

ALISTAIR
COOKE'S
AMERICA

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ALISTAIR COOKE'S AMERICA

By Alistair Cooke

A GENERATION ON TRIAL: U.S.A. v. Alger Hiss (1950)

ONE MAN'S AMERICA (1952)

CHRISTMAS EVE (1952)

TALK ABOUT AMERICA (1968)

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For:
Stephen Hearst, who insisted on it
Michael Gill, who saw it through
and
Jane, who suffered it.

Prologue

A PASSAGE TO AMERICA

During the First World War, I was a small boy in Blackpool, a seaside town on the northwest coast of England, which was then the summer-time Mecca of the cotton workers of inland Lancashire. It had hundreds of boarding houses and a stretch of sand on which it was possible to drill thousands of soldiers, since it was six miles long and, at the low tide of the Irish Sea, as much as half a mile wide. The town accordingly became a vast cantonment, and pretty soon after the United States declared war in 1917 the “doughboys” arrived. We had seven of them billeted on us. (I learned much later that the men who wrote the American Constitution put in a clause expressly forbidding the billeting of any soldier in a private house. But the Founding Fathers, with their uncanny foresight, saw to it that this prohibition did not apply to England.) I thus had the experience, extraordinary in those days for a provincial middle-class boy, of encountering in the flesh the legendary tribe of “the Yanks,” who were known to us only through the silent and often baffling antics of Buster Keaton, Mary Pickford, and William S. Hart at the so-called picturedrome.

The Americans moved in like a football team invading a hospital, for by the autumn of 1917 all the vigorous British conscripts had come and gone from Blackpool, and very many of them were already rotting on the fields of France. They had been succeeded by the last scrapings of the barrel, the old and the chronically frail and sick. All the “C3s,” once confidently labeled as unfit for combat and assigned to the auxiliary service of the Royal Army Medical Corps, were now being desperately trained as warriors. To these brave crocks—most of whom would very soon go the way of their comparatively healthy predecessors—were added the “blue-jackets,” a legion of the halt and the maimed who would today be categorized by the Pentagon as “impaired combatant personnel” but in those honest days were known as wounded soldiers.

The melding of these convalescents with the bouncing Americans was not easy. Cynical or crippled veterans of Ypres and the battles of the

Somme did not take warmly to eager-eyed youngsters from Iowa and Illinois who announced they had come to win the war so long and inconclusively fought by the British and the French. There was a climactic episode in which a Texan ran into a Lancastrian blue-jacket on Central Pier. They each have their own brand of dead-pan humor unfortunately not recognizable as such to the other. After some dry exchange, the blue-jacket tossed the Texan into the Irish Sea, and for a nervous week or so all the Americans were confined to their quarters. The mordant humor of this situation did not escape a wide-eyed nine-year-old, and so at a tender age I was witness to my first upheaval in Anglo-American relations.

I doubt that I harbored then any preconceptions at all about Americans. Everything about them was peculiar and fascinating. They wore Boy Scouts hats, an oddity that was never explained. All their ranks had identical table manners and, so far as we could tell, identical accents, thereby confronting the British officers with touchy problems in guessing at social station. They treated my mother with a New World courtesy that kept them strangers long after their British counterparts would have been close, if off-hand, friends. But they addressed children as equals, and I was treated as a sort of regimental pet. Since my own father, an artist in metalwork, had been drafted in his fortieth year into an airplane factory in Manchester, from which he came on leave only once a month, I had the luck of having seven extra fathers, and no doubt my inclination to take to Americans was incorrigibly determined then.

They were taller than our soldiers and uniformly paler, almost yellow. I now suppose that they came from the cities of the Eastern seaboard, or perhaps the South, where the burning sun is something you stay away from. At any rate, my father (who had not been to America either) explained to me that their biscuity complexions were due to the famous skyscrapers, which kept the sun off their faces the year round. Later on, after I had been subjected to the only American texts then compulsory in an English elementary school (*The Deerslayer*, *Hiawatha*, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, and the totally incomprehensible *Tom Sawyer*), my mental picture of the United States, and of such scattered human life as it supported, became sharper but not, I regret to say, more accurate. First, there was New York, with skyscrapers and yellow men, and red men lurking in the suburbs. Then a long stretch of something called the prairie or pampas (we were never told exactly which) and through the middle of this uninhabited wilderness there flowed a wide river—"the wide Missouri," probably, since that was the subtitle of the only American song we were required to sing in unison. Later still, the musical *Show Boat* came to England and we knew then that the big river was the Mississippi, thrashing with steamboats and gamblers, who were nudged

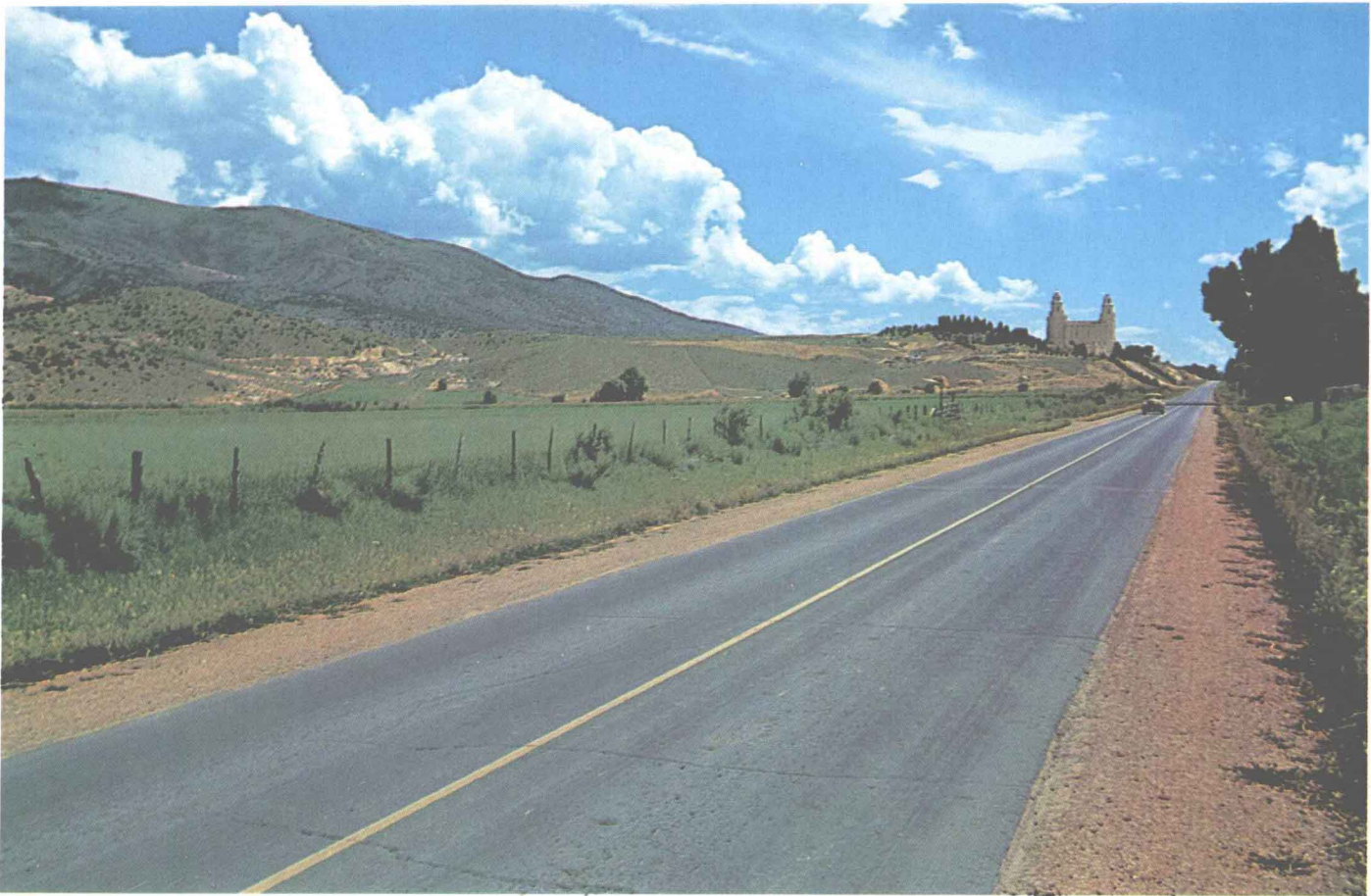
aside from time to time by a man in a white suit and a bushy white mustache who kept rushing to the stern and dropping a plumbline and shouting, "Mark Twain!" Beyond the Mississippi, it was said, there was another yawning prairie rising eventually to the only range of mountains in America, the Rockies; and at last you came on the Pacific Ocean and the only other American city, San Francisco, which we were told had been founded exclusively by Australian convicts.

There was very little in my excellent grammar school education to rip apart this tough patchwork of preconceptions, for in British schools in those days American history stopped abruptly with the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, on the principle that if they didn't need us, we didn't need them. But after the First World War, both the national prejudices I had imbibed and the personal memories of "the Yanks" that tended to contradict them began to blur together and fade as the inevitable reaction against Our Gallant Allies set in. Throughout the 1920s, America became known to us as a lurid society of licentious movie stars, ruthless gangsters, a boastful citizenry, and a grasping government called "Uncle Shylock," who was out to bleed old Europe white with demands for war reparations. Like most healthy schoolboys, I had no more social conscience than a puppy; so that while it was proper to defer to one's parents when they bemoaned the money-mad Republic across the seas and contemplated every American import, from canned beef to shirts with collars attached, as typical bits of "shoddy," these horrors paled for me and my friends before the heroics of Lindbergh, Douglas Fairbanks, and Bobby Jones; the country's reputation for beautiful and pliant females; the arrival of Fred and Adele Astaire; and the joys of American jazz.

This may seem like a very simple load of mental baggage with which a Cambridge graduate was to set sail for the United States in September 1932 after he had been awarded a fellowship for graduate study at Yale. But I believe that the preconceptions about another country that we hold on to most tenaciously are those we take in, so to speak, with our mother's milk; and after the showing of the *America* television series in Britain, it was made plain to me in many penitent letters, some of them from eminent persons, that the infection of these old prejudices is still widespread.

This is not the place to go into all the stages of my subsequent enlightenment, except as they seeded the long, unconscious gestation of this book. My fellowship was intended to train me in the expertise of American theater direction, so as to return and revolutionize the English drama. But one of the "obligations" of my tenure was to be given a car and tour, in the summer vacation, as many of the States of the Union as possible. It was more of an outrageous luxury than an obligation, at a time when bankrupt stockbrokers were pulling their sons out of Yale,





Utah and Kentucky.

and this first safari through America, in the midst of Roosevelt's Hundred Days, shook me out of my deep ignorance of politics. (In those days, a Senator was to me some sort of American with a toga, and for several years such vital mysteries as "judicial review" and "executive usurpation" were meaningless bits of jargon that the newspapers went on about.) But the upshot of this tour was to make the landscape and the people of America far more dramatic than Broadway; and when I returned to England, I weaned myself away from the theater during a tapering-off period as the BBC's film critic and then gave myself over to writing and directing programs about American life and history for a country that was then inadequately informed by a mere handful of correspondents in America, half of them in Hollywood. It was only a matter of time before I returned, on an immigrant visa, and found myself—to my astonishment—launched as a second-string foreign correspondent for the London *Times* and the BBC, required to write and broadcast knowing pieces on the criminal trial of a Tammany leader, the fate of a farm bill, and the indecisive thirteen-hour ordeal of a man waiting to jump from a hotel balcony. During thirty-five years as a foreign correspondent, I must have covered just about everything, from the public life of six Presidents to the private life of a burlesque stripper; from the black market in beef to the Black Panthers; from Estes Kefauver amid the snows of New Hampshire to Jack Nicklaus amid the azaleas of Augusta, Georgia; from Henry Kaiser's Liberty ships to Francis Chichester's *Gypsy Moth* sailing into Staten Island at one in the morning; from the Marshall Plan to Planned Parenthood; from Senator Joseph McCarthy's last stand to the massacre of Muhammad Ali by Joe Frazier.

I list this bewildering variety of assignments without foolish boast, because it is the stimulating duty of a foreign correspondent to cover everything. Whereas a domestic reporter, even at his best, graduates from general reporting and hops up the ladder to success towards a single specialty (sports, organized labor, the stock exchange, or the State Department), a foreign correspondent is required to act on the preposterous but exhilarating assumption that he takes all knowledge for his province and is equally at home in a textile mill, a political convention, a showing of abstract art, a proxy fight, or a launch pad at Cape Canaveral.

In all, I made about a dozen automobile tours of the country, as well as innumerable regional jaunts, and in one long and lonely drive through the late winter, spring, and summer of 1942, as an accredited "war" correspondent reporting from the American grandstand to an audience of embattled Britons, I found myself rediscovering—on re-tread tires at the compulsory thirty-five miles an hour—the whole American landscape, region by region, county by county. The theoretical purpose of

this trip was to see and say what the war was doing to such wildly different specialties as steel production, long-staple cotton, the tattooing of sailors' forearms, and the manufacture of heels for ladies' shoes. But what I learned from this memorable experience was that in a continent of (then) forty-eight governments, a half-dozen radically different climates, a score of separate economies, and a goulash of ethnic ingredients, nothing that you say about the whole country is going to be true; and secondly, that the exciting way to learn about the history of this country, and the experience of settling it, is to dig it out of the landscape. It was more fun to come on shepherders in Idaho talking a peculiar half-Irish, half-Basque lingo than to stay home and read a Congressional report on immigration. A fictional series on, say, "The Forty-Niners" cannot begin to convey the feel of their ordeal as much as a stroll through the graveyards in the foothills of the Sierras.

On all my trips, from the late 1930s on, I packed in an orange crate in the trunk of my car the federal guides to all the states I was likely to drive through. These had been written by penurious writers and local historians enlisted under the Writers Program of the government's Works Projects Administration during the Depression. America, which had had no guidebooks worth the name, suddenly had a library of the best; and it was these unsung historians who put me on to hundreds of places along the road that few tourists had ever heard about. So when the British Broadcasting Corporation first proposed to me the alarming project of recounting the history of the United States on television, I was given the courage, or gall, to attempt it because of two passing thoughts: one was that as a correspondent writing for an innocent audience of foreigners, I usually had to trace the most topical news story back to its historical beginning (you cannot assume, as *The New York Times* must, that its readers can instantly place the history of "interstate commerce" into the context of a sudden violation of it); and through my travels I had acquired something of what Theodore Roosevelt said every President should have, namely, "a sense of the continent." I might not, as many more learned men could, recall at once a well-articulated skeleton of the outline of American history. I had, of course, read a good deal of American history down the years, but when I think of some historic person or episode, I tend to think first of a place, some corner of that continental field that is forever American, because something charming or hideous or otherwise memorable had happened there. So I jotted down a long list of such places, most of them, I should guess, not much known to tourists or even to the standard history books: Catherine, Kansas (the first planting of Turkey Red wheat); Big Bone Lick, Kentucky (the dinosaurs' contribution to "the dark and bloody ground"); New Harmony, Indiana (the most touted of the "communes"); Pittsburgh

Landing, Tennessee (the menace of the Union Army's plentiful reserves); The Humboldt Sink, Nevada (the cruelest ordeal of the Gold Rush); Newfane, Vermont (the epitome of native New England architecture); Livingston, Montana (the literal bottleneck in the continental wartime supply route to the Pacific); and so on and on. To arrange these memories of a nation's history from the landscape and not the books seemed the best I had to offer. There are rafts of formidable and brilliant historians. The papers and magazines are groaning with Cassandras. So without any preconceptions about how it would come out (I am not sure whether the United States is going to come out intact or not), I arranged the episodes in chronological order. Whether it was to succeed or fail, it seemed to me a good, though tortuous, thing to attempt: to try and say what is moving about the American experience over four hundred years at a time when that experience is either forgotten, badly taught, or shamelessly sentimentalized; and to recall what is tough and good about the American system of government at a time when that system is poorly understood and, in some high and low places, perilously close to corruption or betrayal.

The nucleus of this book is, of course, the scripts I wrote for the television film. But film has to be direct and immediate, at the expense of reservations and intellectual subtlety. Film as history is therefore inevitably oversimple (still, it is better to be oversimple than overwrought). Complicated issues, such as the scores involved in the making of the Constitution, have to be reduced to dramatic opposites—so that in the fourth episode, for example, the sort of Constitution that was to emerge turned into a clash between George Mason and Alexander Hamilton, with James Madison as the referee and eventual winner. The fourth chapter is considerably longer than the original script and, I hope, truer to the complexities of the seventeen-week debate. Similarly, the Spanish and French contributions, which had to be mercilessly condensed into a single episode, are here given their proper due. In all, this book is about four times the length of the spoken television scripts.

The first thing a foreigner has to try to take in about America—and it is not something automatically grasped even by all the natives—is the simple size of the place and the often warring variety of life that goes on inside it. In a motion picture of the 1930s, the hero was a young American from the prairie arriving in England to take up a Rhodes Scholarship. He settled for his first trip to Oxford into the snugness of an English “railway carriage” and found himself sitting opposite an English parson buried in his newspaper. As the gaping boy looked out over the small-scale landscape with its velvety pasture, the trim spinneys, and the checkerboard hedgerows, he could not restrain himself. “You know,

sir," he said, "I guess the whole of England could be fitted into one corner of Nebraska." The parson looked up from his paper and crisply replied, "But to what *end*, young man?"

It is the classic English riposte to the classic American response on first seeing England. From Dickens on, the English have always remarked, with due condescension, on the American preoccupation with size, and the Americans have rarely let them down. And for good reason. If there was one conception more than another that white men had to forget when they came to America, it was of a guaranteed livelihood in a friendly landscape. They had to get used to the idea of a vast and dangerous country whose size alone guaranteed the possibility of success in one part of it after failure in another. The size of the country was the image of their salvation, just as brute size guaranteed sanctuary to the Indians—for a couple of hundred years.

What is consoling about the American concern with size is that once the insular Briton makes the crossing and is exposed to it he tends to share it with a gurgling childlike wonder. In Sussex, he might have been in the habit of driving twenty miles to dinner. But if, like me, he should acquire a friend in some such place as Alpine, Texas, and another in El Paso, he will brag till his dying day that he once drove 360 miles round trip just for a meal. Most people, I believe, when they first come to America, whether as travelers or settlers, become aware of a new and agreeable feeling: that the whole country is their oyster. They may, in fact, settle down in one place and stay there. But America can still fire dull imaginations with the prospect of a continent to explore. In my experience, the only people immune to this vision are those urban types to whom—as the late Fred Allen used to say—"everywhere outside New York City is Bridgeport, Connecticut." This parochialism is common in all the big cities of the East, but in New York City it amounts to a kind of insensate village pride.

There are, in fact, large regions of the United States that will challenge the hardihood of the most carefree wanderer. As I write this, a forgotten skyjacker is either living off roots and mountain-lion meat or, more probably, is frozen stiff on the slopes of the Cascade Mountains. The airplane passenger, on his first flight west, is invariably astonished to look down for hours on a landscape as seemingly hostile as the barren interior of Australia or the craters of the moon. But practically all of it may be driven across comfortably on cement highways and six-lane freeways. The determined adventurer has to make a special effort, if he wishes to imitate the pioneer, and penetrate the Great Basin in Nevada or the fastnesses of the Bitterroot Mountains or the High Sierras.

A famous American historian announced positively in 1893 that the frontier had disappeared three years earlier. But more free land was



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