Liberalism, Puritanism and the Colonial Mind

Main Currents in American Thought, *Volume I*

Vernon Louis Parrington

With a new introduction by **Bruce Brown**

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藏书章

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Liberalism, Puritanism and the Colonial Mind

TO THE MEMORY

OF

J. ALLEN SMITH

SCHOLAR TEACHER DEMOCRAT GENTLEMAN

Omnium Amicus erat
qui
Justiciam amant.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE TRANSACTION EDITION
VERNON LOUIS PARRINGTON

Bruce Brown

> *"Ideas are not godlings that spring perfect-winged from the head of Jove; they are not flowers that bloom in a walled garden; they are weapons hammered out on the anvil of human needs."*
>
> —*Vernon Louis Parrington*

THE FIELD AT THE FAIRGROUNDS in Guthrie, the capital of the Oklahoma Territory, was frozen but free of snow for the kickoff of the big college football game on New Year's Eve 1897. The contest, which was actually the prelude to the day's main event, the Territorial Intercollegiate Oratorical Contest, pitted the University of Oklahoma against another Oklahoma school, Kingfisher College.

It was the fledgling University of Oklahoma football team's first game that far from home, and during the early part of the contest they had some tough sledding. Oklahoma end Bill McCutcheon was being punished particularly hard by a heavy-set Kingfisher tackle. "He hurt me every time he hit me," McCutcheon recalled later. Closer inspection revealed that McCutcheon's opponent was wearing armor: Beneath his jersey he had concealed an elbow of stovepipe over each shoulder and arm.

Although McCutcheon's opponent was forced to shed his extra gear, Kingfisher continued to dominate Oklahoma, and carried an 8-6 lead to the bench at halftime. There is no record of what the Oklahoma coach told his beleaguered team as they warmed themselves during the break, but its results were evident during the second half in classic college football fashion. The Oklahoma offense came alive, eating up the field with plays that called for the tackles and ends to cross-block their opposite numbers while the ball carrier swung through the gap

boosted by supporting backs, for in those days, football offenses relied as much on pushing from behind as blocking in front.

Midway through the second half, the game was interrupted by the Logan County sheriff, who had never seen a football game before, and supposed the action on the gridiron to be a brawl in progress. It took the appeals of several notables present, including University of Oklahoma President David Ross Boyd (Oklahoma was by then leading), before the sheriff would let the game be completed. Finally relenting, he gave the affair a Wild West touch by firing his gun over his head to restart the contest, prompting the spectators to respond with the appropriate rodeo cries: "Hold that steer!" "Ride 'em cowboy!" "E-yip-eeeeeeee!"

Out on the playing field, the flavor was not so much Red River as Crimson Wave. Although Oklahoma's young Harvard-educated football coach had chosen not to play in this game himself, the Sooners still bore the strong mark of Harvard football, that rough rugby/soccer amalgam which won first the Ivy League colleges and ultimately all of America away from traditional soccer. Striding the sidelines in a tweed suit and tie, the Oklahoma coach exhorted his men. They were an odd crew, composed of a professional baseball player, a Chickasaw Indian, some local farmers and a smattering of University of Oklahoma students, but now the drilling he had put them through paid off and they won handily by the score of 17 to 8.

This was the first of many hurrahs for both University of Oklahoma football and its tweedy coach and English professor, Vernon Louis Parrington. During the four years he coached the Sooners, Parrington, then a darkly handsome young man in the Robert Louis Stevenson mold, only lost twice, and one of those games turned on what was later revealed to be an illegal drop kick by the University of Arkansas Razorbacks, according to Harold Keith's *Oklahoma Kickoff.* After shutting out the last four opponents Oklahoma faced at the close of the 1900 season, Parrington retired forever from football coaching with what is at this writing still the second highest winning percentage in the history of Sooner football after Bud Wilkinson.

Parrington's explanation for the move was that he wanted to devote more energy to the teaching of English, but his motives, like everything else about him, were far from simple. A voracious reader who actually hated Harvard and the old Brahmin-dominated culture it represented, Parrington also wanted more time for personal questing. As William Allen White recalled in his Pulitzer Prize winning autobiography, Par-

rington was part of a crowd of young fellows "too proud for pool, too wicked for prayer meetings, too lazy for baseball—although Vernon Parrington pitched a mean outcurve for the Emporia Browns—too sophisticated for the local poker game, and too young and full of vision to let the world go by without trying to understand it."

Parrington's real passion of the moment was poetry, which he wrote and published in the local newspapers. He also spent several years in intense Bible study while at Oklahoma, as a recent article by Lark Hall in the *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* shows. In time, the wide ranging intellectual curiosity that was a life-long characteristic carried him from Victorian poets to the arts and architecture to English and American literature to political science and the history of ideas, and finally landed him on shores far removed from the close-drawn world of his early Presbyterian schooling.

Although the glory he achieved on the gridiron and the diamond would be considered crowning achievements for many fondly remembering their careers, they are for Parrington a mere footnote compared to his later accomplishments in the arena of intellectual history. Long recognized as one of the brilliant teachers of his generation, Vernon Louis Parrington reached the apex of his career in 1928 when the first two volumes of his epic study of the development of American culture, *Main Currents in American Thought*, were awarded the Pulitzer Prize for history.

He was felled by a heart attack the next year, but his influence continued to grow posthumously. By 1940, even Lionel Trilling, who was highly critical of Parrington, acknowledged that "his book now stands at the center of our thought about America." Parrington's reputation has fallen so drastically during the intervening decades, however, that younger students of American literature may be surprised to learn that his writings were once thought of comparable importance to those of Oswald Spengler, Alfred North Whitehead, and Vladimir Lenin.

The same cycle of style that made Parrington seem so hopelessly old-fashioned a few years ago may now be bringing him back, though, for our own time bears more than a passing resemblance in terms of the interests and the excesses of the high 1920s, an era which both produced Parrington his greatest work and gave him his first global acclaim.

VERNON LOUIS PARRINGTON was six years old in the spring of 1877 when his father decided to give up the law and office work for

farming. A restless idealist of a sort more common to the previous century than our own, John Parrington had already been a high school principal, commanded black troops in battle as a captain in the Union Army, been elected to county office, herded sheep, and practiced law.

Now he concluded that physical and mental health demanded an agrarian life, and so he moved the family from Aurora, Illinois, to the town of Americus, Kansas, and then on to the 160 acre homestead he proved up outside town. The farm's improvements amounted to a 50-foot well which "yielded an abundance of slippery-tasting, alkaline water," as Vernon later recalled, a four room house (with blue clay from the well in the walls for insulation), and a rude stable. The land itself was almost perfectly flat with only one wild tree, a broken-crowned cottonwood that stood a half mile from the house.

In an unpublished autobiographical reminiscence he wrote for members of his family in 1918, Parrington said Hamlin Garland's classic agrarian novel, *Son of the Middle Border*, accurately pictured every "detail of ugliness and discomfort" of the years he spent on the farm outside Americus, but added that for him the life was not an entirely drab or hopeless existence. "It was filled with poignant emotions," he recalled. "To go to bed with ... the wild fascination of a prairie fire in the soft darkness of a spring night ... and then wake in the morning to the call of the prairie cock from a low ridge half a mile away—a call that was compact of the dawns and freedoms of the untamed places—was that not to sleep and wake in the very Land of Desire?"

Although he left the farm for good by the time he was twenty, Parrington credited it with making a lasting contribution to his intellectual makeup. "[F]rom the vantage point of our farm, two and one half miles north of the village, I saw the border move beyond us and the countryside change from a wild, unploughed prairie, to a well-tilled farming region. Of the diverse experiences of my life I value none more than this. In the most receptive years of my life I came under the influence of ... the frontier with its democratic sympathies and democratic economies. From that influence I have never been able to escape, nor have I wished to escape. To it and the spirit of agrarian revolt I grew out of, I owe much of my understanding of American history and much of my political philosophy."

When the Parringtons moved again in 1877 to Emporia, the largest town in the vicinity, with a population of about 8,000, it was partly to

enable John Parrington to better carry out his new duties as probate judge, and partly to give the Parrington boys a chance for a better education than was available at the one-room school house at Pumpkin Ridge. Both Vernon and his brother John were promptly enrolled in Emporia College, a small Presbyterian academy which Parrington described as "provincial—quite wholesomely I now think." Although academically minimal in many respects, Emporia College did Vernon the great service of introducing him to two ideals that were to play important parts in his life: the curveball and art.

"I was fifteen when I first saw an out-curve thrown," Parrington wrote in February 1918 when he was forty-seven years old. "Time, place, circumstance, the way the great Pack twisted the ball in his palm and delivered it with a full arm sweep, the lucid explanation of the theory—these things are still fresh in my memory ... for these are among the golden experiences of youth. In that moment new fields, fresh interests were opened to me, and thereafter I was assiduous in practice until I could throw a curve that the most skeptical must acknowledge." More than that, he quickly developed into one of Kansas' better players, touring the area at age nineteen as part of an all-star battery that local baseball teams hired to come in for important games.

Meanwhile, other interests were already competing for his time, particularly painting, which he studied for several years at Emporia. "When I was 16 I had definitely determined to be a painter," he wrote. "By the time I was 18 ... an increasing realization of economic demands had driven this idea out of my mind; but not before some realization of the significance of art in the life of men had come to me—a realization which later was to make such writers as William Morris my intellectual masters. The love of beauty rather than the love of truth was to dominate me and turn me aside from the stream of scientific learning which bore away so many of my generation."

By the time he graduated from Emporia with a bachelor of arts degree in 1891, Parrington had begun to cut a swath outside Emporia and Kansas. An essay of his, "History and God," was published in *College Life* magazine, and that fall he went away to Harvard on a full academic scholarship. Although he graduated two years later with Oswald Garrison Villard and William Vaughn Moody in the class of '93, Parrington largely loathed his time in Cambridge. "I was too inexperienced to know the ropes," he wrote, "and I got an appalling percentage of shiftless and stupid instructors."

While in Emporia, Parrington had begun a habit of heavy reading in the public library with an emphasis on Victorian novelists such as Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Trollope, and Reade. At Harvard, he continued the practice on a broader scale. Like Hamlin Garland, who "took his degree" in the Boston Public Library, Parrington made self-directed study a major part of his education. Later, he would observe with an ironic glimmer that it was the "library and not the college that opened my mind to English literature, preparing me for the work I was to take up."

Parrington had never consciously decided to be a teacher, but upon his graduation from Harvard he was offered a position as an English instructor back at Emporia College, and he accepted. He also played baseball professionally during the summers, pitching, catching and managing for the Emporia Browns in the Kansas League. He seemed to have considered professional baseball as a career (despite the poor pay and low social status the game enjoyed during those days), but the heat of the summer, the six game a week schedule, and the responsibility for keeping his players out of the bars finally took the bloom off the sport for him. Then, too, he was discovering at Emporia College that his gift for teaching might be greater than his one with the small white sphere.

The four years he spent at Emporia as an instructor were probably the busiest of his life, combining teaching English and French, earning his masters degree, playing baseball, courting an occasional young lady, handling a raft of his students' extra-curricular activities, and seeing friends like William Allen White, the editor of the *Emporia Gazette* and author of the influential essay, "What's the Matter with Kansas?" which helped swing the tide against populist William Jennings Bryan and elect Republican William McKinley president in 1896. Parrington himself was headed in the opposite direction politically. He voted for Bryan in 1896 (his first break with the staunch Republicanism of his father), and was soon borne farther to the left by the general distress that afflicted American agriculture during this period, and specifically by the decline in the Parrington family fortunes.

John Parrington had lost his judgeship some years before, and by 1897, after a decade of low corn prices and unrealized schemes, he was about to lose the only thing he and Vernon's mother had left—the farm. In his family reminiscence, Parrington recalled warming himself by the stove on his parents farm during the winter of 1897 and listen-

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ing as full big ears of corn burned "briskly, popping and crackling in the jolliest fashion. And if while we sat around such a fire watching the year's crop go up the chimney, the talk sometimes became bitter about railroads and middlemen, who will wonder? We were in a fitting mood to respond to Mary Ellen Lease and her doctrine of raising less corn and more hell."

Assuming financial responsibility, Vernon asked Emporia College for a raise to save the family farm from foreclosure. The president would not grant it, but a short time later Vernon obtained the needed money by taking a job teaching English at the University of Oklahoma in Norman. Despite the good times he was to find in Norman, the experience was in some ways an ordeal, as is immediately apparent from Parrington's description of his introduction to the town and campus. "A searing wind blew great dust clouds from the southwest as I stepped off the train and started for the University. I passed through a stretch of burnt-up, slovenly village, and out along a quarter mile of plank walk—the very nails of which were partly drawn out by the heat—and at last came to the University grounds, a small patch of brown prairie with a single red brick building topped off with a wartlike cupola."

Parrington's response was to throw himself into his labors, both academic and otherwise. "He would lay out for himself a given amount of work, and he was unhappy if he didn't get it all done," recalled his wife, the former Julia Williams, whom he married in 1901 when he was a professor at Oklahoma. "After his coaching and teaching came his evenings of work on his chief love, the writing of poetry. Always his great desire was to have more time to write. He felt that the true fullness of life came only through the imagination. Facts were dead lumber to him and he must reconstruct in his own imagination." By his own estimation, he was then "still the bookman, drawing my nourishment from *belle lettres*."

Although certainly not a pedant, he was nonetheless undistinguished in his thinking, and might have remained so had not great good fortune come to him in the form of personal disaster. The bad news was that in 1908 Parrington was fired from his position at the University of Oklahoma, which had by then come to include responsibility for directing the English and Athletic departments as well as teaching. Although in no way personal (Parrington was one of 23 people refused new contracts, including the president of the university, in the political turmoil that accompanied Oklahoma's statehood), the loss of his

livelihood was nonetheless distressing on a number of scores, among them the fact that it meant that he would have to give up the new house he had just designed and had built in Emporia.

The good news came a few weeks later when University of Washington President Thomas Kane made a special trip to Emporia on the recommendation of outgoing Oklahoma President Boyd to talk with Vernon Louis Parrington. Kane offered him a job before he got on the train out of town that night, and Parrington followed Kane to Seattle almost immediately. The verdant forests, island-strewn expanses of water, and volcanic peaks of the Pacific Northwest were as refreshing to him as the burnt prairie of Norman was oppressive. He already had friends and relatives in Seattle (he and Julia had been married there), and soon added more from the faculty of the University of Washington, among them Edward McMahon, William Savery, Frederic Morgan Padelford, and most important of all from an intellectual standpoint, J. Allen Smith, whose seminal Progressive history, *The Spirit of American Government*, had appeared the year before.

Although Smith was eleven years Parrington's senior and a member of the History rather than the English department, the two were remarkably similar in background and interests. Both had grown up in the Midwest, attended college, taught, and been fired by institutions of higher learning there. Both shared a fondness for Herbert Spencer and William Morris, and a perhaps not unconnected belief in Progressive ideals. The two became close friends, freely sharing their intellectual impulses, and in the process, the older man helped crystallize the younger man's thinking in several areas, among them the use of economics as a tool for cultural analysis. "When I quitted Norman the economic interpretation of history had not yet risen for me," Parrington wrote, "but it lay just below the horizon and was soon to become the chief luminary in my intellectual sky."

One obvious manifestation of Vernon Louis Parrington's deepening command of English and American literature was the tremendous popularity his classes attained. Still fit and handsome, with a full head of dramatically white hair, he had a powerful classroom presence that kindled a spark that still burns in his surviving students. "He was the best classroom teacher I ever saw or heard," declared Gladys Savage, eighty-two, a former student who later taught English herself at U.C.L.A. By the early 1920s, a course with Parrington became the *sine qua non* of liberal education at the University of Washington.

E. H. Eby, a former student and colleague of Parrington's at the University of Washington, reflected that "the source of that popularity was the personality of the teacher, together with his gift for presenting ideas and provoking a response. By means of a Socratic cross-examination, Parrington made the student discover his intellectual deficiencies; while the class, to its astonishment and delight, found the quest for truth both elusive and exciting."

All during this time Parrington was also quietly working on a book. As far back as his Oklahoma days, Parrington had been thinking about a study of American literature. Finally in 1913, five years after he came to Washington, he began to write *The Democratic Spirit in American Letters, 1620-1870.* The book was finished in 1918, but lack of interest by publishers forced him to put it on the shelf. Returning to it during the 1920s, Parrington continued to expand, strengthen, and polish it, until finally in 1927, seventeen years after he began it, the book appeared as *Main Currents in American Thought, vol. I and II.*

NINETEEN TWENTY-EIGHT was a vintage year for Pulitzer Prize recipients. The drama award that year went to Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*, while the novel award was won by Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, and the poetry award was claimed by Edward Arlington Robinson's *Tristram*.

However, for sheer originality and force of imagination—to say nothing of depth of study—none of these works could compare with that year's winner of the Pulitzer for history, Vernon Louis Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought.*

Parrington's opus was not only the first comprehensive history of American letters and thought to appear in this country, it was the first major work to consider American literature as an expression of American culture, rather than some academic aesthetic schema. We now take both of these perceptions so much for granted that it is easy to forget the bedrock contribution Parrington made to both literary criticism and intellectual history in America.

Working alone in Seattle, Parrington realized that much of American literature was crude by refined critical standards. Furthermore, if the reader was restricted to those dainty morsels fit for the period's contemporary aesthetics, most of the best American writing would be thrown out. Parrington therefore seized on the idea of treating American literature and letters as an expression of the central American cultural value, democracy.

"And indeed in this country, with its long history of democratic aspiration, why should there not be a grand history of thought and letters celebrating the democratic theme?" Richard Hofstadter wrote of Parrington in *The Progressive Historians*. "Why should not someone, at last, use the history of letters to illuminate national life and thought, and discuss literature, in the tradition of Sainte-Beuve and Taine, as an index of culture?"

There had previously been a couple of minor efforts at American literary history by writers like Barrett Wendell, but none had come close to the breadth of Parrington's study, nor exhibited the felicitous quality of his prose. Similarly, a few efforts at American intellectual history had been attempted by writers like Moses Coit Tyler, but the subject had been almost entirely ignored by conventional academic historians, giving the old Sooner footballer an open field.

In Parrington's hands, American literature, which had been a ragtag poor relative of the literatures of England and the Continent, was suddenly transformed, almost before the reader's eyes, into a noble creature worthy of all the world's attention, since it embodied so compellingly one of history's great social experiments. While it is not entirely true that Parrington created the study of American literature in the nation's colleges, it is fair to say that he did more than any other critic to hasten its initial acceptance, and thus paved the way, with the subsequent contribution of the great American novelists and critics of the 1930s and 1940s, for the unquestioned acceptance it enjoys today.

In developing the concept for what would become *Main Currents*, Parrington drew on intellectual sources as diverse as his rich fare of study. From Hippolyte Taine's *History of English Literature*, which made a big impression on him during his college days, he absorbed three important lessons: the idea of using literature as a means of portraying national culture; the idea of organizing a grand literary history around a series of biographical and critical portraits; and lastly, the idea that environment plays at least some role in forming the art of a given era or nation, From William Morris and John Ruskin, Parrington picked up elements of the Victorian tradition of moral-aesthetic criticism, as well as something of their refined 19th century style. Thomas Jefferson gave him the marrow of democracy, while George Santayana provided germinal phrases like "winds of doctrine," and J. Allen Smith, the pioneering Progressive historian, impressed upon him the importance of economics as a cultural determinant, and fostered his reading of Karl Marx.

Out of this and much more, Parrington wove a clear and consistent picture of the development of democracy in America during the 300 years between 1620 and approximately the beginning of the twentieth century. He saw in this nation's literature the record of the tremendous struggle between the forces of majority and minority rule that spanned generations and even centuries to link writers as diverse as John Winthrop, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, Theodore Parker, and Theodore Dresser in a grand and continuing debate about the very nature of America. For Parrington, the crux of this debate was embodied in the clash between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, the former representing the best of America's indigenous agrarian democratic tradition, and the later representing the rising power of the business oligarchy issuing from the marriage of the unearned increment to the centralized state.

Journalists, essayists, historians, propagandists, and satirists were all given consideration in *Main Currents*, along with the more traditionally literary writers such as novelists and poets. Parrington was primarily interested in tracing the development of "certain germinal ideas that have come to be reckoned traditionally American," but this did not deaden him to aesthetic concerns when they were warranted. He was one of the first influential twentieth century critics to champion both Walt Whitman and Herman Melville, and his own writing immediately reveals a distinctive aesthetic sense. Parrington was a master of the apt quote, the illuminating image, and the epigrammatic expression.

As a mature critic, Parrington demanded only one thing: that art have some bearing on the real world that produced it. He no longer had any patience with the idea of beauty for beauty's sake, and little more for the belle lettristic critics. "Do they understand the origin and significance of those ideas which they study so lovingly?" he asked in a 1917 essay, "Economics and Criticism."

> Ideas are not godlings that spring perfect-winged from the head of Jove; they are not flowers that bloom in a walled garden; they are weapons hammered out on the anvil of human needs. Freedom to think is bought with a price; and to ignore the price is to lose all sense of values. To love ideas is excellent, but to understand how ideas themselves are conditioned by social forces, is better still. To desire culture, to enjoy commerce with the best that has been known and thought in the world is excellent also; but to understand the dynamics which lies back of all culture signifies more. Men who will be free, struggle to be free, fashion themselves ideas for swords to fight with.

To consider the sword apart from the struggle is to turn dilettante and a frequenter of museums.

Regarding his partisanship on the larger social and political issues, Parrington was equally straightforward, writing in the foreword to volume I of *Main Currents*, "the point of view from which I have endeavored to evaluate the materials, is liberal rather than conservative, Jeffersonian rather than Federalist ..." This bias provided the values which lay behind Parrington's judgments, but did not prevent him from memorably portraying figures he did not particularly admire. Regarding Hamilton, for instance, Parrington conveys the considerable magnitude of the first Treasury Secretary's genius ("Certainly no other man in America saw so clearly the significance of the change that was taking place in English industrialism, and what tremendous reservoir of wealth the new order laid open to the country that tapped them"), as well as what might be called the moral blindness that led him to advocate child factory labor and the rule of the wealthy.

A self-taught architect who loved the balance and proportion of Gothic cathedrals, Parrington strove to impart a similar balance to his recounting the great American debate concerning democracy, as is evident in his pointed pairings of opposing views on essential questions. Thus Fisher Ames ("The essence and almost quintessence of good government is to protect property and its rights") is set against James Fenimore Cooper ("A government founded on the representation of property ... is radically vicious. It is the business of government to resist the corruption of money, not to depend on them"), John Dickinson is set against John Adams, Robert Treat Paine against Horace Greeley, and so forth. Parrington was the rarest of all partisans in that his biases were honed, not in the darkness, but rather against the brightest intellects that divergent thought could provide.

Main Currents bears the mark of Parrington's intellectual openness throughout. He was more than willing to follow the logic of situations and history wherever they might lead, even when they ran counter to his deepest assumptions and conditioning. It was Vernon Louis Parrington, the son of a Union Army officer and an abolitionist, who kindled in twentieth century America an appreciation of Southern writers like John Pendleton Kennedy (author of *Swallow Barn*), and who traced the history of a regional literature that has continued to grow in stature and importance since his death with the work of Wil-

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