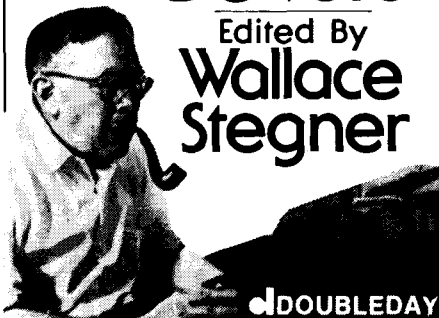


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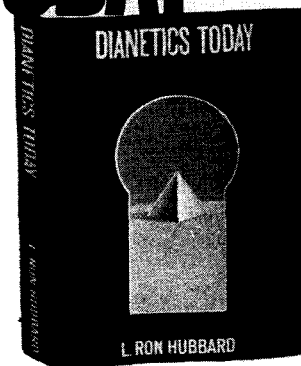
The Letters of Bernard DeVoto

Edited By Wallace Stegner



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By America Obsessed

The Man of Only Yesterday: Frederick Lewis Allen

by Darwin Payne

Harper & Row, 340 pp., \$12.50

The Letters of Bernard DeVoto

Edited by Wallace Stegner

Doubleday, 393 pp., \$10

Reviewed by Alfred Kazin

Frederick Lewis Allen and Bernard DeVoto were born in the 1890s and died in the 1950s. Both went to Harvard and in one capacity or another stayed in the Harvard orbit all their lives. Both were associated much of their lives with *Harper's* magazine, Allen as editor and DeVoto as occupant of the "Easy Chair" column. The intellectual passion of each was the American past. Both are likely to be remembered for easily readable, nostalgic books of American history that exhibit the necessary gift of the popular historian in America for expressing the heart's tug of middle-class American readers away from big cities and the mass age.

When you consider how utterly different Allen and DeVoto were in background, in personality, and especially in intellectual range and ambition, it is curious to realize how alike they were in their American traditionalism-cum-liberalism, their political decency—and their removal from imaginative literature. Like all good best-selling authors, they were just like the public for which they wrote. Allen—it is a pity that Darwin Payne's rewritten Ph.D. biography of the man is so banal—came of old Puritan stock, and was and looked the earnest twinkly Yankee, and was a thoroughly unpretentious man who correctly thought of himself as a conduit to the moderately literary, professional class that had always taken *Harper's*. His biographer has not examined this relationship to the magazine audience, but it is just this that makes Allen's handling of *Harper's* interesting.

DeVoto was born in Utah of an Italian ex-Catholic father and an ex-Mormon mother. He never got over his origins, though he celebrated the "West" as if

he were its surrogate. All his life he was belligerently, unappeasably self-conscious about his roots, his looks, his unrequited gifts as a "scientific" analyst, novelist, teacher. He thought he should have been a psychiatrist. The most emotional and insecure of men, he could not write a letter without telling you how right he was on all matters of fact. Naturally, as letters, these letters are never charming or graceful. They are just terribly positive, not "personal," just documents in Benny DeVoto's endless need to assert himself to critics, opponents, skeptics.

Twenty years after his death, Frederick Allen remains dear to his friends because of his unassuming charm. Twenty years after his death, DeVoto remains dear to friends like Wallace Stegner because he loved sharing what he knew, because of his courage as a civil-liberties fighter, because he became a great spokesman for conservation against all the special-interest groups that never got tired trying to rob the national preserve. DeVoto's greatest appeal to his friends was his aching, overwhelming need of love and assurance. Allen was so obviously in control that the contrast between the two men is fascinating.

Since I never knew DeVoto but have been reading him all my life, I find his intellectual self-assertiveness in *everything* hard to take. Stegner's editing of so many stiffly polemical letters, like his biography of DeVoto, *The Uneasy Chair*, is humorously objective as well as affectionate. But as a writer, DeVoto was possessed by a *folie de grandeur* that is just as intrusive in the letters as in preposterous blunderbuss attacks on the major poets, novelists, and critics of the twentieth century. DeVoto could never admit that he wrote from a violent emotional bias. In attacking the supposed follies and vile anti-American prejudices of the literary criticism and poetry and fiction written in the Twenties, DeVoto misconceived literature in the crassest possible way by stridently demanding that *one* writer reflect the sum total of what *all* Americans were experiencing.

DeVoto had no understanding of what imaginative literature is. As he said over and over, "reality" is concerned with "things, not words." Ironically, he eventually fell a victim to his insistence that literature show a literal, point-to-point

Alfred Kazin is the author of a number of works of literary criticism, most recently *Bright Book of Life*.

relationship to the national experience. As editor of Mark Twain's unpublished papers, he came more and more to see that there was indeed, as Van Wyck Brooks had said, an "ordeal" to the writer's life. And the more DeVoto became aware, during World War II, that American power had become power-mad, too big and rich for its own good, that the "classical" Republic had somehow gone off the rails, the more DeVoto's trilogy of the "continental experience"—*The Year of Decision, Across*



the Wide Missouri, The Course of Empire—went in for a geographical, geopolitical, ethically neutral nationalism. The "continental experience" significantly replaced the American social virtues in whose name DeVoto had clobbered the imaginative writers who had written of "reality" as the individual, dreamlike experience of our consciousness. DeVoto was afraid of his own dreams.

DeVoto's "continental" trilogy, homage to the enduring significance of the western experience, is far more informed and ambitious in every way than Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday, Since Yesterday, The Lords of Creation, The Big Change*. But despite his passion for the West, DeVoto as historical thinker is not a whit deeper than was Allen in his modest, nostalgic best-sellers about the supposed disruption of American life since the Twenties. A mild bitterness is in one form or another the burden of all successful American writing. We always write about ourselves as if we were Gatsby, cheated of *the* girl.

DeVoto combatively identified himself with the Old West but spent his life in Cambridge. He never got over the fact that he was refused tenure at Harvard and had to edit *The Saturday Review of Literature* instead. Sentimentally—in lieu of more subtle and honest explanations—he attacked the major writers as somehow faithless to America. Then, as

America became more overbearing, imperial, DeVoto plumped for the "national destiny" as a geographical necessity from sea to shining sea precisely because our "manifest destiny" had at last become politically and humanly unbearable to him.

The more DeVoto saw that the U.S. government lied to its people, spied on them, collaborated with special interests to rob the people, the more DeVoto spun his rapturous historical romance about the trailmen, the trappers, the explorers, the missionaries of the Old West. Nothing new in this—all American writers specialize in romantic disenchantment; this seems to have begun in 1492. But DeVoto could never admit to a vital change in his perspective. He *always* had to be right.

What is worse, he had a kind of cultural Nixonism, a belief that the "East" ran the Establishment. The "leftist" intellectuals, as Mr. Stegner dutifully echoes here, wrote all the literary histories. Well, why didn't the virtuous sons of the Golden West write them? For the same reason that Eliot, Pound, Fitzgerald, Cather, Hemingway, Dos Passos, Lewis—midwesterners all—never went back, any more than DeVoto did, to stay.

Frederick Lewis Allen had it much easier—moving between Boston and New York. But then, Allen was not a perpetual sorehead, not cursed by the delusion that he had to be right all the time and right about everything. DeVoto was a great journalist, but he lacked the one quality that would have excused and redeemed his lifelong belligerency. He was not a genius. □

FRASER YOUNG LITERARY CRYPT NO. 32

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer on page 57.

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WCSO CYW WAI YAVH
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