

THE AMERICAN MIND

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THE foreign visitor is commonly warned that New York is not America, and the meaning of the statement is clear. But it is not very helpful. A more relevant observation surely is that New York is very American. To go from New York to Fort Wayne, Indiana, is not to go to another country, or even to meet something different: the difference is only in size and degree. Neither in New York nor Pittsburgh, Boston or San Francisco, Cincinnati or Seattle is the foreigner moved to make comparisons of americanism; in the 'old' South and New Mexico 'regionalism' is still very marked; but in only a few, a very few, places—Sante Fé, for example, or, I suppose, old New Orleans—does he ask rhetorically, 'Am I really in the United States?' It is one of the most astounding things about this astounding country—its unity and uniformity.

The area of the United States is three million square miles. New York is as far from the Californian Redwoods as London is from the Urals, the distance from Galveston to the Canadian border is about the distance from Athens to the North Cape. Some 140 million souls live in this area, originating in every nation of Europe (there were still thirteen million foreign-born American citizens in 1930), and with of course a big African element. And yet they are 'We, the people of the United States' as much as the homogeneous two-and-a-half million of 1776. Neither differences of national origin nor geographical and climatic differences—and they are very great—have produced the deep diversities one would expect: the 'melting-pot' melted—and then remade. Neighbours in the Twin Cities of Minnesota may respectively pronounce the word 'jug' as 'yoog' and 'choock' and accuse one another of not knowing English, an unreconstructed lady from Back Bay may (for other reasons) insist that 'Idaho' is only a mispronunciation of 'Ohio', the Brooklyn juggling with vowels and consonants must be heard to be believed: but a Vermonter is as intelligible to a Texan as a Dutchman is unintelligible to a Dane; only an American from a very remote back-block, or one speaking with too many reminiscences of his native Algonquian,

could cause the confusion that a Lowland Scot may arouse any day of the week in Birmingham.

This uniformity is reinforced by a chronic suspicion of social nonconformity. Negroes, Jews, Catholics, Mormons or people who wear beards suffer socially—to the varying degrees that they do suffer—for being ‘different’—to the varying degrees that they are different. But Negroes live and think in just the same ways as their social opposite numbers among the Whites. The timber dwelling-houses that we admire in New England are met in less and less admirable metamorphoses in residential sections all across the country; go to sleep in a bedroom in Philadelphia, wake up in one in Saint Louis and nothing is changed: the breakfast cereals below Mount Whitney are the same, and so, unfortunately, is the bacon. To meet the members of a Rotary club is the same experience in Portland, Oregon, as it is in Portland, Maine; a discussion in the faculty common-room can be no less penetrating and well-informed at a college in Montana than in Maryland. Everywhere are minds working in the same sort of way, showing the same sort of reactions, presenting the same situations and warning-lights to the visitor from outside.

‘It was not, in short, particular environments that determined the American character or created the American type but the whole of the American environment . . . the general triumphed over the particular. That people, which displayed the most diverse racial stocks and the most variegated climates and soils, achieved a distinctive and stable national character with an ease that confounded not only the expectations of her critics but all history and experience.’

To propose a book on ‘The European Mind’ might well provoke mockery. But to write on ‘The American Mind’ raises no eyebrows. It can so obviously be done. And Professor Commager has done it, done it with that unrelenting, tireless thoroughness which is an American characteristic in work of this sort, acquired no doubt partly from the great German element; but done with a grace, a humour and wit, that that thoroughness too often lacks.¹

Professor Commager’s first chapter is a long description and

1 *The American Mind: an Interpretation of American Thought and Character since the 1880's*. By Henry Steele Commager. (Cumberlege: Oxford University Press, 30s.)

analysis of the nineteenth-century American as he was up to the 'nineties—the watershed of American history'. He then shows us the literature of the transition years, the bringing of society within the embrace of evolution, the impact of pragmatism, determinism in literature and the cult of the irrational, with the rearguard action of the traditionalists, the secularisation and consequent spiritual ineffectiveness of Protestantism, the growth by immigration and the somewhat ambiguous influence of Catholicism—or rather of those aspects of it to which Mr Commager refers. It must be supposed that Catholic Christianity did not impinge on the American mind solely in terms of the potential political and cultural power of the Church, the Syllabus of 1864, '*Testem benevolentiae*', moral problems of marriage and the films, parochial schools, and Al Smith's candidature for the presidency. In spite of many people's understandable fears, 'It might be maintained', writes Professor Commager, 'that the Catholic Church was, during this period, one of the most effective of all agencies for democracy and Americanization'; at the same time he would seem to agree with D. W. Brogan that, 'One result of this preoccupation with the immigrants has been that the Catholic Church in America has counted for astonishingly little in the formation of the American intellectual climate'.

In the passage from puritanism, rationalism and idealism to an evolutionary realism and scientific determinism, from agriculture and isolation to industry and involvement, Henry Adams 'illuminates better than any of his contemporaries the nature and operations of the complex forces that were hurrying the older America across the threshold of the twentieth century'. He stood out against multiplicity, chaos and stagnation: force for force, he insisted, the Blessed Virgin Mary is as intelligible as the dynamo, and he was quick to point out that Faraday and Clerk-Maxwell would have joined St Bernard in condemnation of Abelard. But he was on the losing side, and he knew it; and in his second part Professor Commager examines the new science of society and the new economics (already in 1895 Lester Ward remarked that, 'The charge of paternalism is chiefly made by the class that enjoys the largest share of government protection'), the literature of revolt and historical writing and interpretation, with the widespread *trahison des clercs*, applications of political theory, the evolution of law; and, after a chapter on architecture and society,

he balances his opening by a final examination of the twentieth-century American:

'That America was the offspring of Britain was acknowledged; that the roots of her culture and her institutions traced back to Greece and Rome and Palestine was not to be forgotten; and the basic institutions of state, church, and family which Americans maintained and the fundamental values which they cherished advertised the origin and the relationship.'

They still do. But the reaction from all the nonsense about 'our American cousins' and 'hands across the sea' has gone so far as to become almost an exaggeration. In Professor Commager's analyses, surely masterly, of the *American character* 'it is precisely because American thought owes so much to English and European thought that I have attempted to distinguish what are its American forms, characteristics, idioms, and idiosyncrasies'. But the many profound differences and conflicts still leave not unimportant particulars of which an Englishman can say, 'How like us'. 'The reluctance of Americans to exalt formal philosophy or indulge in metaphysical speculation'; respect for traditional morality; individualism combined with a passion for voluntary associations; practical, opportunist . . . and more. The well-prepared visitor to the United States who is nevertheless surprised at the unexpected differences he keeps on meeting, can at the same time be no less surprised by the evidences of 'Englishness' to be encountered in individuals whose names may be Metzger, Kakowski, Nyblom—or even O'Reilly. Whatever her history since 1776, and whatever the particularity of her experiences, however many millions of immigrants she has absorbed from continental Europe and elsewhere, the origins of the United States are seen to be English—and when I say English I do not mean 'British'. We both 'speak the tongue That Shakespeare spake; the faith and morals hold Which Milton held'. That over-worked quotation is very relevant. Cheap jokes about 'Americaneese' or criticism of Milton's faith and morals are not relevant: for Shakespeare's tongue is more than language, and Milton was greater than some of his convictions.

Similarly when we come to compare Mr Commager's twentieth-century with his nineteenth-century American. The picture on the whole seems discouraging. It is certainly frank: no censorious and superior Englishman could have been franker, or

perhaps so quiet. But it seems somehow not to tell the whole story. Indeed, Professor Commager says it does not. In general terms,

'it could be said that the two generations after 1890 witnessed a transition from certainty to uncertainty, from faith to doubt, from security to insecurity, from seeming order to ostentatious disorder, but the generalization was too loose to cover adequately the diverse manifestations of the American mind and too tentative to justify dogmatic conclusions. . . . All that can be said with certainty is that twentieth-century civilization was more complex than nineteenth and that even partial mastery of it required both intellectual maturity and moral integrity. None familiar with the statistics of crime, of divorce, or of psychiatric aberrations, with the history of depressions or of wars, could plausibly assert that the twentieth-century American's mastery of his environment was more than partial.'

The contradictions involved are excellently illustrated by Mr Commager's blistering summary of the typical American as the advertisers picture him—or her: at the end of which he says, 'The problem remained a fascinating one, for if it was clear that the advertisers libeled the American character, it was equally clear that Americans tolerated and even rewarded those who libeled them'. He sums up: 'The American character, as delineated by Tocqueville, Bryce and Brogan at half-century intervals, seems substantially the same: the differences are quantitative and material rather than qualitative and moral'.

Professor Commager has not written a history but an interpretation of the distinctively American way of thought, character and conduct. The book stands squarely on its own feet; it brings its author level with Mr Herbert Agar in explaining the United States to Great Britain. But it is a happy coincidence that the publication over here of *The American Mind* should be accompanied by Mr Agar's *The United States: the Presidents, the Parties and the Constitution* (Eyre & Spottiswoode; 25s. net), which gives brilliantly and in detail the political and historical background of what Professor Commager writes. For we in Great Britain are badly informed about the American political background. It is not altogether our own fault. I suppose that the English visitor seeks information (unless Hollywood be his overriding interest) on no matter more assiduously than on the Democratic and

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Republican parties; and on no matter are the replies more unenlightening. We may be referred to Bryce's classic statement on the subject, and we may have sufficient interest to look it up: but even then we may be more bewildered than understanding. Though he does not quote it until his penultimate page, and then in a footnote, Mr Agar may almost be said to have written an account of the origins and development of American political institutions in justification of Vice-President Garner's observation in 1938, that 'Each of the two parties is in a sense a coalition. Any party to serve the country must be a party of all sorts of views.'

Mr Agar's powers of analysis and exposition, his realism uncorrupted by cynicism, his eloquent sincerity and the pungent readability of his writing stand in no need of advertisement or commendation. There can be but one regret. Beginning with the Revolution, he ends when Theodore Roosevelt leaves the White House in 1909. But it is precisely since the first world war that there has been in Great Britain greater interest in American current affairs and trends than at any time since the War between the States—*et pour cause*. Mr Agar's book explains by inference a good deal of their significance: but there is still much that we do not understand. For example, the venomous hatred or sneaking maliciousness (those expressions are not too strong) shown by so many Americans towards the memory of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Perhaps the answer is in *The American Mind*.

'The battle for Europe requires of the United States a far better public-relations job than she has produced up to now', wrote the New York *Commonweal* in an editorial some months ago. She could not have better men on the job than Herbert Agar and Henry Steele Commager. But public-relations is not a one-way traffic: we must be ready to listen with attention and consider with sympathy. People in Great Britain are not free from anti-Americanism, some of it ignorant or thoughtless, some of it sheer prejudice, even among those who should know better. Maybe the address of the Manchester working-men to Lincoln in 1862, which Mr Agar rightly calls 'noble', seems also a little ingenuous to us; but eighty-nine years later our common task is to 'preserve, protect and defend' things of which the Constitution of the United States is itself a product: and the common resolution of *how* it can and shall be done is part of the task.