

*in American
Literature*

EDMUND FULLER

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Reading Consultant: HERBERT POTELL

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FRONTISPIECE: an oil painting of the American eagle by the artist W. F. Vaché. This painting was hung over the door of President Lincoln's cabin on the steamer River Queen. (Courtesy, The Home Insurance Company.)

Artists who have contributed to the illustration of this book are: Robert Shore, Harvey Dinnerstein, Marilyn Miller, Lawrence Bjorklund, Donald Bolognese, Joseph Weishar, Aldren Watson, and Raphael Palacios.

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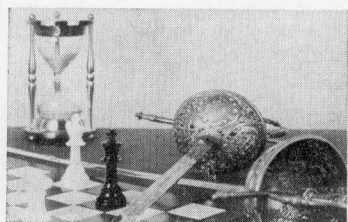
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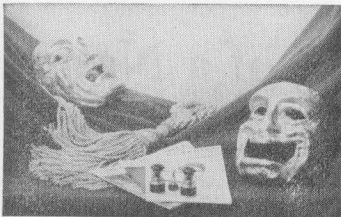
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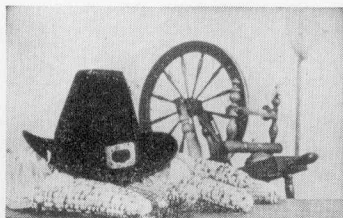
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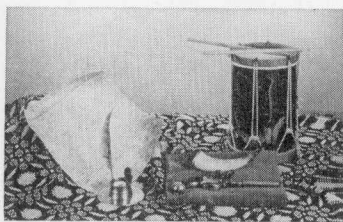
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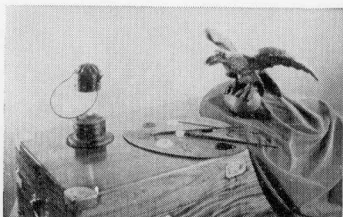
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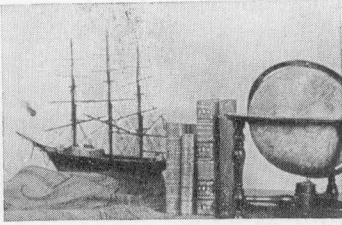
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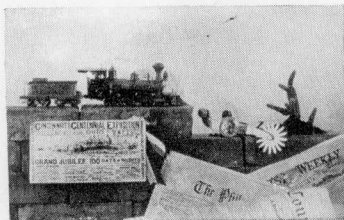
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WHAT IS AN AMERICAN?

OVER THE COURSE OF TWO CENTURIES, the question has been asked again and again: What is an American? The fascination of it, the element that makes it just as lively a query today as it was two hundred years ago, is the fact that the American, like everyone else in the world but perhaps more intensely than most, is constantly changing and developing. Parts of the earliest answers remain true, but new conditions demand consideration. Each generation of Americans has, in its own way, reviewed the question and stated the answer.

One of the earliest answers — and still a memorable one — was made by Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, who was born in France in 1735, spent some time in England, and emigrated to America in 1765. He settled on a farm in what is now New York state and remained until 1780, the late years of the American Revolution. While he was here, he wrote a book called *Letters from an American Farmer*. It was published first in England in 1782, and in America, at Philadelphia, in 1793. The book was not reprinted until more than a hundred years later, in 1904. De Crèvecoeur died in France in 1813, unaware that the world would someday acclaim his modest book to be a classic. The English essayist William Hazlitt said that the author of the *Letters* was one of the three great North American writers of the eighteenth century. Whether or not this judgment still stands, the fact is that De Crèvecoeur uniquely caught the spirit of this new land: he saw the American as a man and citizen, and as a forerunner of free people everywhere. The clarity and directness of his vision brings to us, American readers of today, remembrance of our origins and a thrill of recognition.

FROM *Letters from an American Farmer*

What then is the American, this new man? He is either a European, or the descendant of a European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French