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# CONRAD RICHTER'S AMERICANA

*Bruce Sutherland*

**D**URING RECENT YEARS the prevailing ignorance of native backgrounds and history has been a disturbing element in modern American life. Between wars the emphasis, as reflected in social consciousness and much of the contemporary literature, shifted to the present and the future. The past was either ignored or imperfectly understood: ahead lay the millennium; behind lay the wreckage of a thousand human aspirations. Ignorance of the American past has meant indifference to it, for its continuing and varied influence is felt part of the time by all people, but the failure to relate the past to the present has prevented intelligent assimilation and has been responsible for some of the weird notions that are current. Academic historians no longer reach a wide audience; the popularizers, the debunkers, the writers of historical fiction are the chief purveyors of historical information and what they have to offer is not all cloth of gold.

Much that passes for historical fiction is designed to appeal to a large cross section of an industrial society which, bewildered by the complexities of a mechanized age, turns to stories of pre-industrial life for wisdom, excitement, color, pageantry, or whatever the soul may most desire at the moment. Such emotional shots in the arm, when taken at their face value, are often good entertainment; when used as a framework upon which to build dreams of a golden age, they are instruments of regression and escape. [Fortunately, during the past two decades historical fiction of a more mature nature has appeared, in which intelligent contemporary writers with an understanding of their own age have attempted to integrate the past and the present in terms of moral values, human relationships, and the "fullness" of life. These writers are humanists in the truest sense of the word, and their work is a real contribution to the literature of the present even though it treats of the world of the past. One of the greatest of these modern humanists

is Conrad Richter, whose stories of American backgrounds have been appearing for the past ten years.)

Like many other boys born in the 1890's, Richter was reared in a small-town environment. Pine Grove, Pennsylvania, a farming community in Schuylkill County on the edge of the hard coal region, was not different from hundreds of other American communities of the period. Nor was it unusual that Richter's people had helped to establish the community some generations earlier; that these people had been preachers, tradesmen, soldiers, blacksmiths, farmers; and that in them was a mixture of South German, French, English, and Scotch-Irish blood. Such things were typical of America. Even less unusual was Richter's early interest in the Frank Nelson books, those Castlemonian classics which were so avidly read by American boys over a period of fifty years, and which incidentally have never been given their just due as molders of character. This early, spontaneous, whole-hearted interest in native backgrounds and deeds of derring-do was a part of the heritage of many American boys who came to man's estate and, alas, outgrew such boyish nonsense. But not Conrad Richter. He had known his forbears as people and not as chromos on the wall; he recognized the ties between the present and the past, and as time went on, what had been a healthy boyish interest in cowboys and Indians became a mature humanism which impelled him to study the phenomenon of an American life that was rapidly vanishing.

The sources of Richter's inspiration are not hard to catalog. From boy's books he went on to family records and stories and traditions; he read everything authentic upon which he could lay his hands, anything that would shed light upon those aspects of the American past in which he was interested. But the most important source of all was the people who had lived through days that have now passed into history, and from them Richter garnered the little details and authenticities of early life as it was actually lived. No writer on American social history is more thoroughly at home with his material nor has anyone been more careful to preserve the spirit of times past.

Gradually, what had started as a life hobby became a life work. After high school and a series of odd jobs as teamster, farm laborer, clerk, timberman, and salesman, Richter turned to journalism. A series of ten articles under the general title of "The American Newspaper" had appeared in *The Bookman* from March to December, 1904, and these articles pointed the way to a profession. Newspaper experi-

ence in various Pennsylvania cities and towns followed, but it was in Cleveland while working as a private secretary that Richter first began to write fiction.

In April, 1914, when Richter was twenty-three years old, "Brothers of No Kin" was published in the *Forum*. The story had a remarkable reception and seemed to open the way to a brilliant writing career. E. J. O'Brien chose it as the best story of the year; it was reprinted a number of times, and magazine editors became aware of the existence of its author. Success, however, carried disillusionment with it, for the twenty-five dollar payment which Mr. Richter received only after screwing up enough courage to ask for it, was paltry. The episode is best described in his own words. "I had just been married, had sober obligations, and told myself stubbornly that if this was what one got for the 'best' story of the year, I had better stick to business and write in my spare time only the type of story that would fetch a fair price, which I did." This helps to explain the standardized mediocrity of the early Richter stories, with the exception of "Brothers of No Kin." Several of them were collected and issued as *Brothers of No Kin and Other Stories* (1924), and all that can be said for them is that they are "well-made" stories, tailored for the trade. Some have elements of nativism and local color, some have a glimmer of characterization, but for the most part they give the impression of assembly-line mass production which at best gave the author practice in the art of writing. The titular story belongs in a different category. It is a bare narrative of a man who in taking the sins of a friend upon his own head gives up the Kingdom of Heaven, a man at whom modern "youth would have laughed and cynic would have sneered," but one who fortunately lived among his own kind in a Pennsylvania valley and was understood by his own people. In this simple story of faith and self-sacrifice, the outline of Richter's later humanism is readily discernible.

[During this period, when fiction was clearly a side issue, Richter was going through a process of self-education peculiarly his own.] Many have left the beaten track and in their own way have attempted to learn the secret of the universe. Somerset Maugham speaks of a doctor he knew who "spent long years burrowing away in the library of the British Museum and at long intervals produced a huge pseudoscientific, pseudophilosophical book that nobody read . . .," striving, ever striving for the unattainable. Mr. Richter went through such a period, one that lasted about fifteen years, and, although he feels now that what came out

of it was only amateur theory, the fact remains that this theorizing constituted a serious attempt to discover something about man and the world in which he lives. Between 1925 and 1927 three books were published which contain the essence of his theories, *Human Vibration*, *Life Energy* and *Principles of Bio-Physics*. These theories were not easily put together. Of trying to "invent backwardly" the mechanism of himself and incidentally of all men, Mr. Richter says, "Ancestors had provided me with the passion, which included an outfit. Circumstances helped prod me. I had many ideas. They fell down with disheartening consistency one after the other."

It is impossible to chart the course followed by Mr. Richter during this period. Much of his thought is based on the assumption that man is the most perfect of all mechanical creations; that the primary elements in man are material and that they can be tested as electrons, atoms, and other supersensible objects can. These primary elements are the cell and its vibrations, cellular energy, and a force which is opposed to the free replenishment of this energy. An understanding of these forces and the effect which they have upon the individual makes it possible to "know thyself" and in knowing to have a fuller and completer life. The network of nerve matter which joins the trillions of cells in each individual is affected only to a minor extent by individual experience. It is "through inheritance from literally countless ancestors across an incredible period of time" that this network of nerve matter and its reactions are chiefly determined. Thus it seems certain that Mr. Richter was convinced that, even more than we realize, we are the products of numberless ancestors and that many of our reactions to various stimuli have their roots deep in ancestral sources. Individuals cannot be independent of the past because ancestral control does to some extent govern both their present and their future actions. This reasoning may be neither scientific nor philosophic, but it helps to explain Mr. Richter's deep interest in those people out of whose present the future of America was being formed.

In 1928 Richter gave up a small business in the East and moved to the Southwest. He believed that the early nineteenth century in New Mexico corresponded roughly to the early seventeenth century in Pennsylvania and he found that many of the incidents, humorous and tragic, that had centered around his own forbears in Pennsylvania or had occurred in his great-grandfather's store and tavern, the famed Mansion House, had also happened in the West at a later date. For five years

Richter made a study of early Southwestern life from what original sources he could find—books, newspapers, manuscripts—and from the memories of old men and women who had grown up with the country. By 1933 he was convinced that his earlier attitude toward writing had been wrong and that he was now ready to produce the best fiction of which he was capable. Since then he has published one volume of stories and four novels on early American life which prove the wisdom of his decision.

There was nothing new or startling about the Richter stories which began to appear in the magazines early in 1934. On the surface they were Western stories of a high order, authentic, carefully conceived, and skillfully narrated. Closer scrutiny reveals how vastly different they are from the type of Western to which Americans have become accustomed. These are stories of pioneer fortitude aimed at a depression-ridden world; and the contemporary soul, battered and bewildered by life, through them is brought into closer contact with people of another age who also lived, loved, struggled, and died but whose lives form a pattern out of which emerges completeness and serenity. The fight for freedom, dignity, self-respect, and security occurs in every generation. Conditions change but the goal for which man strives remains the same, and sometimes out of the past comes a clearer vision of that goal than can be seen in the obscurity of a muddled present and a clouded future. Richter was aware that the growth of American culture is dependent upon past as well as present aspirations and that the will to survive in the present is often conditioned by the past.

In the collection of short stories published as *Early Americana* (1936), Richter succeeded in relating the life of the nineteenth century Southwestern frontier to the life of the present. By depicting the people of that day during the course of the daily round of human contacts with the land, the weather, tools and equipment, enemies and friends, all against a colorful regional background, he achieved a realism that is not governed only by the outward aspects of drudgery, drabness, and despair. There were such qualities as courage and silent heroism; there was a record of solid and stubborn achievement, and Richter's insight into the spiritual side of a life that could be both drab and terrifying is a tribute to his painstaking research and his knowledge of human nature. The long vigil of a teen-age boy and girl in the hushed expectancy of an Indian attack; the bitter opposition to the railroad by one who feels that progress can demand too high a price; the stubborn de-

termination of young homesteaders to enjoy the fruits of their toil in defiance of the cattle interests; the effect of a seven-year drought upon a whole community; the adjustments of a delicately reared Georgia girl to life on the remote frontier; the loneliness and pride of an early trader who refuses to become a squaw man; the combination of danger and distance which makes a mockery of normal human intercourse; the feuding and gunfighting of cattle outfits—these are the essentials of life out of which Richter has woven his stories.

The unaffected simplicity of the characters, the deftly inserted authenticities of frontier life, the play of carefully guarded emotions, the loneliness and distance, the grandeur and the terror, are all molded into an artistic whole which recreates brief moments in the lives of people isolated from their more safely settled kindred. Richter is acutely aware of what this life meant to the women; some of his finest characterizations are brought about by little flashes of insight into the souls of these women. Not all of them are frontier heroines, but stoicism, perseverance, and a grim acceptance of conditions over which they have little control are marked characteristics. Pioneer fortitude can be sickeningly overdone; extreme realism is often a false indictment of a way of life. Such pitfalls are avoided by Richter, for his interest lies neither in the legendary heroine nor in the victim of frontier neuroses. His chief concern is with ordinary women to whom the life was neither heroic nor lacklustre; it was a life that had to be lived, and, when material values failed, spiritual forces could be drawn upon for sustenance.

Mr. Richter's first novel, *The Sea of Grass* (1937), was, according to what is probably an apocryphal story, written at the instigation of a Texan who was bored with stories about poor share-croppers and who wanted to see in print an honest account of one of the big pioneer cattlemen who ruled feudal domains larger than some of the Eastern states, and ruled them well. The theme had been in his mind for several years and was partially explored in the story "Smoke over the Prairie" (*Saturday Evening Post*, June 1, 1935). For a writer of carefully constructed, almost condensed stories the planning of a novel must have presented some formidable problems. There were patterns to follow, but the long, padded epic so typical of American historical fiction did not appeal to him. Faced with highly theatrical material which verged on the melodramatic, he was brief and restrained almost to the point of taciturnity in his treatment of it. The result is a com-

pletely successful short novel which meets even the most exacting literary standards.

[Mr. Richter's method is objective. Against a vast background of grassland and desert faithfully, even artistically painted, the dramatic essentials unfold. A quarter of a century of change is packed into a few pages without sacrificing either perspective or proportion. This is the story of an empire "dead and quartered today like a steer on the meatblock" but athrob with life such a very few years ago. It is the story of Colonel Brewton and his wife Lutie, of Brice Chamberlain—of change which destroys and builds at the same time, of the past which succumbs to the present and of the personal tragedy which attends the tide of progress. The vastness of the theme to some extent overshadows the characters, and in less skillful hands they would be little better than stock performers in a melodrama. The stage property effects of hero, villain, and fair lady may be seen; but since life itself is not free from melodrama, certain theatricalisms could not be avoided entirely. Had they been, the truth would have suffered. The irresistible force of agrarianism meeting the immovability of established tradition and use did not result in a clear-cut victory for either, and in reconstructing one such struggle Richter had added another chapter to our social history.]

[By 1940, when *The Trees* was published, Richter had reached his full stature as a proponent of the American heritage.] In this novel he turns to the frontier of an earlier day, to the development of the old Northwest, and in this account of the pioneering experiences of a hardy, illiterate Pennsylvania family he epitomizes the whole story of Western settlement. [There is none of the glamor of historical pageantry; there are no heroics, no carefully staged dramatic situations, no great names and no great deeds. This is a story of the common man told in the homely idiom of that man; a story in which the daily and the yearly round of primitive existence is faithfully described and one which recaptures the moods and thoughts of an age that was governed almost entirely by necessity. The natural simplicity of the story is in itself a work of art. Richter's familiarity with pioneer life, the result of many years of careful study, is nowhere permitted to appear obtrusive. What he achieves is a pioneer's eye view of frontier existence and of a group of people who "never preen themselves before posterity." You would have to seek far in American fiction to find a truer picture of how our pioneer ancestors really lived, and it is safe to say that *The Trees* is one of the finest novels on this aspect of American life ever written.]



*The Trees* is not an historical romance, nor is it an historical novel. It is a realistic narrative of the experience of the Luckett family, who migrated across the Ohio into new territory; of the trace through the endless forest, the building of a cabin, the coming of other settlers, and finally the ultimate disintegration of the family unit. Each member of the family is well and carefully characterized: Worth, the father, veteran of Yorktown, nomadic as an Indian, ever restless to go where the game is—a good father and husband according to his lights but not one to assume the responsibility of a settled existence; Jary, the mother, old and dying of the woods fever at thirty-six, a town girl married to a hunter, resentful, irritable, yet bowing to the inevitability of life; Sayward, the eldest child, strong, practical, self-reliant; pretty, delicate Genny; stolid Achsa; Wyitt, the one boy; and the baby Sulie. The death of the mother and the growing restlessness of the father throw the burden of family responsibility on Sayward, and as a consequence “Saird” becomes the central character in the book. No romantic heroine, she is the personification of all those qualities so essential in the frontier woman.

There are some memorable scenes in this novel. The death and burial of Jary is an epitaph to all the worn, sickly, lonely women who succumbed to the rigors of pioneering. The lost baby Sulie, whose disappearance aroused the whole community and of whom not a trace was found except for a little “bitty” playhouse made by the lost child deep in the woods, brings to mind all of the wilderness children who strayed from home to die of exposure or to be picked up by Indians. The brutality of Jake Tench, who skinned a wolf alive just to show off his skill with a knife, is indicative of the latent savagery of primitive life. Young Wyitt’s experience with his first deer, Achsa’s illness, Genny’s courtship, and many other episodes leave a lasting impression, and all are woven together with the bits of homely lore that were a part of the lives of pioneer people. Sayward’s marriage to the Bay Stater, Portius Wheeler, ends the novel and marks the passing of the frontier. Settlement had come to the land and to the people of the land.

In *Tacey Cromwell* (1942) the scene is once again the Southwest, this time a mining community in Arizona Territory toward the end of the last century. As in his other novels, Richter has been meticulous in gathering his material and has steeped himself in honky-tonk and mining-town lore of the nineties. This aspect of American life is still familiar to many Americans who can remember much of it at first hand,

but generally only the more exciting or glamorous or naughty features of the life have been emphasized. Bret Harte had no choice but to end his "Outcasts of Poker Flat" in snowy tragedy, for he could not permit Oakhurst and the Dutchess to survive only to return to a life of sin, and society had developed no scheme for the rejuvenation of reformed prostitutes and gamblers. What Bret did not attempt Richter has accomplished, for *Tacey Cromwell* is the carefully patterned story of a prostitute and a gambler who attempt to cross the great divide into the land of respectability.

Richter is an observer of human frailty but never a judge. He lets facts speak for themselves and makes no effort to tamper with the realities. When because of the boy Nugget, Tacey determines to give over her old life and start anew, she is well aware of the risks involved. Even four hundred miles is not a great distance to put between oneself and a lurid past, especially on the frontier. Her motives are not clear even to herself, and not much is certain except her love for the boy and his gambler older brother. Society does not permit her to achieve the respectability she wants for her little family; husband and children are denied to her by her past, but society cannot prevent her from developing into a woman of character nor can it deprive her of the right to love those from whom she is forced to separate. The gambler Gaye becomes a banker, marries well, and ultimately is made treasurer of the Territory; the boy Nugget thrives on the advantages that accrue from his brother's success; the orphan Seely, whom Tacey befriended for a short while, never finds her niche in the respectable world into which she is later thrust, but it is the character of Tacey, hard, competent, strong, and understanding, that dominates the story. Laid against a regional background of a "society" emerging from the license of a frontier mining community, this short novel depicts an important phase in the growth of American culture.

Mr. Richter's recent novel, *The Free Man* (1943), has been something of a disappointment. For the first time the short novel form proves inadequate to the theme, and failings so carefully avoided in earlier novels are noticeable. Here the author's power of expression has proved unequal to the greatness of his conception. There is a consciousness of historical things which partially blacks out the human element. It is not that Mr. Richter is not sure of his material—it is more that he has not assimilated it as carefully as in his previous works or that he has attempted to compress too much into too little space. Cer-

tainly the theme of this novel was as close to his heart as anything he has ever written—perhaps it was so close that it interfered with complete objectivity. Whatever the cause, one feels that a much greater novel should have resulted and that had circumstances been right such would have been the case. *The Free Man* is not a creative failure. It has moments of brilliance and flashes of insight into character. But the plain truth is that the novel is not up to its author's exacting standards when, considering the subject matter, it should have been one of the best books he has ever written.

The novel was timely in that it recalled the occasionally neglected fact that our life and our freedom have grown out of the contributions of more than one hardy European strain. It tells the story of Henry Free, born Henner Dellicker, who came to Pennsylvania just before the Revolution, was illegally and unjustly indentured, escaped and found refuge with fellow Palatines on the frontier above Reading. It is rich in its historical revelations of little-known facts about the freedom-loving Pennsylvania Germans, and Henry Free's experiences epitomize the making of an American; but the story is not closely woven, and the presence of the arrogant Miss Amity Bayley, later Mrs. Free, has a disquieting effect. It is conceivable that mutual revolutionary ardor could have brought two such opposite personalities together, but a more homely mixture of English and German blood might well have enriched the story. It is to be hoped that he will give the Pennsylvania Germans another trial.

American history is a magnetic field for the novelist, one that has been carefully explored by romancers and realists alike. There have been extremes of treatment, and between the extremes nearly every conceivable approach to the subject has been made. Many a fascinating story has been produced, thoroughly documented, well characterized, and entertainingly narrated. It would seem impossible to add anything new to what has already been done with the material. Historical knowledge and the ability to write are the attributes of many, but in themselves they do not create great fiction. Mr. Richter's chief contribution to Americana is a restrained realism which depends greatly on brevity and understatement for its effect. This, combined with an understanding of people, a feeling for historical things which transcends mere knowledge, and the ability to think and write in terms of his characters and their environment places him among the chosen few who have made the past of America come alive.