

**AMERICAN
MYTH
AMERICAN
REALITY**


James Oliver Robertson



AMERICAN MYTH, AMERICAN REALITY



James Oliver Robertson

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TO

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of Carrington, North Dakota,
who left me an American inheritance

Helen Maud Cam,
of Sevenoaks, Kent, England,
who taught me how to use it

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and who wanted me to tell about it

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J.O.R.

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West Wickham, Cambs.
Santa Fe, New Mexico
Hampton, Connecticut

Preface

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT some of the myths Americans believe, and the reasons for their believing them.

Myths are stories; they are attitudes extracted from stories; they are “the way things are” as people in a particular society believe them to be; and they are the models people refer to when they try to understand their world and its behavior. Myths are the patterns—of behavior, of belief, and of perception—which people have in common. Myths are not deliberately, or necessarily consciously, fictitious. They provide good, “workable” ways by which the contradictions in a society, the contrasts and conflicts which normally arise among people, among ideals, among the confusing realities, are somehow reconciled, smoothed over, or at least made manageable and tolerable. Everybody likes a good story; most people admire someone heroic: myths are often couched in good stories, very often told of heroes and heroines. But myths are not always narratives, they can be highly abstract; and complex myths, especially in literate societies like ours, are not easily separable from ideologies.

Myths are not rational, at least in the sense that they are not controlled by what we believe to be logic. They are sometimes based on faith, on belief rather than reason, on ideals rather than realities. And they are passed on from one generation to another by an unconscious, non-rational process somewhat similar to the process by which language is transmitted. As language is changeable and adaptable, so are a society’s myths; language is conservative and slow to change, so are myths.

All of us are aware of our myths. They are part of the world we live in. But when we study our history, when we try consciously and rationally to understand ourselves and our past, we tend to discount myths. We think of them as fictions, “only stories,” “made-up” things which have nothing to do with reason and understanding. We contrast myth and reality; the one is mistaken, unreal, false, a lie; the other is objective, understandable, real, the truth.

But the “truth” about a people, the “truth” about America and Americans, resides *both* in American myths *and* in American realities. The myths

are part of the world we live in; so were they part of our grandfathers' world. If we would understand our world, or anyone else's, we must understand its myths as well as—indeed, as part of—its realities.

If all human beings before the modern and civilized world used myths as an essential part of the structure of their understanding of their individual, social, and physical universes, then it is legitimate to assume that we use myths in the same way for the same purposes. Put another way, we believe that nearly all the human beings we know of in the past—from the ancient Egyptians and Sumerians and Chinese through the Greeks and Romans, the medieval and Renaissance Europeans as well as the Indians, the Khmers, the Japanese, the Zulu, the Maya—all these, and all others, used myths and complicated mythologies in order to understand and organize the realities of their worlds. The assumption I have made is that we are not, in our modern civilization, so different. We, too, use myths and mythologies in order to organize and understand our real world.

Since the development of Greek philosophy, humanity has had available to it another mode of thought, another way to organize and understand the real universe: self-conscious, logical rationality. Logical reason is conscious, dialectical, experimental, investigative; it is openly and actively contradictory to myths. Because of the pervasiveness of myths in human experience, the advocates of rationality are in a constant battle posture. Over the past two or three hundred years in Europe, and in the offshoots of European culture throughout the world, modern Europeans have attempted to see human life as an entirely rational affair, and have turned to reason and science to understand the organization of human experience. The result has been an insistence that the modern world is essentially different, that change is more rapid and more important, that our understanding of the universe and of human experience is more real and more true than that of all human beings before us.

The advocacy of reason has led to the denial of the existence of myths, in precisely the same way that the advocacy of one particular body of myths—say the belief in a particular god or set of gods and the accompanying theology and mythologies—has led human beings for millennia to deny the existence (as well as the insight and validity) of all other bodies of myths. It is not impossible, of course, that our belief in reason and science is our myth.

The analogy is tempting—and fruitful. People have, evidently, believed their myths as completely and absolutely as we believe in reason and science. They seem to have felt, in their cultures and in their times, that their myths were as certain, as true, as efficient explanations and organizations of the universe as we believe reason and science to be. If nothing else, we can gain insight into the power of belief in myths by comparing myths to our reason, our science.

My purpose is not to challenge the efficacy or the validity of reason and science. I do challenge, however, the modern assumption that the modern world is without myth, and that modern myths, where they do exist, are either lies, perpetrated in order to manipulate unreasoning, unthinking people, or aesthetic creations, individual and personal, subjective—and therefore untrue and invalid as organizing principles for any significant human experience.

Years ago, Perry Miller, an astute and subtle historian of New England Puritan thought, wrote in *Errand into the Wilderness* that he made the decision to “expound” his America “to the twentieth century” while he was unloading oil drums at Matadi “on the banks of the Congo.” I can make no claims to such romantic adventure—although shortly after I began this book I did watch drums of nitroglycerin being off-loaded from a freighter in hundred-degree heat standing in the middle of Manila Bay. I confess that when I watched from the deck of that ship I was concentrating more on the skill of the crane operator and on the tensile strength and possibilities of rust or metal fatigue in the cables than I was on expounding anything to anybody. But I can understand how spending time outside America in close contact with other people can make a historian want—urgently want—to tell what is true and real about Americans. I have had the opportunity on several occasions to explain the modern United States to intelligent and interested foreigners—from European corporate executives to university students abroad. Such experiences convinced me that one could not understand any people without understanding their myths—the non-rational, often irrational, embodiment of their experience as a people, upon which they depend as much for their vision and their motivation as they do on their formal ideologies and their rational analyses and histories.

This is an essay. It is a trial, a foray into relatively uncharted areas. It is an effort to hack a trail, to make a path into the wilderness of contradictory American beliefs. The essay is based almost entirely on the work of historians and analysts of American society. I have put the work of those others together for a single purpose: to chart a path.

The Overture introduces the themes—the existence, the nature, and the functions of myths in American society—which underlie the four parts of the book. Each part then describes a set of closely related American mythologies in some detail. The result is a description, not a judgment; it is written in the hope that Americans might be able more clearly to see and understand the structure and implications of their inherited beliefs and ideals. There seems little question that the myths people share affect their behavior as well as their thought and understanding. And myths do seem to have an important function in social life: they *explain* the world.

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OVERTURE



AMERICANS AND MYTHS

Where Are We?

THE HUMAN WORLD is a funny messy disorderly illogical nonsequitur sort of place in which most people bumble most of the time, don't see any but their own little bit of logic, and stick to it no matter what the reality around them may be. They often don't see what it is they are trying to do, much less the implications of what they are actually doing. How can you explain that state of affairs to people who function in precisely the same way but who want logical explanations and rational motivations for everybody else?

America is a memory—a memory of the lives and actions, the beliefs and efforts, of millions of human beings who have lived in American spaces, participated in an American social world, and died Americans. The memory is contained in American names—of people, of places, of events and institutions. The memory is contained in stories Americans tell one another—in poems and histories, in speeches and broadcasts, in shows and pictures, in jokes and obituaries. It is contained in the ways Americans behave and in their expectations of behavior; it is contained in the rituals Americans perform and in the games they play; it is contained in American social groupings, and in the political, economic, and religious institutions Americans maintain.

In the American memory are contained many of the truths which are self-evident to Americans, which help them to understand their country, and to explain their lives.

Some of those truths seem to have grown out of American spaces: America is a vast and productive land; it is the most powerful nation on earth; it is a great breadbasket of the world; it is resourceful and wealthy.

Some of the truths seem to have come out of the American past, out of historical experience: Columbus discovered and Europeans settled and civilized America; Americans fought a Revolution for freedom and independence; Americans fought a Civil War over nationalism and slavery; America created a vast industrial world; Americans require automobiles, and energy, and a high standard of living.