

THE
American
Character

BY

D. W. Brogan

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ALSO BY D. W. BROGAN



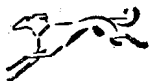
THE ENGLISH PEOPLE

Impressions and Observations

"Mr. Brogan has with rare understanding and good humor delineated the Englishman of caricature and of reality. And he has delineated him for the edification of Americans, and in an idiom that Americans will understand and welcome. There is probably no one else who could have done this job quite as well. . . ."

—Henry Steele Commager in

New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review



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Preface

THIS BOOK is ambitious in design but modest in its actual detail. It is designed to make more intelligible to the British public certain American principles and attitudes. But it makes no pretense to either profundity or elaborate learning. A great many important aspects of American life have been ignored or treated very sketchily, sometimes because they were irrelevant to my immediate object, sometimes because I thought myself incompetent to handle them.

I have been writing on American topics for fifteen years. Inevitably I have sometimes repeated myself. I have not tried to find novel ways of saying the same thing. "The American Way in War" appeared in part in *Harper's Magazine*.

As readers will soon discover, this is a personal book. I have made assertions because I thought them to be true and relevant, not because they had a weight of independent authority behind them. There may result from this plan of work an air of impertinence and casualness. But nothing could be further from my intentions or attitude than to treat any serious American topic frivolously. My object has been to make what I think is the most interesting country in the world interesting and intelligible to others. Above all, I have tried to make plain that there is no parallel in history to the experiment of free government on this scale. The scale accounts for a great deal, including the apparent justification at some periods and in some departments of American life for pessimism about the present or the future of America. In the past, the pessimists have always been wrong. I think they are still wrong.

D. W. BROGAN

London, March 24th, 1944.

Introduction

"The American is a new man who acts on new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions."

—J. HECTOR ST. JOHN DE CRÈVECŒUR

IN THE LATE SUMMER of 1936, I arrived in Kansas City (Missouri). When I tried to buy a ticket for St. Louis at the Union Station, I was interrogated in a friendly, American fashion by the ticket clerk. "You from Europe?" "Yes." "Well, don't go back—it's going to Hell." I was more than half-convinced that he was right—although I was going back. A month or so before, I had lain on the shore in Somerset on a Sunday evening and had been aroused from day-dreaming by a noise in the air and a swirl of excitement around me. Above, magnificent, serene, and ominous was a Zeppelin, moving east. It was low and clearly seen; a day before, it had been in New York; by tomorrow's dawn it would be in Frankfort. The swastika was plainly visible as it moved on, over Glastonbury where, the legend runs, Joseph of Arimathea had brought the Holy Thorn and built the first Christian church in Britain. A shadow was crossing England: women on the beach looked at their children—with a faint and how inadequate perception of what was soon to befall Bristol where they came from. How remote it all seemed in the hot sun of western Missouri, how remote it was even from me, and how much more remote from the people of Midwest America, with fifteen hundred miles each way between them and the oceans, with the huge war memorial outside

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the station to remind the citizens of Kansas City of their first adventure overseas and to confirm their resolution that it would be the last.

I went a day or two later to see a friend of mine who lives in a small town in Illinois. We went together to the corner drugstore to get ice cream for supper. It was a scene familiar enough to me and familiar to all movie-goers—the Main Street of a small American town on a Saturday night in late summer. The boys and girls were there in their white summer clothes; there were endless cars; it was possible that here, as in other American towns like this, it was thought more important to have a car which is a public asset than a bathroom which is private. There was over the street and over the town that indefinable American air of happiness and ease, at least for the young. There was that general friendliness and candor. Here, as much as in the Bowery of which he was the Boss, men and women were acting on the principle laid down by Big Tim Sullivan, "God and the People hate a chesty man."

People called each other by their "given names"; there were friendly inquiries and a few introductions of the visitor. It was a world in which the ominous word "stranger" had been given a friendly flavor. "Howdy, Stranger" is not a hostile greeting, and it was invented in America. Looking at the people, at the boys and girls milling round the drugstores, disappearing in cars that shot off into the warm, welcoming darkness, it was hard to remember the tension of English life, the worse tension of French life. Life, it is true, was not altogether easy and agreeable for these people. Those who had definitely put youth behind them showed signs of fatigue and worry. They had reason. This was a farm town and the farmers had had a bad time. Some, not very far away, were still having a bad time. Across the Missouri it was a drought year. In Emporia, Kansas, it was still doubtful, so William Allen White had told me, whether they could reopen the local normal college that Fall. There might not be enough water. All that region had been badly hit by very bad times, by crop failures, by bank failures. But there was still an impression of hope, of recovery. There was an air of confident adaptation to their way of life in the dress, the speech, the manners of the young. This, if a world they had not made, was yet a world that seemed to have been made for them.

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In the drugstore there was the usual stock of gadgets, of remedies for all ills. There were soft drinks, no hard liquor; but there was—most impressive sight of all—a book and magazine section. There were the books of the films; there was the book of the year or decade (it was the first year of *Gone with the Wind*). If you wanted to know about dressmaking, about cosmetics, about domestic management, about love, about astrology, about business success, about child training, about how to be happy on a small income (the answer being usually a way to make it large), the printed oracles were there. And the spoken oracles, too, for radios blasted the soft summer night and the heat did not empty the movie house.

And it was all American—even the guiding stars. The advertisements, the gadgets, the radio programs, the movies, the patent medicines, the patent solutions to human woes—all were American, or almost all. There might be in the advertising sections some sales talk for English biscuits or French perfume or Scotch whisky. There might be in the movie house a travelogue by Fitzpatrick; there might be in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* a cartoon by a greater Fitzpatrick bringing home the bitter truth about the outer world. No doubt some residents in the town had traveled (my host had). Perhaps the librarian or the English teacher had told the women's club of a tour in England or the "colorful Caribbean." Some veterans had memories of France.

The regional press was already doing a first-class job, a better job than was being done by most English papers, to awaken the people to the truth of the new iron age that we were all living in, to the significance of Manchukuo, to the menace of international war in Spain. Perhaps, the Parent-Teachers' Association had asked for more instruction in civics and in current affairs. Certainly, appeals for charity, for Chinese, or for Spaniards had been or would be answered as soon as made.

But in the warmth and ease of that summer night, the inevitable, the right, the human character of American natural isolationism was brought home to me. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho did not pass close to southern Illinois, as it did southern England, and there was no visible good Samaritan in Illinois—or in England—to shame Priest or Levite.

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Their great highway was the Mississippi; for its control a long and bloody war had been fought and won. From that state had come the leader of the victorious party, but Lincoln was long dead and deified in his tomb a hundred or so miles to the north in Springfield. The whole region had once been a great international prize, but it was a century and a half since George Rogers Clark had seized the little French settlements of Kaskaskia and the rest from the English. It was over a century, too, since his brother William and Meriwether Lewis had marched west at the orders of President Jefferson, making for the Pacific, preparing the road maps of "manifest destiny." It was a generation since Henry Adams had brought his sophistication and his bile to the St. Louis Exposition and thought out again the problem of what makes and moves and unites societies, what was alike and unlike in Chartres in 1200 and in St. Louis in 1904—"the Virgin and the Dynamo." But in 1936, it was the calm, dead center of a tornado whose outer boundaries were too far away for comprehension or apprehension.

There was no way in which the inevitable, deplorable, maddening impact of the outside world on Illinois and on the whole Mississippi Valley could be brought home to the dwellers therein. If men and women in England in 1938 could profess to believe in "peace in our time," why should not these happy Americans believe with far more plausibility in peace in their time—for them? Yet in less than six years, German submarines were sinking American ships in the mouth of that Mississippi secured for the infant United States through the energetic disregard of constitutional proprieties by President Jefferson. And all the considerable cities of the Valley were preparing to defend themselves against air raids, against desperate, forlorn hopes in which the Nazis would strike, whatever the cost, at the most typical, representative, important city of the Midwest—which naturally was Zenith or whatever city was yours.

As the shadow over Europe grew longer and darker, as the darkness was made more terrifying by the whistling with which our leaders tried to keep up their courage and ours, as the chances of peace in Europe became more and more dependent on the temptations of easy victory for Germany, and those temptations more and

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more controlled by the possible reaction of the American people, the problem of the American temper became more urgent. It was largely a question of time: if the American people had been prepared in 1931 to do what they were prepared to do in 1939, if they had been as ready in 1939 as they were in 1941 for the dangers of the time! But it is an endless sequence of ifs that it is not very profitable to follow out. What is more profitable is to try to make plain how natural, how justifiable, how given by historical conditions was the tempo of American awakening, the slow acceptance of the fact that the shadow cast over Somerset was also cast over Illinois. It took the actual shadow, repeated again and again, to awaken Somerset; Illinois had to awaken with far less help from the eye and ear.

But it was not only Illinois. All over the United States there was the same life, conditioned by the same history, by an experience in which the outside world grew more and more remote, backward, barbarous, and—so it was thought—relatively weak. On the new concrete roads, new-model cars made American nomadism the expression of American civilization. "God's Country"—as the song put it—was the country of the Lincoln Highway. Into the great inland nodal points the trains poured: Illinois Central; New York Central; Union Pacific; Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul; Père Marquette; Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe. But only a few Canadian trains in the north, only a few Mexican trains in the south, to recall the outside world, and doing it not much more effectually than an occasional Rolls-Royce or Duesenberg or Hispano-Suiza lost among the Lincolns, Packards, Buicks, Chevrolets, Fords. The air was getting fuller of passenger planes; the air ports more numerous and more splendid. And it was as natural, though as wrong, to think of the new technique as an American invention and practically an American monopoly, as to think of Colonel Lindbergh as the first man to fly the Atlantic.

What could it mean to the remote villages of the South, to the people who worshipped in those little wooden churches with their odd, pathetic, and fantastically ugly imitations of stained glass? Did it matter to them that the French had put an aerodrome beside Chartres Cathedral, and that the latest addition to the inscriptions at that place was an appeal for volunteers to join the organization that

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would move the Chartres stained glass to a safe place when the inevitable war (that no one would admit or deny was coming) yet came? This region had had its war, its record of destruction; and its wounds, material and spiritual, were still bleeding.

Yet that region, in five years' time, was beginning to send its volunteers via Canada, to fight in defense of that Wells Cathedral over which the Zeppelin had serenely passed.

What could it matter to the *Canadiens* of New England? What did it matter to them that the country that had expelled the *Acadiens* and conquered the *Canadiens* was in danger and, with it, the ancestral land that had abandoned the good ways of old France and no longer had enough sons to guard her fields? In less than six years' time the New England coast was beleaguered by submarines, and their kinsmen from across the border were dying first at Dieppe and then in a heroic assault outside Ortona.

What did it matter to the less energetic fugitives from a New York winter I saw a few months later, who, resisting any temptation to take a ski train up to the White Mountains, took a train bound for Florida? Yet inside five years, the submarines of the enemy were cruising in impudent immunity within rifle shot of the pleasure cities where the tourists lay on the sand, or profited and lost in Colonel Bradley's hospitable gambling houses.

I remembered, too, the long controversy over bridging San Francisco Bay, the doubts of the War and Navy Departments about the wisdom of building such vulnerable structures across the entrance to a great naval base. Such fears had seemed purely fantastic, purely pedantic. Yet within three years of the celebration of the completion of the bridges, the dead and wounded from Pearl Harbor were being brought ashore in San Francisco. And, a few months later, I stood in the living-room of a friend's house looking straight into the Golden Gate and wondering, like other people, how the great naval battle of the Coral Sea was going and whether the Japanese would risk putting a carrier or two into the permanent summer fog belt and bomb San Francisco as they had bombed Pearl Harbor. I remembered, too, how I had first seen Seattle, taken over by invading Lions or Elks or Moose or Eagles, and how I had next seen it, with a solitary barrage balloon (from London) floating over the air port, curiously homely

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and comforting to a passenger who had just seen the great ice fields and glaciers of Mount Rainier below him and had need of something to restore a human sense of scale.

Our fate, the fate of civilization in Europe, the fate of constitutional freedom in America are and were bound up with the defeat of a self-confident, energetic, efficient, and ruthless political and military system that denies our premises and dislikes and despises our aims. This was true in 1936; it is true in 1944. It was the meaning of the shadow cast over England. But that shadow was not cast in such dramatic form over America.

What could this growing shadow mean to the people of Utah? It was nearly a century since the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints had crossed the prairies and the plains to the great empty basin of the Great Salt Lake. Nearly a century had passed since they had made their Exodus, since they had been saved from the crickets by the seagulls sent by God to preserve his chosen people. I had seen the monument to the seagull; I had seen the irrigated fields and fertile valleys redeemed from the wilderness; I had heard the hymn of the new Israel, the Mormon version of the Hundred and Fifth Psalm: "Unto thee will I give the land of Canaan, the lot of your inheritance." The old bloody feuds, the murder of the Prophet, the vengeance of the Destroying Angels, were half forgotten by the people who sang "Come, come, ye Saints." Isolated in the great, empty basin, shut in by mountains on all sides, living in the land they had made; with their own, exclusive version of world history to cut them off from the fears and hopes of the outside world, what could Hitler mean to them? Yet in a few years' time, not merely were their sons sent to all corners of the world, but the needs of war economy were transforming Deseret as it had not been transformed since the railroads brought in Gentiles to the kingdom of Brigham Young.

What, I more than once reflected, could all this mean to the shepherds of New Mexico who elected Dennis Chavez of Los Chavez ("Chavez of that ilk," as they would say in Scotland) to the United States Senate? "The blood of the conquerors," to use Harvey Ferguson's phrase, no doubt ran in their veins; so did the blood of the conquered. But that last outpost of New Spain had been for long so peaceful! The Comanches had been tamed, and the bloody memory

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of the seventeenth-century Indian rising that had for twelve years turned the little capital of Santa Fe into a heathen town, was faint, today. The austere and bare mountains of the Sangre de Cristo above the stripling Rio Grande del Norte were as strange as ever to European eyes, as strange as they must have been to Miss Willa Cather's hero when the future Archbishop came to them a century ago, from the strange but not arid, not empty mountains of Auvergne. Peace had at last come to Santa Fe and to Taos. But in less than six years from that summer, there fell on the little cities and villages of New Mexico the catastrophe, the heroic disaster of Bataan. For the local National Guard had been mobilized and sent off to the Philippines, and boys who had known nothing of the outer world died in gallant defense of another relic of the Christian empire of Philip II and Philip III—the Commonwealth of the Philippines, reunited with New Mexico in a common destiny by the power of the United States.

And that power was so easy to underestimate, and each such underestimation made war more likely. It was easy for the Japanese to underestimate it; for, as Mr. Justice Black had pointed out, the Japanese, like the Americans, believe that they have never lost a war. It had been easy to surprise the somnolent Tsarist Russians at Port Arthur in 1904; it would be easy to surprise the complacent, ill-informed, and unsuspecting Americans at Pearl Harbor in 1941—to “catch them with their pants down,” in the expressive American phrase; and one of the Japanese diplomats negotiating in Washington while the trap was being got ready prided himself on his command of American idiom.

It was easy for the Germans to despise the people whom Herr von Papen in 1916 had described as “those idiotic Yankees.” True, the idiotic Yankees had been too much for Herr von Papen and his employers, but that was in the bad old days. I remembered a discussion in Paris in 1939 with a very eminent White Russian diplomat, a Baltic baron by origin, who told me that his friends in the German Embassy were not in the least interested in the power of the United States. “Whatever they do will be done too late. And if that war-monger Roosevelt does try to impede the policy of the Reich, there will be a revolution against him and his Jewish advisers.” So spoke the experts of the Third Reich. I said that I did not believe this; that

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I knew America well, that to awaken the national pride and anger of the American people would be the most fatal mistake of the gamblers in charge of the destiny of Germany and the peace of Europe. I even told the revealing story of what had happened to John Quincy Adams in 1797 when he was sent by his father, President John Adams, as Minister to Berlin. "When the American Minister to Prussia, the son of the President, arrived at the capital of Prussia, he was examined by a dapper young officer of the guard, who unblushingly admitted that he had never even heard of the United States of America."* A century and a quarter later, a successor of John Adams and John Quincy Adams in the White House deposed the Hohenzollerns, and another quarter of a century after that, another successor was Commander-in-Chief of an army which put more men in the air over Berlin than Washington had Americans under him at Valley Forge or at Yorktown.

I remembered, too, that when the British troops under General O'Hara marched out at Yorktown in 1781 to surrender to Washington and Rochambeau, their bands played *The World Turned Upside Down*. And as in the darkening months and years, I heard the apologists for the new Danegeld preach the policy of buying Hitler off—even, if absolutely necessary, with British property—I wondered whether they, with their subservience to the new enemy of all American political religion, really cared nothing for American goodwill or whether, like the Germans, they thought that it was a mere matter of sentiment, that there was time enough before the American giant awoke to see that he should awake, like Gulliver in Lilliput, bound hand and foot.

But many of them, English and German, did not even think that he was a giant, that the world had really been turned upside down at Yorktown, that it was time for even the smuggest Prussian expert or English politician to learn what it meant that the United States had grown to its present stature and to its present unity.

That the Japanese and Germans made a mistake they are now learning the hard way. That those of us who underrated the speed and power of American action were wrong, we are now learning in a much more agreeable fashion. Yet the American problem remains.

* Bennett Champ Clark: *John Quincy Adams*, p. 61.

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It is a double problem. It is the problem of making intelligible to the American people the nature of the changes in the modern world which they can lead, or which they can resist, but which they can't ignore. That is a problem for Americans. There is the second problem: the problem of making intelligible the normal American's view of the world, of his own history and destiny. Full success in the solution of such a problem is impossible; there must always remain an element of the unconscious and unintelligible in the national life of any people. But a little can be done to encourage sympathetic understanding of the Americanism of America.

The problem of modern America is almost literally one of orientation. A century ago, Henry Thoreau described how, when he went out of doors uncertain where to go, his instinct always decided for him. "I turn round and round irresolute sometimes for a quarter of an hour, until I decide, for the thousandth time, that I will walk into the southwest or west. Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free. Thither no business leads me. It is hard for me to believe that I shall find fair landscapes or sufficient wildness and freedom behind the eastern horizon. I am not excited by the prospect of a walk thither; but I believe that the forest which I see in the western horizon stretches uninterruptedly toward the setting sun, and there are no towns or cities in it of enough consequence to disturb me. Let me live where I will, on this side is the city, on that the wilderness, and ever I am leaving the city more and more and withdrawing into the wilderness. I should not lay so much stress on this fact if I did not believe that something like this is the prevailing tendency of my countrymen. I must walk toward Oregon and not toward Europe." *

All American experience, down to very recent times, was on the side of Thoreau. Oregon was no longer the wilderness; the Columbia River no longer rolled hearing "no sound save its own dashings," but was tamed by the greatest dams in the world and—towards the ocean, at least—rimmed with cities. But the westward drive was still potent; Americans rejoiced still in "the inward eye which is the bliss of solitude." It is only in this century that they have begun to learn, slowly, inadequately, humanly, that the world is really round, that to walk toward Oregon is to walk toward Europe. It has been a shock to their

* Quoted by Bernard De Voto: *The Year of Decision 1846*, "Invocation."

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optimism, a shock to their view of their destiny. It is now necessary to turn from the lesson of Thoreau—or to apply it in a new world. Honolulu is west of Oregon; China, “the Orient,” is west of Honolulu; the Aleutians and Siberia are north and west. A contemporary of Thoreau knew that mere movement in one direction is not a solution.

“Were this world an endless plain, and by sailing eastward we could for ever reach new distances, and discover sights more sweet and strange than any Cyclades or Islands of King Solomon, then there were promise in the voyage. But in pursuit of those far mysteries we dream of, or in tormented chase of that demon phantom that, some time or other, swims before all human hearts; while chasing such over this round globe, they either lead us on in barren mazes or midway leave us whelmed.”*

The world is round, and so you come to Europe (or Europe comes to you) by the back if not by the front door. The world runs north and south as well as east and west. Brazil is a neighbor of Africa as well as of the United States; Canada is a neighbor of Siberia as well as of Greenland.

And it is not only a world that has closed in on the United States (or on whose once remote borders the United States now presses with unconscious weight and power). It is a world in which all nations have to make deep adjustments in their mental habits, have to take stock of what is living and what is dead in their traditions. But that adjustment must, all the same, be made in the terms of the living tradition, according to the spirit. “These are the times that try men’s souls,” wrote Thomas Paine in 1776. These are the times that try men’s powers of sympathetic imagination, of mutual understanding, for without these there will be no enduring structure of peace and order built.

* Melville: *Moby Dick*, Chapter LII.

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