

Irving H. Bartlett

The American Mind in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

The Crowell American History Series



Irving H. Bartlett
CARNEGIE INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

The American Mind in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

Thomas Y. Crowell Company
NEW YORK
ESTABLISHED 1834

Copyright © 1967 by Thomas Y. Crowell Company

All Rights Reserved

Except for use in a review,
the reproduction or utilization of this work
in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means,
now known or hereafter invented,
including photocopying and recording,
and in any information storage and retrieval system
is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 67-14299

Series design by Judith Woracek Barry

Manufactured in the United States of America

Crowell Publications in History

KENNETH M. STAMPP

Advisory Editor for American History

The Crowell American History Series

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN & ABRAHAM S. EISENSTADT, *Editors*

The American Mind in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

IRVING H. BARTLETT

Parties and Politics in the Early Republic, 1789-1815

MORTON BORDEN

The New Deal

PAUL K. CONKIN

EDITORS' FOREWORD

It is a commonplace that each age writes its own history, for the reason that man sees the past in the foreshortened perspective of his own experience. This has certainly been true of the writing of American history. The purpose of our historical writing remains constant: to offer us a more certain sense of where we are going by indicating the road we have taken in getting there. But it is precisely because our own generation is redefining its direction, the way other generations have redefined theirs before us, that the substance of our historical writing is changing. We are thinking anew of our direction because of our newer values and premises, our newer sense of how we can best fulfill the goals of our society, our newer outlook on the meaning of American life. Thus, the vitality of the present inspires the vitality of our writing about the past.

It is the plan of the *Crowell American History Series* to offer the reader a survey of the point of arrival of recent scholarship on the central themes and problems of American history. The scholars we have invited to do the respective volumes of the series are younger individuals whose monographs have been well received by their peers and who have demonstrated their mastery of the subjects on which they are writing. The author of each volume has undertaken to present a summation of the principal lines of discussion that historians of a particular subject have been pursuing. However, he has not written a mere digest of historical literature. The author has been concerned, moreover, to offer the reader a sufficient factual and narrative account to help him perceive the larger dimensions of the subject. Each author, moreover, has arrived at his own conclusions about those aspects of his subject that have been matters of difference and controversy. In effect, he has written not

only about where the subject stands in historiography but also about where he himself stands on the subject. And each volume concludes with an extensive critical essay on authorities.

The books in this series are designed for use in the basic course in American history, although they could be used, with great benefit, in advanced courses as well. Such a series has a particular utility in times such as these, when the traditional format of our American history courses is being altered to accommodate a greater diversity of texts and reading materials. The series offers a number of distinct advantages. It extends and deepens the dimensions of course work in American history. In proceeding beyond the confines of the traditional textbook, it makes clear that the study of our past is, more than the student might otherwise infer, at once complex, sophisticated, and profound. It presents American history as a subject of continuing vitality and fresh investigation. The work of experts in their respective fields, it opens up to the student the rich findings of historical inquiry. It invites the student to join with his older and more experienced colleagues in pondering anew the major themes and problems of our past. It challenges the student to participate actively in exploring American history and to seek out its wider reaches on his own.

John Hope Franklin
Abraham S. Eisenstadt

CONTENTS

- One: Interpreting American Democratic Thought, *1*
- Two: Religion, Philosophy, and Science in the American
Democracy, *5*
RELIGION, *6*
PHILOSOPHY, *18*
SCIENCE, *25*
- Three: Political and Social Thought in the American
Democracy, *32*
THE MIND OF THE JACKSONIANS, *33*
THE REFORM IMPULSE, *38*
CONSERVATISM AND DEMOCRACY, *55*
- Four: The Mind of the South, *73*
THE DEMOCRATIC MIND IN THE SOUTH, *74*
THE SOUTHERN MIND AS APOLOGIST FOR SLAVERY, *78*
THE REACTIONARY ENLIGHTENMENT, *92*
- Five: The Democratic Imagination, *94*
WHITMAN: THE DEMOCRAT AS POET, *97*
THE NOVEL IN AMERICA, *103*
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE: THE DEMOCRAT AS PURITAN, *105*
HERMAN MELVILLE: THE DEMOCRAT AS SKEPTIC, *109*
- Six: Conclusion, *114*
Bibliographical Essay, 120
Index, 125

ONE

Interpreting American Demo- cratic Thought

The American mind from about 1830 to 1860 is both a product of and a commentator upon the expanding political, social, and economic democracy of the period. Three themes that we will find recurring often in the thought of the period are closely related to those discussed by Ralph Gabriel in *The Course of American Democratic Thought*. They are (1) belief in the free individual (which implies equality), (2) belief in the moral law (which implies religion), and (3) belief in the American

mission (which implies nationalism). A fourth theme, requiring more explanation, may be described as the ambivalent response in the American mind to the pace of change. Whether measured in terms of population increase, territorial expansion, urbanization, economic growth, or technological development, American society was being transformed during this period at a spectacular rate. Some Americans, like Whitman, rejoiced in the change. Others, like Hawthorne and Melville, were skeptical. A few, like Calhoun, despaired. The most characteristic response, as William Taylor points out in a recent study entitled *Cavalier and Yankee*, was an ambivalent one: "The rapidity with which every aspect of national life was changing produced both sets of response: The optimism and the despair. Some of the alarm appears to have sprung from the very fact that American institutions were free and men were free to change them—for better or for worse. It was precisely because the Union had grown and changed so rapidly, for example, that people began to wonder whether it could survive."

For a long time the interpretation of American thought during the middle of the nineteenth century was dominated by the work of Frederick Jackson Turner and Vernon Parrington. Turner held that American democratic ideals and aspirations were a product of the frontier, and Parrington described the development of American thought during the period as an ideological conflict in which liberals in the Jefferson-Jackson tradition attempted to defend democratic values against attack from a declining Federalist aristocracy and a rising, acquisitive capitalistic oligarchy.

Both of these interpretations must be modified in the light of recent scholarship. Turner's frontier thesis has been attacked for both substantive and methodological reasons. In a recent book entitled *The Frontier Mind*, Arthur Moore takes issue with the assumption that the West was the custodian of American virtue and vigor. Taking Kentucky as a case Moore finds the typical frontiersman to have been a cultural barbarian characterized by sloth, rapacity, and violence, ignorant of the intellectual inheritance of the Enlightenment and, except for his ability to kill Indians and survive in the wilderness, unable to contribute

greatly to the realization of the American dream. A more fundamental objection to the Turner Thesis is made in terms of methodology. Many scholars have pointed out that if the frontier has been the decisive influence in shaping American civilization, other nations with frontiers should have shaped similar civilizations. It is easy to show that this has not been true, and thus modern historians look for other explanations.

Parrington's interpretation of American thought as a fierce domestic dialogue pitting liberals and radicals against conservatives and reactionaries must also be modified. Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* offers a challenging counter-interpretation. Hartz finds the key to his thesis in Tocqueville's statement that Americans were born free. Lacking a feudal tradition they did not have to develop an authentic radical tradition. A liberal tradition (Hartz calls this "The Lockian ethos") arose in America, "and this is the factor which like some ultimate Hegelian force keeps showing its face in the various aspects" of our history. Almost without exception, Hartz argues, American thinkers have agreed with each other in accepting the Lockian ethos (the right of private property and the right of self-government). According to Hartz any society developing as America did in the first half of the nineteenth century, with no feudal background, no peasantry, and no proletariat, was bound to move toward democracy and capitalism. "The irony of early American history, however, is that these impulses, instead of supplementing each other, seemed to fight a tremendous political battle." Jacksonian Democrats likened the Whigs to the corrupt Old World aristocracy; the Whigs rejoined by comparing the Jacksonians to the bloodthirsty rabble in Europe. Yet both had immeasurably more in common with each other than with their alleged counterparts abroad. The typical American thinker invariably represented the American liberal consensus. Parrington's mistake was in confusing the rhetorical differences of political opponents with nonexistent ideological differences.

As we pursue our examination of the American mind in the middle of the nineteenth century we can expect to find repeated emphasis placed on the values of individualism and

equality, the moral law and religion, the American mission and nationalism, the ambivalent response to change. We will trace the development of American thought in a burgeoning democratic society, searching both for the liberal consensus which joined America's most significant thinkers together and for the *significant differences* which divided them.

TWO

Religion, Philosophy, and Science in the American Democracy

Through religion, philosophy, and science men attempt to understand and bring themselves into harmonious relationship with the universe. In our own time philosophy and science have become highly specialized disciplines and have lost their intimate connection with religious inquiry. In the three decades before the Civil War, however, they were inseparable. Theologians, philosophers, and scientists, whatever their special in-

terests, shared and expressed the common values of American democracy.

RELIGION

In 1922 Harold Stearns edited an influential book entitled *Civilization in the United States*. He included over thirty articles on subjects ranging all the way from politics and science to sex and humor, but he left out any discussion of religion in America. The reason he gave was simple. He could not find anyone to write on the subject. Two years ago a distinguished American historian, Henry F. May, contended in the *American Historical Review* that "for the study and understanding of American culture, the recovery of American religious history may well be the most important achievement of the last thirty years."

The renewal of interest in the history of American religion can be explained in different ways. It is partly a result of the enormous impact that theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr have had on American intellectuals in the last thirty years. It derives somewhat from the work of American literary critics like F. O. Matthiessen, which has become increasingly concerned with the religious ideas of such classic American writers as Hawthorne and Melville. In American historiography it is due above all to the scholarship of Perry Miller. In the foreword to his first book, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts*, published in 1933, Miller justified his exhaustive attention to religious ideas by venturing the thesis "that whatever may be the case in other centuries, in the sixteenth and seventeenth certain men of decisive importance took religion seriously; that they often followed spiritual dictates in comparative disregard of ulterior considerations; that those who led the Great Migration to Massachusetts and who founded the colony were predominantly men of this stamp." Although Miller was primarily concerned with the intellectual history of New England during the colonial period, his prodigious scholarship ranged freely into later periods, and he demonstrated that theology was a primary concern

of the American mind at least through the middle of the nineteenth century.

Tocqueville emphasized the pre-eminence of religion to Americans in the middle of the nineteenth century when he claimed that there was "no country in the world in which Christianity retained a greater influence over the souls of men." Our agreement with Tocqueville, however, does not mean that the religious temper of the country in the 1830's, 40's, and 50's was simply a further flowering of seeds planted by the Puritans. Perhaps the ghost of Jonathan Edwards was still abroad in the land, but every year it grew more wraithlike and lost more of its haunting power. The men and women who flocked to support Jackson's banner were the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Edwards's auditors. Many of them still had an appetite for strong religion, but they wanted it on terms befitting a free-born people who had rejected the tyrannies of the Old World for the democracy of the New. Calvin's famous five points which emphasized the sovereignty of God and the depravity and helplessness of man needed to be rewritten. Since the high office of the theologian is not to destroy but to sustain and increase the faith of his fathers, it is not surprising to find that the most representative religious thinkers of the period, however they might disagree over specific points, found common ground in their attempt to make religious faith palatable to a generation brought up in the democratic faith—a faith that emphasized the rights and dignity of man and the self-improvement of mankind.

The history of religious thought during this period is essentially the history of the transformation of Calvinism, and its immediate roots go back to the eighteenth century when such splendid representatives of the American Enlightenment as Benjamin Franklin and Jonathan Edwards were in their prime. These two men, in some ways so different, were of one mind in their concern to make their religious ideas conform to the demands of rational men and to the discoveries of modern science. Although born into a strongly Calvinistic family, Franklin was repelled by the harsh strictures of Calvinism. When

he was about fifteen, a time when most pious young men were expected to worry over the state of their souls, Franklin discovered deism. The religious ideas which he developed with the help of his reading in Locke, Newton, and other Enlightenment writers left little room for supernaturalism. Calvin's God of wrath was transformed into a benevolent master mechanic and prime mover of the universe. The quest for salvation was replaced by the quest for morality and worldly success, and the sense of sin gave way to the knowledge that man by the use of reason could live blamelessly without God's intervention.

Like Franklin, Jonathan Edwards also studied the works of Locke and Newton, but his brilliant treatises were essentially a work of conservation, and had the effect of strengthening Calvinist orthodoxy by showing how modern refinements in psychology and physics supported the doctrines of natural depravity, predestination, and supernatural grace. Franklin believed that morality was the core of religious life and that the world would reward the moral man. Edwards insisted that man was a naturally sinful creature, utterly beyond redemption unless God chose to infuse truly religious affections into him in the form of a genuine "saving" or "gracious" experience.

During Edwards's own lifetime the great majority of American believers were more sympathetic to Calvinism than to the liberal ideas of Franklin. By the turn of the century, however, the Calvinists had turned to the defensive almost everywhere, and for the next several decades the common mission of our most significant Protestant theologians was to justify religion in doctrinal terms that the new generations would accept. William Ellery Channing attempted to do this by emphasizing the liberalism of Unitarian Christianity. Charles Grandison Finney attempted to do it by preaching a new kind of revivalism. Horace Bushnell sought to do it by recasting the whole structure of orthodox theology according to the temper of the new age.

William Ellery Channing

It is difficult for modern readers to appreciate the impact of William Ellery Channing on the generation that came into maturity in the pre-Civil War period. When Channing died

in 1842, Theodore Parker claimed that “no man in America” had left such a sphere of influence, “no man since Washington” had “done so much to elevate his country.”

Channing was born in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1780. He graduated from Harvard in 1798 and returned there three years later to pursue theological studies. In 1803 he assumed the ministry of Boston’s Federal Street Congregation. He retained this pulpit throughout his career and from it preached most of the sermons that established his reputation as the father of American Unitarianism.

Channing is the supreme example in American thought of the Enlightenment mind reaching out for romanticism. He was literally a child of the American Revolution. His grandfather had signed the Declaration of Independence. His father had studied with James Madison at Princeton, and as a boy of seven Channing himself had been present at the convention when Rhode Island ratified the Constitution. He grew up with the new nation, and the optimistic view of human nature on which the American experiment was based greatly influenced his own thinking.

Neither Edwards nor Franklin offered spiritual nourishment for Channing. Edwards’s Calvinism was too severe, and the barren history of New England theology after Edwards, composed for the most part of a seemingly endless succession of wrangling controversies over the precise definition of narrow theological concepts, was distasteful to Channing. Franklin’s deism, on the other hand, was too cold and much too secular. Channing did not share Franklin’s worldliness. Like Edwards he had gone through his own solitary vigil of the spirit and he could never subscribe to a religious system which substituted a first cause for a personal God.

Channing’s course lay somewhere between the extremes of Edwards and Franklin. It was preceded by the development of a group of liberal Congregational ministers clustered mostly around Boston about the time of the Great Awakening. These clergymen, of whom Charles Chauncy (1704-1787) was probably the most influential, rejected predestination, and without questioning the authority of Scripture or the existence of a