

America: Inventory and Appraisal

THE AMERICAN MIND. By Henry Steele Commager. Yale University Press. \$5.

THE field of recent American intellectual history has been well plowed in the last generation. Parrington in his fragmentary but striking third volume laid bare many of the prevailing tendencies of the last seventy-five years; and numerous writers since Parrington—Gabriel, Curti, Lloyd Morris, Morton White, Hofstadter, Kazin, Dorfman—have enlarged on the period or on one or another of its major aspects. It is hardly to be expected that at so late a date our conception of the main outlines of the time would be radically changed; and this "The American Mind" does not pretend to do. Professor Commager's new book is rather "an interpretation of American thought and character since the 1880's," disclaiming any professions of completeness and seeking instead to define the more revealing manifestations of a "distinctively American way" of thought and behavior.

It must first be said that "The American Mind" is a rich and brilliant book. Henry Commager has never written before with such felicity and charm. The

raw material of the period is wild and exhausting; but the author is always in control, moving through it with wit and urbanity and penetrating insight. His characterizations of authors and books are masterpieces of compression; his conception of the movement of the times is complex, flowing, and capacious; and, above all, the flick of an adjective and the turn of a phrase show again and again how instinct his historical judgment is with the timbre and tempo of the period.

The first and last chapters—The Nineteenth-Century American and The Twentieth-Century American—are essays in the treacherous field of historical generalization. Their insights are perceptive and searching, if somewhat random; they succeed in setting an effective contrast between 1880 and 1950. In the chapters between, Professor Commager explores the concrete ideas and influences which divide us from our grandfathers. The decade of the nineties, he argues, was the watershed. Looking back, one could see the America of the past—predominantly agricultural, predominantly isolationist, self-contained and self-confident, living with exuber-

ance on the intellectual and moral capital of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Looking ahead, one might discern modern America—urban and industrial, hopelessly entangled in the sickness of the world, trying desperately to adjust its institutions and ideas to conditions new and in part alien.

The first fundamental change, Professor Commager argues, was from the world of Newton to the world of Darwin. Americans were well used to problems of adjustment; but the process had hitherto taken place within a stable moral and political framework. Now change was becoming qualitative as well as quantitative. It was not easy for them to find their bearings in a crumbling universe. "For the first time in their national experience they were confronted with a challenge to their philosophical assumptions." Instead of the familiar task of adjusting old institutions only to a new physical environment, they had now to make their moral and political ideas conform to new scientific and philosophical premises.

They became aware only gradually of the immensity of this problem. The first generation, like the buoyant John Fiske, could take evolution in their stride and see in it only new evidence of the grandeur of God. But the symmetry of evolution as a principle was rapidly being complicated by the fruits of evolution in practice. The economic strains and fractures of the last decades of the nineteenth century created doubts and anxieties which hastened the dissolution of the old order. And, for many, evolution was hardening unpleasantly into scientific determinism. Man stood impotent before the massive and unceasing operations of nature, whether in the economies of the laissez-faire school, in the sociology of William Graham Sumner, or in the novels of Theodore Dreiser; or else man gained potency only as he partook of the elemental energies of nature itself, as in the stories of Frank Norris and Jack London. It was but one further step, Professor Commager argues, to the cult of the irrational; where, under the dispensation of Freud, man found himself even more the creature of uncontrollable forces, now no longer in the exterior universe but within his very being.

This was one direction in which the stream of evolution flowed. But the

Walter Winchell

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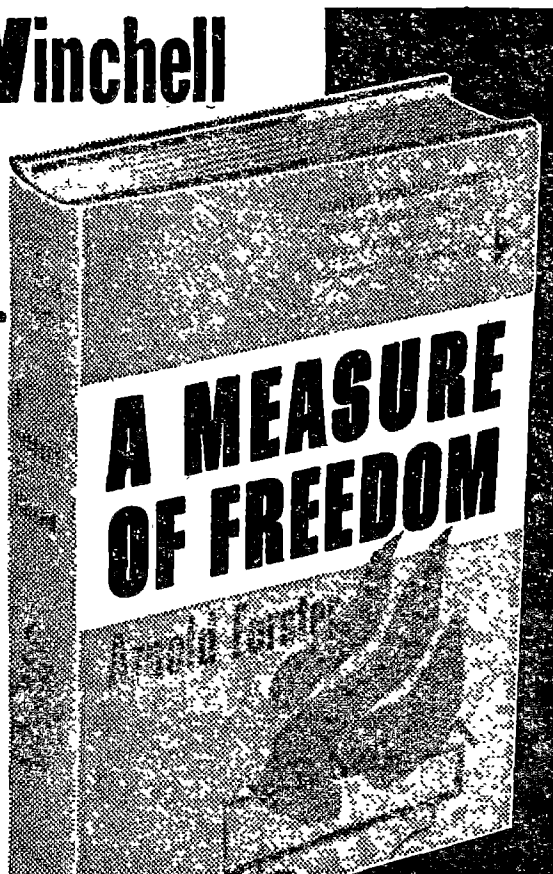
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stream had diverged; and another led in the direction of a suspension of judgment on final questions, an affirmation of the unfinished character of the universe, and a modest testing of truth by its consequences in performance. In his philosophy of pragmatism William James used the methods of science to confound the determinism of science; and John Dewey, by socializing pragmatism, converted it into an instrument of positive change.

These were the radiations, deterministic and voluntaristic, from the scientific universe. Against them, the traditionalists—Willa Cather, Ellen Glasgow, Edwin Arlington Robinson—put up a noble fight for the old order. "They can be understood better in terms of the nineteenth than of the twentieth century," writes Professor Commager; though he adds, "It is a safe prophecy that they will speak to the twenty-first more directly than most of their more vociferous and sensational contemporaries," and he sees in Robinson "the most distinguished of American men of letters of his generation." Still, while tradition could sustain individuals, it could not stem a tide of change. Nor could the old-time religion, perishing in the fatuities of Dayton, Tennessee, withstand the pressures of science; and those faiths which sought accommodation tended to end by making fatal concessions to secularism.

The first half of the book deals, so to speak, with the process of disintegration. The second half deals with the process of reintegration—the affirmative response of the vitalities of American life to the challenge of this strange new universe, grown suddenly cold and complex and baffling. In a brilliant chapter Professor Commager describes the contributions of Lester Ward to the restoration of potency to social theory. He then sets forth the impact of Veblen on economics, the literature of revolt, the innovations in history, the vigorous new impulses in politics, the revolution in law and jurisprudence, the new spirit in architecture. There is a gallery of strong and admirable men here—Par-
rington, Beard, and Turner; Bryan, Wilson, and the two Roosevelts; Pound and Holmes; Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright—and their efforts obviously command Professor Commager's sympathy and allegiance. Yet these ef-

forts, though bold and courageous, were somehow not enough to contain the consequences of the basic transformation. Instead of putting the universe together again, they only developed techniques for living among the ruins.

"The American Mind" ends on a mid-century note of ambiguity. American civilization was by 1950 urban but not urbane, Professor Commager finds. People never had so much leisure before; yet they have never been so hurried. Women had been emancipated, and technology had altered the problems of living; yet one marriage out of four ended in divorce, "and nervous breakdowns became so common as to be almost unfashionable." Mass education had conquered the nation, but it had not notably raised the levels of information or of intelligence. The greater degree of centralization and organization had brought in its wake a terrifying demand for conformity. "That the American mind was more mature in the mid-twentieth than in the mid-

nineteenth or even the mid-eighteenth century was by no means clear." Thus he concludes by suggesting the existence in America today of a paradox more baffling than that of Henry George—the paradox of anxiety in the midst of complacency. It is characteristic that his last two pages are made up, not of affirmations, but of questions.

So bare an outline of so fertile a book omits of necessity the many striking perceptions and illuminating observations along the way. I find Professor Commager's occasional comparisons backward and forward in time—thus comparing Theodore Parker, Jacob Riis, and Steinbeck in their attitudes toward the underprivileged—a most useful device for illustrating vividly the great curve of change. He also makes enlightening contrasts with Britain; as when he speculates why the British writers of the twentieth century were never alienated from their society as were the Americans. The capacity for comparison shows the advantages of writing intel-

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lectual history out of so well-stocked a mind.

Yet a shortcoming of the book derives from its failure to carry comparisons far enough to justify its title. Professor Commager asserts in the preface his belief that "there is a distinctively American way of thought, character, and conduct," and announces his desire to illustrate the American way in the book itself. But the book does not, I believe, establish the validity of his American exceptionalism; and, indeed, it would require a quite different book to do so. Such a book would involve a much more systematic comparative study of ideas and behavior, particularly as between the United States and Western Europe. It is a book which Professor Commager is eminently qualified to write, and which I hope he will turn out some day. But it is not this book.

The weakest chapter, I think, is *The Cult of the Irrational*. Professor Commager has little patience with the attempts to master in language and imagery the moral and intellectual complexities he himself describes so ably in other passages of the book; and he imputes to some of the experimenters a perverse desire "to achieve a highly intellectualized—and exclusive—obscurity," adding that "no one who studies the career of Ezra Pound can doubt that the search for obscurity was related to hatred of democracy." I would quarrel too with some of his literary judgments—the rating of Thomas Wolfe above Hemingway or Faulkner as a literary artist, for example, the taking seriously of James Branch Cabell, or the designation of "The Octopus" as Frank Norris's "best" novel. And I feel that Professor Commager has been beguiled

by the Veblen vogue from a full recognition of the extent to which the triumph of Veblen's conception of economic method would have prevented the flowering of Keynesian economics in our own day. There are also occasional factual slips: Moran of the *Lady Letty* was, of course, a woman and not a man; James V. Forrestal was not a lawyer; and Charles A. Beard's book about Jeffersonianism was not called "The Economic Interpretation of Jeffersonian Democracy." While I am caviling, I might as well mention the index, which omits many names to be found in the book, includes others with only a partial listing of the pages on which they appear, and seems to be constructed on no discernible principle.

But though any reader is bound to dissent from certain of Professor Commager's judgments and emphases, "The American Mind" is a wise and suggestive book which all students of American civilization can read with benefit. It fills in the intellectual background of our contemporary perplexities with insight and vigor. And in so doing it provides important clues to our central dilemma. Professor Commager notes sadly in his mid-century affirmation what he calls "a progressive atrophy of the creative instinct of the average American." One reason for that atrophy, he believes, is the mounting pressure toward conformity; life is becoming increasingly regimented. Yet he continues, "Regimentation was not, as political critics would have it, a product of government regulation or of a Communist conspiracy but of a technological economy, and it was, perhaps, inevitable."

I wish he had explored that "per-

haps" a bit farther. For I think he is pointing here toward the crucial problem of our time—the problem of preventing an increasingly centralized economic system from whirling into its inner vortex all the ideas, all the values, all the freedoms which give life meaning and dignity. It is this problem, as Professor Commager suggests, which has shadowed American life since the 1880's. All we know today is that none of the simple solutions—such as transferring the titles of ownership to the state—can meet the fundamental problem. "The American Mind" gives a rewarding and, on the whole, heartening picture of the resources—moral as well as intellectual—with which Americans will try to meet the problem in the time that remains.

ARTHUR SCHLESINGER, JR.

The Facts About Shakespeare

SHAKESPEARE OF LONDON. By Marchette Chute. E. P. Dutton and Company. \$4.

BIOGRAPHERS of Shakespeare all confront the fact that on one side stand the splendor and loveliness of his poetry together with a few contemporary testimonials of affection and esteem, and, on the other, the arid records of his commonplace life. There is nothing discreditable in the records, but they do reveal that Shakespeare was careful in his investments, capable of over-storing grain, slow to pay his taxes, and quick to collect his debts. A sensitive Frenchman—Jusserand, I believe—once said that when this winged spirit walked the earth (as, of course, he had to do), he trod with feet of lead. For many years the standard *Life* of Shakespeare was Sidney Lee's. Lee accepted the hard facts without demur and presented the success story of a middle-class provincial. His book was supplanted in this country by that of Joseph Q. Adams, a precise scholar but one who could not resist mingling with the facts a few romantic fancies to bring the story nearer to the heart's desire. In 1930 came Sir Edmund Chambers's indispensable two-volume compilation, which attempts no interpretation at all, and in 1932 John Dover Wilson's "The Essential Shakespeare." Wilson blamed the bourgeois flavor of Sidney Lee's *Life* upon the fact that he

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