," "Chastity," and "Our Digestion," or Dr. Mary Walker, who wore men's clothes and won a medal for her brave work during the Civil War, or Abigail Duniway Scott, who said: "One half of American women are dolls, the rest are drudges, and we are all fools." Indeed, sometimes the author seems more interested in poking fun than in writing a well-balanced history.

But Mr. Holbrook does not ignore the serious and commendable aspects of the reforms he discusses. He loves to expose frauds and to deflate narrow-minded, intolerant reformers. He is unsparing of most of the Prohibitionists, for example, and almost unfair in his ridicule of some of the utopians. But for reasonable and honest reformers, however zealous, he has ample praise. He is kind to Dorothea Dix, to Margaret Sanger, to Eugene V. Debs, and even to the often-absurd John Humphrey Noyes, founder of the Oneida community and exponent of "Perfectionism," "complex marriage," and "male continence." The men and women who devoted themselves selflessly to aiding the deaf, the dumb, and the blind receive his special praise. Neither glib joviality nor slick "cleverness" can be found in the pages devoted to Thomas Gallaudet, Alexander Graham Bell, Samuel Gridley Howe, Helen Keller, and others prominent in these movements, yet this section is among the most interesting and attractive in the volume.

Mr. Holbrook's methodology and his basic point of view do not make for great history. He is a sort of poor man's Thucydides, a proletarian Gibbon. His works are neither deeply researched or deeply thought out. But his eminent good sense and honesty, his straightforward prose, and his gift for humor and the pungent phrase make "Dreamers of the American Dream" a good, simple introduction to his subject matter.

THE NEW VIEWPOINT OF JOHN BULL: American history was long a neglected subject in British universities, but anyone who does not know that since the second World War the situation has undergone a marked change should read "British Essays in American History," edited by H. C. Allen and C. P. Hill (St. Martin's Press, \$6). In this quietly competent volume seventeen British scholars offer interpretations of major historical developments in the United States from the establishment of the Constitution to present times. Written primarily for British readers and based upon secondary sources, the essays contain much that is familiar to American students; but the perspective is always the fresh one of the foreign observer and the authors seldom fail to provide some provocative emphasis or idea of their own. Outstanding contributions among a generally good lot are Professor Allen's thoughtful treatment of what could have been a hackneyed topic, the Turner frontier thesis; Max Beloff's analysis of American foreign policy since 1871; and D. W. Brogan's astute comments on contemporary American liberalism. The liberals' "greatest monument," Professor Bro-

gan observes, "is the present Republican party," which cheers Herbert Hoover but accepts the New Deal.

—HAL BRIDGES.

OF FLINTLOCKS AND FRONTIERS: When Colonel Jefferson Davis led his volunteer regiment, the Mississippi Rifles, into the Mexican War he insisted that his men be equipped with the United States Army's new Model 1841 percussion rifle. In battle his regiment used the new weapons so effectively that it has been known ever since as the Mississippi Rifle. This is one brief sample of the unusual historical information to be found in Carl P. Russell's "Guns on the Early Frontiers" (University of California Press, \$8.50), a handsome and authoritative volume designed primarily for curators of museums, students and historians of guns, and private arms collectors. For twenty-six years Dr. Russell has been collecting gun information. His book spans the centuries from Jamestown to the Mexican War, and is replete with exact descriptions, drawings, and diagrams of the various models of rifles, pistols, and small cannons that helped win the West. A glossary of gun terms adds to the book's usefulness.—H. B.



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