

1932

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Recommended Citation

Montgomery-McGovern, J. B.. "Whiter America? A Returning to Exile's Impressions." *New Mexico Quarterly* 2, 2 (1932).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol2/iss2/8>

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Whither America?

A Returning Exile's Impressions

By J. B. MONTGOMERY-McGOVERN

SPEAKING of Voltaire, V. I. Woolf says: "In his time, (as perhaps in all times) it was dangerous to tell the truth, for men live by lies."

Is it dangerous in America in the year of grace, 1932? Is it dangerous even to say: "I don't know, I'm not fool enough to be dogmatic"?

Three years ago, I should have denied that this was possible. I had been away from America for many years. No, I had not forgotten the America of the 1900-1910 era. Unfortunately, I am old enough to remember it. But a "vigorous and growing" country must expand—otherwise than merely territorially—in a quarter of a century.

I thought: If, by casual references to evolution—in the biological sense—or to certain modern hypotheses to the effect that depravity may possibly be due to causes other than the machinations of a personal devil, I shock old ladies from provincial small towns, in this "older and more conservative country," or those members of the clergy whose thinking runs in molds created by "spiritual fathers" of long dead generations, in a land where church and state are one—well, at any rate, in a "young and intellectually eager country" (how often I had heard America called that by my compatriots more recently "come over"), I shall be less "*cribb'd, cabin'd, and confin'd*."

The American of today, I thought, is "willing to taste any drink once"; even to experiment with strange ones. "America," I had recently heard an American, far more familiar with present-day America than I, say, "is not a land of old ladies."

Good! I thought. If Americans of today, broadly speaking, lack the suavity of manner, the grace, the dignity,

of the better type of old ladies, at least they will not throw up their hand in horror at attitudes of mind, points of view which were not the mode in the days of good Queen Victoria and of dear General Grant, or even those of the first days of the present century.

True, just before I left the older country, a "Don" of one of the older universities of this older country laughingly had said: "So this trip is going to take you to the country where monkeyvilles flourish. I wonder what seeds of heresy you will sow there."

I was indignant. "I am not going to a tiny backwoods village in what you call the 'Bible Belt,'" I retorted. "I am going to the large cities of the Atlantic Coast. People there really don't lasso buffaloes in the streets, or—"

"But you told me, yourself," he began, "when you were at school in—" he mentioned a certain famous New England town.

"But that is longer ago than I like to remember. America prides herself upon being a land of progress, you know," I reminded him. "Times—"

" 'Times is changed,' says the dog's meat man, 'Lights is riz,' says the dog's meat man," he hummed friviously to a tune just then popular. ("Dons" do not always talk in Latin tags).

Still I came back to America expecting to find other things than prices "riz." America was not a land, I had been assured, where people lived in the day before yesterday.

I have been back in America a little over three years. A part of this time I have spent in New England, a part in the Middle Atlantic States, a part in the South, a part in the Middle West; just now I am in the Rocky Mountain region. With the exception of the Pacific Coast, I have been, since my return, in practically all parts of this geographically vast country. Some time was spent in America's two largest, and probably most cosmopolitan, cities, New York and Chicago.

Circumstances have thrown me, to a great extent, with university men and women. What I have learned of the American viewpoint of the present day—I am speaking collectively, not of that of exceptional individuals—has been learned not from the newly-landed immigrant, or from that convenient friend, “the man in the street.”

Nor am I considering the point of view of the man or woman recently “come East” from Cross Roads, Mississippi; Main Street, Minnesota; or Red Dog, Arizona.

What I have gathered has been from contact with people of education whose cultural background, if not birth, has been “Eastern”—a point regarding which it seems, with the majority, the proper thing to be proud. Many of these people are engaged in teaching, in passing on intact their particular brand of culture to the younger generation of Americans, in instilling “loyalty to tradition,” with emphasis on “tradition.” (Are the psycho-analysts right: That because America is a young country, she gains “compensation” by stressing tradition?)

I am not talking about teachers in the public schools, in the American use of this term. Of the cut-and-driedness of the machinery of the present day public school system I had heard something. (How true or how false this heresay I have as yet had no means of ascertaining, directly). But also I had heard something—much, in fact—of the high standards of the private schools of America, those of the better sort; of the attention given in these schools to the individual; of the training adapted to the student's needs, of the cultivation of his initiative—or of hers.

It came as something of a shock, therefore, to hear the principal of one of the most “select” of these schools within the environs of New York City—a woman holding not one degree, but three, from well known Eastern colleges—say to a lecturer on anthropology: “Of course let the girls see that all study of anthropology leads up to Christianity.”

“Why, it doesn't,” the lecturer gasped.

"But it *must*," the principal insisted. "This is a Christian school. Not sectarian; we are very broad-minded. But your own research—you say you have studied comparative religions—must have taught you that all heathen myths and customs—all other 'religions,' if you will, all codes of morals, if they are really morals, lead up to Christianity. That is obvious." The lady's lips closed determinedly. There was to be no foolishness about this matter.

A sort of Procrustean bed, apparently. If the result of research did not fit the tradition-that-must-be-maintained of the school, and that accepted by the best families, in this best of all countries, why so much the worse for research. So much the more must the lecturer beware of touching upon any point which conflicted with tradition. Yet money was collected in this school, both from teachers and pupils—those who did not subscribe were made to feel distinctly uncomfortable—for foreign missions; for the teaching of the heathen, among other things, the wickedness of holding to tribal tradition and taboo. The heathen are unfortunately unprogressive when left to their own sloth of mind and their childish folly, the folly of considering their religion, the religion of their fathers, superior to that of other people's fathers.

On another occasion this same lecturer was asked by another "educator," a lady of "old American" family—pre-Revolutionary, as she took pains to let it be known—there was no intermingling with ignorant immigrant stock in her line of long descent—"What record have anthropologists of the earliest man?"

The answer naturally had to do with the Java skull—our old friend *Pithecanthropus*. Also with the gentleman from Piltdown, and with eoliths, and other matters now scarcely more exciting than comments upon the weather, and rather less provocative of discussion than the relative merits of different sorts of fishbait.

The lecturer had anticipated, from the lady's—the "educator's"—somewhat agitated interest in the matter

that perhaps she had some theory to urge in regard to the presence of "dawn-man" in America. Perhaps she was resentful that mention of America had been omitted. The greater was the lecturer's surprise, therefore, to find that the "educator's" agitation had quite a different basis.

"It is impossible that you are telling the truth," she said, "for the Bible gives one distinctly to understand that the Garden of Eden was"—The "educator" held forth upon the lecturer's impiety for not having given Mesopotamia, or, at least, some part of Asia Minor, as the site of the finding of the fragments of *Pithecanthropus Erectus*.

Poor *Pithecanthropus*! It really was reprehensible of him to have been careless enough to leave scraps of himself in lands other than those mentioned in Sacred History.

The "educator," whose agitation came as a slight surprise—No, gentle reader, she was not from the "dark belt"; she had a contempt for the South, because of its general ignorance and lack of enlightenment; she was from New England. "All Southerners," she said, "are backward. They are poor intellectually. They have to come to us for education—those of them that want any."

There flashed across the lecturer's mind the recollection of having seen at the South, while the before-the-Civil-War Rich were still, as the aftermath of that war, very poor—too poor to send their daughters to the only schools that were, from the Southern point of view, then possible for girls—mothers acting as teachers. These mother-teachers—some, at any rate, who came promptly to mind—would teach their small children gathered about their knees—not, "Line upon Line," but in simple language, gleanings from *The Descent of Man* and from *Origin of Species* before the children, themselves, were able to read "long words." (By the way, has a *Children's Darwin* ever been written? There seems nothing that fascinates children more than the story of evolution simply told.)

Yet Southerners, and apparently all not blessed with the "background and tradition of Puritan culture," are,

from the point of view of the average New Englander, even the educated, poor in other than material possessions. One illusion lost, namely: that there is little or no provincialism left in America. "The radio, the airplane, and most of all, the automobile have done away with sectional prejudice," I had frequently been told.

What type of *genus homo Americanus* had Artemus Ward, one wonders, in mind when he said: "The trouble with most people ain't that they don't know, but that they know so much that ain't so."

This smug complacency, this dogmatic laying-down of the law, this knowing what either "ain't so," or what at least, is highly problematical, is not the exclusively prerogative of the present-day American, certainly. It is much in evidence in the "mother country," Anglo-Saxonly speaking, and in all the pink-colored portions of the world's map. (Is it the contribution which the mentally middle-class Anglo-Saxon has made to the world-psyche?) But America, one is told constantly—and truly, judging from the babel of non-English tongues and the sight of "foreign" faces in the larger cities—is no longer purely Anglo-Saxon. It is the "melting-pot of the races."

So was Italy, northern Italy, certainly, in the days of the Renaissance. The fusion of breeds into breed, quick with the energy of many, the clash of race upon race, that of the various branches of the Caucasian at least, tends to produce genius, one is told, as the clash of steel upon flint produces flame.

Is it so in America? Has this fusion of breed produced a people eager in the quest of things of the mind and the spirit, as in Renaissance Italy? Nordic and Celt, Slav, Latin, and Semite, seeking in the New World "broader scope," "wider outlet"—these phrases have become platitudes. Have they found this—along other than money-getting lines? Have they in turn, given a wider horizon, or an eagerness to glimpse this, to the "old American stock"?

Nordic, Alpine, and Latin, and, certainly as far as the cities of the Adriatic were concerned, Oriental, as well, was the Italy of the thirteenth century, in which was born a civilization, short-lived in its flowering, measured by centuries, but more brilliant probably than any the world has known since the time of the Greek city-states; which earlier civilization, too, owed much to fusion of bloods, if the results of recent research are to be trusted.

But in America what—apart from bad manners—has this fusion of blood produced? (And incidentally, why the bad manners? Compare the manners of the Italian peasant, or the Portuguese on his native soil, or the Irishman, with those of the same man or woman transplanted to the land of “wider opportunity.” Is some influence at work, in the air, or in the soil—that transforms courtesy and native peasant dignity to insolence and show-off braggadocio?)

Renaissance Italy, true enough, where also race was super-imposed upon race, had its “spots.” Apart from other doings, or leavings-undone, men, even the greatest, were not above pettiness—jealousy, personal hates, vindictiveness. Yet these men, whether great lovers or great haters—or both—were not afraid of IDEAS; did not stand in dread of the uncharted sea before it had become the common highway.

Is the New World, the modern “melting-pot,” incapable of producing men of new vision, of creative power, along intellectual lines, of passionate sincerity? The air of America is said to be stimulating, and certainly as regards stimulation to physical energy, it is. Can it not stimulate to daring of mind? Such daring as is required, apparently, for the entertaining of a new idea—one not connected with “business efficiency”? Or to courage? Courage enough to be oneself; not an imitation of another? Must every idea, every theory or tentative belief, bear the stamp of approval of a hundred million, before, in this country, at the present

time, it is "safe" to hold it? "One does not like to be considered a crank, you know, different from other people." A thousand times since my return I have heard this remark, or one of similar purport.

This cringing fear of being "different"! It is this, perhaps, which more than anything else strikes the returning exile. Not only is this spirit inculcated and nurtured in the most highly recommended schools, wherein the young are trained to be one-hundred-per-cent-Americans, but it is reflected in the advertising pages of the most widely read magazines, pages more enlightening than those devoted to reading matter, as to the point of view, the mental horizon, of the literate American public. Interspersed with advertisements of near-silk and near-pearls which, "even to the eye of the expert," can not be detected from real ones, are advertisements of Somebody's Scrap-Book, or Somebody Else's short and cheap correspondence course, by which Everyman can talk like Every Other Man; be interested and "appear at home" in the same subjects as Every Other Man.

That to talk like Everyman, himself, be interested and "appear at home" in subjects which are of genuine, not imitation, interest to himself, might be of more vital value to Mr. Everyman; that by cultivating his own interests—surely no soul, in America, or elsewhere, can be utterly barren—he might be less of a bore to himself, also to his listeners, never seems to occur to Mr. Everyman, to his wife, or to the advertiser.

One is inclined to long—is tempted to say one wishes one had the right to use the word "homesick"—for those sections of France, of Austria, or other continental countries, where the inhabitants of each district, often of each village, are recognized by their distinctive dress, distinctive dialect, distinctive dances, and frequently distinctive forms of religious worship. The silver buttons that adorn the waistcoats of the men are genuine, as is the homespun stuff

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of which the dresses of the women are made. There is no near-silk, no dollar-store pearls which "cannot be detected" from those costing ten thousand dollars. And as regards religion, whether the worship be that of the Blessed Virgin, or of the Goddess Perchta—a Tyrolean and Salzkammergut version of Freya of old—or, as in these districts not infrequently happens, a combination of the worship of both, this worship is genuine. The hills are ablaze with fires on the eve of St. John's Day, herbs are hung in the barn to avert the wrath of the dangerous Perchta, that she may not cause the cattle to be barren; villages are gay with ceremonial dances performed in her honor, not because those who light fires, or hang herbs, or dance, may be indistinguishable in mental mould or in glass of fashion from the folk living in Vienna or in Paris, but because such form of worship is the outward and visible sign of an inner spirit which is *itself*; which is not an expression of imitation belief, or of imitation interest in things which belong to minds moulded in different form.

The consequence is that such countries—those where genuineness exists, however either financially or socially "backward"—give the impression of being alive, vital; in a sense that, disappointing, humiliating, even, as it is to admit this, America at the present time does not—to the home-comer long expatriated.

Why pretend to be interested in what, in reality bores you? Or pretend to believe what you do not? What is the object? One is inclined to cry with Voltaire, "*Ecrasez l'infame!*"—Surely hypocrisy is less admirable than "differentness"!

A short time ago a mother recommended to me a certain fashionable girl's boarding-school, because Mrs.—, the principal, taught Biblical history so that her daughter no longer questioned the actuality of Old Testament statements—Baalam and the Ass and other narratives of equal sanctity—or the Inspiration of the Sacred Book as a whole.

"Not that I, myself, believe in it all—quite," she admitted, "but it would be dangerous to allow girls to doubt."

"Why?"; I asked.

"Well, you know—."

But I didn't know. And don't know. I am still wondering wherein the danger lies for a young woman, as for any one else, to attempt to face life's problems—religious and otherwise—"straight"; to decide for herself what she can, and cannot, believe.

Since my conversation with the mother of the young girl in question, I have met the principal whom the mother recommended. She, like the mother, "has doubts." But—"It is better for the girls, probably, to believe it all. Anyway their parents want them taught so, and the trustees think it wiser." A form of wisdom shared by the Dean of another well known girl's school, who boasted—off the school premises—that she was a "rationalist"; yet in school conducted chapel service with great orthodox unctuousness and "Christian zeal." This was considered "wiser" by the trustees of this school also. Certainly it was less dangerous for the Dean, who wished to hold her post, and had aspirations toward the principalship of the school; aspirations which have since been fulfilled.

"Standing pat" seems to be essential for standing-in—with the powers that be. I am beginning to realize this. Yet I was taught at school that "the outstanding characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon is scorn of a lie." Perhaps "standing pat" when it means standing-in is not a lie. Wisdom truly is above rubies.

In the case of the mother referred to, who was herself a "doubter," yet thought it "dangerous" for her daughter to question, one is more puzzled. With her there was no obvious self-seeking; no school ma'm expediency. So with a father, in another Eastern state of "culture" (a university professor, incidentally; head of a certain scientific department) who said to me recently that while he, himself, was

distinctly a modernist in religion, yet he sent his children to a fundamentalist Sunday-school. Oh—it was just as well, he supposed, for them; and “people would think it strange if they did not go.”

People would think it strange! So people thought of the mad Leonardo—only in his youthful days a harsher term was generally used in speaking of the illegitimate lad of Vinci. But an Anglo-Saxon, one is reminded, cannot be compared with a *wop*—in more high-brow circles, a “Latin.” (There are times when we Americans like to be very Anglo-Saxon). Then what of thirteenth century Roger Bacon—in a country which was not Latin? He, in the opinion of his contemporaries, was not only mad but bad; had direct commerce with the devil. Was a danger to society. Friar Roger shrugged his shoulders, presumably, and went his way. Certainly he went his way—even at the risk of being burned. It did not worry him, apparently, that his thoughts and his interests were not in the fashion of those about him. He did not boast of near-intelligence indistinguishable from that of his confrères—either that of the good monks by whom he was surrounded, or that of the nobles, those representing the “best society” of his day and land. (It was of this same Roger Bacon, incidentally, that a young woman of twenty, in a collegiate girl’s school in—oh, well, one of the states of America usually associated with intelligence and culture—asked, in all seriousness, a short time ago: “Is he in this year’s ‘Who’s Who’?”)

But to return to our muttons: It is not with orthodox Christianity—“fundamental” or otherwise—that I have a quarrel, or with those who “unfeignedly believe its holy gospel”; any more than I have with those who with unfeigned belief in the efficacy of the rite dance in honor of the goddess Perchta, or with those who bow in obeisance to other shrines alien to orthodox Christianity. My quarrel—rather my disappointment, for America I had been told was a land of “idealists”—lies with those whose ideal consists in

"playing safe," whether from expediency or fashion. Above all, it lies with smug self-complacency which regards such an ideal as the height of attainment, which boasts of it as representing the "level-headed American attitude." Does it? If so, can not too high a price be paid for "level-headedness"?

Oh, yes, out of a hundred and odd million, there are many who are neither smug nor self-complacent; nor even "level-headed"—But Gilbert Chesterton is reported to have said: "America is now middle-aged, an advocate of the tried and safe, while Europe enters upon the untried, seeking new things with the daring and rashness of youth."

Is Chesterton right? Before I returned to America I should have denied it. Is the taunt, "The trouble with most Americans is that they honestly believe they are better than men of other lands because they have more worldly goods," recently uttered of us by an intelligent Frenchman, true?

Yet, on the other hand—and there is an "other hand"—is it not encouraging that Americans themselves, those representing the more intelligent element, are becoming critical of themselves; of their *mores* and institutions, of the mould into which, it seems, American civilization is hardening? It does not require a German, like Keyserling, or an Alsatian-Frenchman, like André Siegfried, to point out the dangers of the present popular drift of American thought and ideal (or lack of it), or the weaknesses of the American political and economic system. Nor does it require an altogether destructive iconoclast, of the type of the well-known H. L. Mencken. The fact that certain of the more sober and thoughtful of the American writers and public speakers are becoming critical of the less admirable characteristics and tendencies of the present-day American life, are beginning to wonder both "Whither?" and "Why?" is, in itself, a most hopeful sign. As yet these are but "voices" (to paraphrase slightly) "crying in the wilderness." But voices in the wilderness often, in the end, gain a hearing.

Another hopeful sign of the trend of thought in present-day America (I speak, of course, from my own perhaps somewhat "heterodox" point of view) is the practically complete *volteface* of the better class and more conservative type of American periodical within the past twelve years in regard to the much discussed "Russian situation." I happen to know (from experience) that in 1919-1920 to speak of the Soviet government of Russia—even of its possibilities in modified form—in terms other than those of contempt and loathing was not only to court social ostracism, but meant actually to be placed under police surveillance.

Today, magazines supposedly among the most conservative (e. g. *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Scribners*, and *Harper's*) publish articles by those recently returned from Russia who openly give praise where apparently praise is due—to those phases of the Soviet form of government from which America—and other "capitalistic" governments—might well pay heed; inasmuch as by methods advocated (and practically adopted) in Soviet Russia unnecessary suffering of the aged, of the infirm, of the financially and socially helpless is alleviated; in many cases prevented—a greater achievement.

Again "voices crying in the wilderness" and these cries may represent wasted effort, energy expended in vain, in a country where individual cases of suffering are relieved with generosity, but where the causes underlying this suffering are so little heeded as in America by those with influence and those in power. Yet—"the tears of the weak wash away the thrones of kings" is an Oriental saying, very old; the truth of which has been proved more than once in history. And "kings" may be those of industry of an outworn economic system as well as those born to hereditary rule.

The present financial depression in America, the far-reaching consequences of which as regards suffering it is unnecessary to stress, has had another result perhaps less

generally noted by the popular mind. That is, it has caused *thought, questioning, wondering, concerning*, fundamental economic and "social" (in the sense of sociological) problems on the part of the man (and "hoefentlich" the woman) whose thoughts hitherto have been concerned chiefly with "keeping up with the Jones's"—i. e. bridge, radio, automobile, golf, and only too often, the latest personal: "Have you heard—?"

What the outcome will be, it would take one wiser than I even to suggest, but as James Truslow Adams, in his able article in the January (1932) *Atlantic Monthly*, (in effect a criticism of what goes by the name of "democracy") remarks, "The one thing it is certain to predict is that change is ceaseless." Personally, to me it seems—however mistakenly—that the changes which America is called upon to face in practically the immediate future are of a more radical nature than any which it has been her necessity to face since, as a nation, she came into being in the latter part of the 18th century.

What these changes will be—other than that they will almost certainly involve a drastic reshaping of her economic system, and almost as certainly a more tolerant and intelligent religious outlook and creed on the part of the masses—how long the time required for their effecting, what the outcome will be, whether for better or worse—who can say?

As Irwin Edman remarks, in his excellent article "Salute to Tomorrow," in the January (1932) *Forum*, "We can no longer look forward, as progressive minded people have looked forward in the past, to a better world. The kind of world in which we may expect to live will inevitably be totally changed in character. It will, *if anarchy or destruction does not overtake us first*,* be not a better world, but a very different kind of good one."

Watchman, what of the night?

*Italics my own. J. B. M-M.