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Mainstream

BY

HAMILTON BASSO

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INTRODUCTION

TO BE an American is to be something new under the sun. One index to that newness, and not the least significant, is the difficulty of definition. Who is he, this American? The Boston Brahmin, the Allegheny mountaineer, the Louisiana Creole, the Ohio corn-and-hog farmer, the Pennsylvania steel-worker, the sons, grandsons, great-grandsons of a surge of immigrants from all over the world—how is it possible to strike an average or a norm? One cannot, obviously. The happier inspiration would be not to try.

To speak of the American, then, is to speak of a mythical person; yet speak of him we must. It is a human habit, when dwelling on that which has no factual existence, an essence or an ideal, to resort to parables and symbols. The language of politics and business, in this respect, is at one with the language of mythology and religion. And our mythical American, without having his character tailored too much, can be made fairly representative of them all; because, however great the differences between individual Americans, however marked their points of dissimilarity, there is yet enough uniformity of thought and temper to set upon them the mark of an unmistakable family resemblance. They speak the same kind of language and their intellectual pockets jingle with the same kind of change. The Boston Brahmin and the Louisiana Creole, chancing to meet in a foreign country, will soon discover and recognize each other. Depth may call to depth, or shallowness to shallowness, but the recognition will be there.

If the American had belonged to a tribe of head-hunters, or to a race of African pygmies, this book, at best, would be only an inconsequential footnote to a vast body of literature. Our libraries would be full of books and monographs on the subject, bearing such titles as *The John Applegates: A Study of Their Cults And Cere-*

monies and *Einflüsse der Europäischen Zivilisation auf das Familienleben des Johannes Applegate*, and great men like Charles Doughty would have gone to live among them, sharing their lives and their hardships, and written great classics like *Arabia Deserta*. And, similarly, if a worker in anthropology should come across indisputable evidence that an Australian bushman and a Sioux Indian had met in hostile territory and shared a meal together, we would have a learned volume on the subject, full of notes and occult language, which would almost certainly gain its author an academic promotion and a raise in pay.

The encounter of our American friends, however, is hardly less remarkable, full of implications and hidden meaning which we, who in our American fashion take every miracle for granted, are apt to overlook. They might be seen as performers in a rather tremendous drama, acting out one of our basic American affirmations—that man is more than a tribal creature, that he can rise above the passions of blood-thinking, that he can live in peace and friendship with members of other tribes. (Always, of course, within the narrow limits of human frailty.) And so our travelers, instead of trying to tomahawk each other, or sitting in that higher stage of social behavior characterized by the smoldering hostility that might distinguished a similar meeting between an Italian and a Croat (or, for that matter, a Frenchman and an Englishman), shake hands and start talking about business and the peculiarities of foreigners and the various excellencies of the United States. Each, in short, recognizes in the other some part of that ideal figment we call the American character.

II

The purpose of this book is simply stated. It begins with the assumption that there is an American character and that it has been shaped by a series of influences which, in their sum, may be taken to represent that other ideal figment we call the American tradition. It will be our hope to chart, as one might roughly chart a river-system, the larger tributaries in whose various mergings we see the mainstream of the tradition, and to indicate how these, in turn, have helped shape the American character. We have not sought any

especial completeness, knowing our limitations, and also knowing that a fully detailed map of the system, down to the last minor headwater, is beyond the reach of a single cartographer. Like La Salle going down the Mississippi, we can only hope to indicate the general shape and current of the stream. And if, at the end, we seem to have overlooked rivers as seemingly important as the Missouri while giving undue attention to others as small as the Clinch, it must be put down to the temperament and prejudice of the explorer. For these, naturally, he does not apologize.

It may be well, indeed, to emphasize the matter of prejudice if only because it is so generally concealed. The central prejudice behind this book is a prejudice in favor of people. We are more interested in the human condition of our hero, whom we have named John Applegate, than in making use of him, for example, as a convenience to illustrate the theory of economic determinism. It would be futile to deny that John Applegate, like all Americans, has been enormously influenced by many economic forces. But what about the influence of P. T. Barnum? In the making of Americans, in the creation of that which we call the American character, which has been more important—the House of Morgan or the House of Tom Thumb? Our tendency, or prejudice, would be to emphasize the latter.

This prejudice, as might be suspected, has had its effect on method. Aware that we are dealing largely with abstractions, and believing that a parable may often contain more illumination than a column of figures, it has seemed helpful to create a kind of false simplicity by illustrating the tendencies under consideration with biographical examples wherever possible, or, if not that, to take in general a biographical view. But here, again, no large completeness has been sought—it is a lack of ambition, rather than the presence of that admirable quality, that the author would like to stress. For he understands, only too well, that the full story of the American is quite beyond his telling; his or any man's. Poets, novelists, critics, philosophers, historians—all have applied, and still apply, their minds and their imaginations to the matter. And all of them, more or less, have ended where they began—caught in a spell and wondering still.

HAMILTON BASSO

"My boy, you've got to know the *shape* of the river perfectly. It is all there is left to steer by on a very dark night. Everything else is blotted out and gone."

"How on earth am I ever going to learn it, then?"

"How do you follow a hall at home in the dark? Because you know the shape of it. You can't see it."

MARK TWAIN:

Life On The Mississippi

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COTTON MATHER AND JOHN SMITH

The American in the Beginning

IT IS A pleasant evening in June. The time, while close enough to be the present, is already part of the past. John Applegate, who owns and operates a corner drugstore in a small American town, is sitting at home alone. His wife and two children have gone to the movies. Had the picture not been one of those comedies his son calls "screwball," which he has never learned to appreciate, he might have gone with them; his taste runs to out-of-door dramas in technicolor, especially those that have a biographical or historical foundation, and to those lavish song-and-dance spectacles that remind him, a little nostalgically, of the musical comedy he saw in New York the year the Independent Druggists' convention was held there.

After a hard day at the store, its regular routine somewhat complicated by the presence of a young woman demonstrating a new kind of beauty cream, John Applegate finds it restful and pleasant to be alone. He is fairly tired, as is only natural for a middle-aged man who has been on his feet all day, and it is good to be sitting in a pair of old slippers with the little touches of home and comfort all about him—the new radio at his elbow, the family portraits on the upright piano, the latest edition of the adventures of Superman lying on the sofa where Sonny left it, Emily's college textbooks stacked on the table near the new novel she brought home that afternoon from the lending library.

Filling his pipe, John Applegate permits himself a sigh of contentment. Neither an arrogant nor an unctuous man, in fact a rather modest one, he can look back over the labor of his life and call it

good. It is true the times are dark, and a pall of uncertainty hangs over the world, but John Applegate has no real doubts concerning his future or that of the country in which he lives. His confidence is not the same kind of confidence he knew in the years before the Great Depression, the memory of which lies like a raw and ruinous scar across his American optimism, but his faith is still enormous.

This faith is something his critics, his foreign critics in particular, have never been able to understand. To them it is fatuous at best: at worst, childish and absurd. What they fail to comprehend, though this is not the whole explanation of American optimism, is that John Applegate comes by it naturally. It is a direct inheritance from his pioneer ancestors. For whatever else was borne in the wagon trains that creaked across the plains, what hopes or dreams or failures or remembrances of past folly, an essential part of every cargo was a faith in the future—new hopes, new horizons, new fortunes, new times. And if, at journey's end, there were to be new follies and new failures, new regrets, there were always further and further horizons to be tempted and explored. Somewhere, somehow, someday—the face of America was the face of promise. The future lay ahead.

John Applegate's forebears, moving into the western wilderness, brought almost nothing with them save themselves. They cannot be called a people without memories, but even their memories were new. Time and the Atlantic Ocean had so thoroughly cut off two generations of Americans from the Old World that, as the wagons rolled onward, it was already a new and different people moving into a new and different land. The past, in the historical sense, did not exist for the pioneer. It was something he had slipped and was glad to slip—inferior, exhausted, outworn. A pilgrim on the road to a new Mecca, Walt Whitman was his prophet.

Have the elder races halted?

Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied over there beyond the seas?

We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

All the past we leave behind,
We debouch upon a newer mightier world, varied world,
Fresh and strong the world we seize, world of labor and the
march,

Pioneers! O pioneers!

John Applegate is the son of his fathers. He, too, has left the past behind. To the despair of Europeans, and those of his countrymen who are sometimes oppressed by a feeling of spiritual emptiness, he finds it dull and tiresome to think about old patterns of culture and old ways of life. He has reached the age when a misty affection obscures his earlier years, making them seem all warm and golden as if hung with an Indian summer haze, but the past extends no deeper than that—no farther than the time when, as he likes to tell Sonny, you could catch a whole string of trout in the pool just beyond the big gray rock in less than an hour's time. The larger, deeper, richer past touches him not at all—or, at best, only when he finds himself being wooed by Hollywood's version of *Mary, Queen of Scots* or the storming of the Bastille. He is convinced, in his heart, that the new is better than the old. Can the first horseless buggy compare with the models now rolling from the assembly line? Would anyone trade this year's radio for a crystal set? To John Applegate's mind, the questions answer themselves. For while the last geographical frontier may have been reached, he is convinced that there are no limits to the frontiers of man's imagination. Here, in America, the world will see such marvels as have never been seen before. John Applegate believes this as much as he believes anything. He is, as George Santayana has observed, an idealist working on matter.

Such idealism, however, rooted in contentment and an uncritical idea of what the future must bring, cannot help but be occasionally shaken and jarred. The conditions of John Applegate's life are vastly different from those of his grandfather's—more varied, more complex, harder to understand. In the days of the Conestoga wagon the forces that made for failure or success, for war and peace, for prosperity and depression, were not so complicated as to be beyond the

reach of individual exploration. Thomas Jefferson, like John Milton, might reasonably think it possible to master the whole body of useful knowledge. With John Applegate, however, it is different. There are many things which, as he freely admits, are "over his head"; he sometimes feels caught in an enormous complexity. As a result he prefers things to be "simple," put in terms that "the average man" can understand; and, like millions of his countrymen, he is in unconscious revolt against the spiritual aridity of his time.

There are moments, then, more and more frequent of late, when he finds himself slipping into uneasiness and doubt. One such moment comes when, settling more comfortably in his chair, he opens the evening paper and turns on the radio.

The voice that comes over the air is not unfamiliar to him. It belongs to a Senator from a Southern state whose election to office was accomplished largely by means of a hill-billy band and the distribution of half-pound sacks of corn meal. Since his elevation to what Sonny's textbook on civics still calls the highest deliberative body in the world, the Senator has won further distinction by permitting himself to be photographed kissing a blond and bosomy screen star on the Capitol steps, the occasion being Washington's birthday, and by riding down Pennsylvania Avenue on top an elephant's head. John Applegate has followed his antics with a certain amount of amusement, having come to the unintentionally cynical conclusion that the Senate, like the old gray mare, is not what she used to be, and, besides, he does not have a high opinion of the political acumen of Southerners. Witness, for example, Huey P. Long.

Of late, however, the Senator has been appearing before the nation in a more serious role. It is not that blond screen stars and elephants have fallen off in publicity value; it is more that the Senator, living in Washington where the bacteria of ambition flourish so abundantly, has his eye on the Presidency. He is demanding more stringent immigration regulations. The present laws, he contends, are far too lax. Uprooted by the tremors that are rocking the old world, hordes of foreigners are swarming into the country: they

threaten, he declares, not only American jobs, but the American way of life. Something must be done. All good Americans—one hundred per cent Americans, the Senator adds—should write to their representatives in Washington at once.

John Applegate does not agree with the Senator, having managed to rise above the down-pull of racism and blood-thinking, but even in his disagreement it never occurs to him to ask what the Senator means by a good, patriotic, one hundred per cent American. He knows. The Senator is addressing him personally. He means John Applegate and all the people like him. And the real American, the kind the Senator is talking about, is first and foremost a Protestant Anglo-Saxon. This concept is fixed in John Applegate's mind with the inviolability of quartz.

He knows, of course, as well as anyone, that there are millions of Americans who do not fall within this definition. There is, for instance, the agreeable young man who teaches athletics at the high school—his parents were Polish. John Applegate understands he is an American, and occasionally suspects him of having a deeper appreciation of the meaning of America than some members of the neighborhood's "older" families, who are likely to take its promise for granted, but still the habit of defining the American in Protestant and Anglo-Saxon terms manages to persist. Nor does it ever occur to him, for one reason and another, that as early as 1782 these terms had lost whatever value they might have once possessed.

"The American," wrote Hector St. John De Crèvecoeur in that year, "is neither an European nor the descendant of an 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 Frenchwoman, and whose present four sons now have four wives of different nations . . . Here in America individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world . . . They will finish the great circle."

The terms that John Applegate would use to define the American are thus some two hundred years out of date. It cannot be questioned, then, but that prejudice has helped shape his idea of the American—prejudice as useless as his appendix but just as likely to become inflamed. More than prejudice is involved, however, just as more than provincialism is involved in the mountain preacher's belief that when St. Paul went to Athens it was a citadel of culture and learning almost as important as Asheville, North Carolina. In saying that the American is Protestant and Anglo-Saxon, John Applegate has compressed the history of several centuries into what he regards as a simple statement of fact. If his synthesis is incorrect, or if he has made history mean what he wants it to mean, he is no more at fault than have been innumerable historians. It is true of John Applegate, as it is true of men generally, that his observations are more likely to shed more light on his own character and personality than on that which is being observed.

II

All history, Ernst Toller slyly tells us in his play *No More Peace*, is the propaganda of the victorious. To John Applegate, always distrustful of barbed cleverness, this would sound like heresy. Although he does not read history, except in his newspapers, he does not think it should be made fun of. That would be trifling with a subject which, like sex and Thanksgiving, he considers rather sacred. Unlike his daughter Emily, who knows more about George Washington's false teeth than she does about the battle of Lexington, he does not like to have his heroes painted, as did Cromwell's followers, "warts and all." Any attempt to convince him of the element of truth in Toller's observation—by pointing out, for example, that Benedict Arnold might be remembered differently had the colonists lost their revolution—consequently would be futile. He accepts his view of history as he accepts the credit of his customers—on trust. It has never crossed his mind that his concept of the American,

irrespective of any incidental propaganda, has been determined largely by the two forces, Protestantism and Anglo-Saxonism, that have been most dominant in the United States up to the present time. Nor has he paused to realize that it rests principally on priority, or that his psychology is not unlike that of those travelers who, boarding an ocean liner at Hamburg, used to consider themselves old inhabitants by the time they reached Le Havre; looking down upon those who came aboard there as brash and noisy newcomers, ignorant of language and having no sense of tradition.

His view is a partial one at best, leaving out much more than it puts in, yet, to support it further, John Applegate might cite the larger span of American history—in his view a strictly Anglo-Saxon affair. He knows that the continent he lives upon was discovered by the Norsemen, and brought to the later attention of the world by an Italian in the service of Spain, but this he tends to regard as two unimportant accidents, easily preventable had the proper Englishmen been around.

He knows, also, about the Indians. One of his great-uncles, Truslow Applegate, rode with the Indian-fighter John Sevier who later became the first governor of Tennessee, and another was with Winfield Scott when the Cherokees were defeated at Wayah Gap in the Great Smoky Mountains. Not long ago John Applegate made a pilgrimage to the place where his latter ancestor won his captain's promotion. He had a real pioneer's feeling, he said, as he rode up the new road that leads to the top of Wayah Bald and looked out over the tumbling ranges fixed in a silence as inviolate as time. The thing he most vividly remembers, however, is the visit he and the family made to the Cherokee reservation. He was frankly disappointed. There were better, more realistic Indians to be seen, as he told Sonny, with the old Wild West shows—Buffalo Bill's in particular. There was a feeling of sadness, even of pathos, he had not anticipated. He left the reservation in a complicated frame of mind. The Indian, he felt, must have suffered a considerable decline since the days of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith.

This Captain Smith has had a greater effect on John Applegate's thinking, especially in relation to his concept of the American, than ever he imagines. Up until the time Captain Smith arrived in Jamestown on that eventful May 13, 1607, the American scene, as far as John Applegate is concerned, was a stage without actors—the Indian being less real and substantial than the trees of the forest through which he moved, a tobacco-smoking wraith who pilfered his enemy's scalp and used, in his benighted fashion, shells for money. It took a man like John Smith, John Applegate would say, a Protestant Anglo-Saxon, to get things really started—an opinion, incidentally, that is shared by all the Applegate connections, especially the Virginia branch of the family, many of whose daughters bear the name of Pocahontas.

Nor does it matter that most of the Applegates, and John in particular, know little about Captain Smith except that Pocahontas risked her neck for his. Or did she? Captain Smith, in a passage that suggests the terse prose that *aficionados* of the Eighteenth Century admire so much in Daniel Defoe, assures us she did; but then, as his book of *Travels* reveals, he had a lifelong habit of getting himself rescued at every serious juncture by a beautiful female of high estate. It happened, by his own count, five different times.

We cannot help but wonder what John Applegate would say to this side of his hero's character: this, not lady-killing exactly, but a curious genius for arousing womanly sympathy in bosoms Italian, Turkish, Muscovite, French and American Indian by turn. But, in any case, John Applegate's admiration of John Smith is not misplaced. Hot-headed, making enemies more readily than friends, Smith was nonetheless the only early colonial leader who fully understood the reality of the struggle in Virginia and who grasped the essential nature of the colonial economy. His departure from Jamestown, brought about by an explosion of gunpowder that sent him back to England for medical attention, nearly caused the colony's ruin; only the arrival of a new expedition saved the settlement from complete disaster.

Asked for gold when he returned to London, he gave his superiors something better—a map of the region, a sound survey of its resources, and the sort of good sense about colonization that fills his little book, *Advice For the Inexperienced Planter*. It would be too much to say that without John Smith the English venture in America would have failed; it is not too much to say that he was one of the greatest contributors to its success. And so, in a sense, John Applegate is correct. It did take a man like John Smith, a Protestant Anglo-Saxon, to get things really started.

III

If John Applegate knows little of Captain John Smith, he knows even less about Cotton Mather. Yet this New England divine, as complex a character as America has produced, not without a certain tolerance of people when they honored and obeyed him but calling them “insignificant lice” when they did not—this intensely emotional man who knew burning visitations and wild exaltations, nervous and irritable, the most widely-read person of his generation, has had a far greater influence upon John Applegate, and his America, than can ever be credited to the quarrelsome little captain who liked to be got out of trouble by tender-hearted women.

Having been said so often, it must be said again: any inquiry into the American character, no matter how modest, must look into the causes of what has been called “the pronounced singularity of temper and purpose” that distinguished the New England settlements, and, with equal emphasis, the earlier New England character. This temper and purpose, it need hardly be said, is what has come generally to be known as Puritanism—something, to John Applegate, vaguely associated with the gloomy figure in the tall black hat used by cartoonists to represent Prohibition during the time when the Bill of Rights did not contain the right to drink a bottle of beer, and the cause, to those of his intellectual peers who make the same mistake of reading history backwards, for the general “lack of