

The German Heritage

The German-Americans, by Richard O'Connor. *Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1968. 484 pp. \$8.95.*

A MORE self-defeating exercise cannot be imagined than trying to define German character and traits. German blood, according to the mystique of kaisers and fuehrers, was supposed to be concentrated in *Ein Volk*, but instead is one of the most diffused in all the world. One-sixth of American citizens have a fraction of German ancestry.

Stephen Leacock once tried to characterize the assumed humorless German passion for method and order by depicting Germans as a people dedicated to gathering fallen oak leaves in the Black Forest and sorting them out by size. Yet it was Ossie Schreckengost, the battery-mate and roommate of the great Teutonic pitcher and fellow eccentric, Rube Waddell, who once insisted that their manager, Connie Mack,

insert a clause in Waddell's contract forbidding him to eat animal crackers in bed.

Germans, it has been said, are submissive to authority. Yet the great migration of the Forty-Eighters was a flight of dissidents and frustrated democrats. Germans who came to America fled the tyranny of kings and princelings with the fierce determination not to be ruled from across the sea. The first thing that impressed Carl Schurz when he set foot in New York was the absence of sentinels at public buildings, of soldiers on the streets, and of any uniforms except those of the police.

German-Americans were called clannish, separatist, quietist, overly timid, and humble. Yet their Sunday beer-drinking, brass bands, and singing showed them to be gregarious and, as O'Connor says, "the noisiest drinkers in the world—next to the Japanese."

It is impossible to generalize on this strain that contributed so much to America. They were at once conservative, anti-Communist, isolationist, and in support of the *status quo*; but also visionary, utopian, victims of feckless idealism, troublesome, atheistic, free-thinking, and missionaries of socialism, Marxism, anarchism, and militant unionism.

Their diversity is astonishing: liberal statesmen like Schurz and Governor John Peter Altgeld of Illinois; military commanders such as the leaders in two world wars, Pershing (originally Pfoerschin) and Eisenhower; ruthless entrepreneurs of the order of Astor, Rockefeller, Widener, Yerkes; Princes of the Church, as Mundelein and Stritch; heroes of sport, such as Ruth, Gehrig, Honus Wagner, Pfann of Cornell; among entertainers, Fritzi Scheff, Clark Gable (Pennsylvania Dutch), Doris Day, Grace Kelly (whose mother is of German descent), the Ringling Brothers, the Flying Wallendas, and Bix Beiderbecke, hero of the Jazz Age.

Their contributions were enormous, and often unsuspected. Who bought Manhattan Island from the Indians? Peter Minuit, a German. Who composed George Washing-

ton's bodyguard? Largely Germans. Who established the first American kindergarten? The English wife of Carl Schurz. Who painted "Washington Crossing the Delaware?" Emmanuel Leutze. On whose land was the discovery made that started the California gold rush? On the German John Sutter's. Who was the most accomplished rustler and horse thief of the Old West? "Dutch Henry" Born. Whose strain of alfalfa for cattle fodder advanced agriculture and ranching immeasurably? That of Wendelin Grimm.

Who built the Brooklyn Bridge? Roebling. Who was responsible for the establishment of an army post at Fort Sheridan, 26 miles north of Chicago, to protect the city? The (largely German) Haymarket anarchists. Who kept the Socialist movement alive by repeatedly pawning his brother's gold watch? Eugene Debs. Who invented the Republican elephant and the Tammany tiger? Thomas Nast. Who draws "Peanuts"? Charles Schulz. Who invented the linotype? Mergenthaler. Who composed 40 per cent of the Major Whittaker's "Lost Battalion?" German Jews from New York.

What German Jew was the leader of New York society, a port-eating Episcopalian, who fed his pigs Jerusalem artichokes? August Belmont. How was Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* introduced to the United States? In a German-speaking production in Milwaukee. Who was responsible for the introduction of the Christmas tree, the stockings, and those cookies baked like bullets called *Pfeffernusse*? German immigrants. Who was the greatest electrical engineering genius we know? The gentle hunchback, Steinmetz.

Again, who gave us Chautauqua (part-time university, universal Sunday school, and medium for instant self-improvement)? Who instituted the *Turnvereins* to build healthy bodies? Who founded the Travelers Aid Society, the Legal Aid Society, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals? Germans, all.

Migration from Germany took several forms and had several impulses. Penniless Germans, after the devastating wars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were recruited and given passage by shipowners, merchants, and governments after signing papers of indenture for from three to seven years, and were peddled upon arrival in the open market. Victims of religious persecution subscribed to the same terms.

The Hessians who fought for the British in the Revolution were impressed by their princes and sold off like cattle. First in the chow line, last into battle, they deserted and merged with the Pennsylvania Dutch. Pietists and mystics proselyted by William Penn founded the first German settlements in Pennsylvania, still today obsessed by the occult, traced by "hex" signs" on barns.

Princes and Pan-Germanic societies, given to dreams of a new overseas "Fatherland," sought to colonize German enclaves true to the hierarchy and discipline of the old country. Finally, there were the Forty-Eighters, whose dreams of a constitutional order collapsed with the revolution. There was at the time, as in Ireland, a potato famine which contributed to the influx.

The trials of the Atlantic passage all through this span of time were terrible. The immigrants sailed in plague ships and swimming coffins. A contemporary chronicler observed: "If crosses and tombstones could be erected on the water, the routes of the emigrant vessels would long since have assumed the appearance of crowded cemeteries."

Once here, nativistic hostility was early encountered by the German immigrants. It came to a peak with the Know-Nothing movement in the mid-nineteenth century and had a resurgence with America's entry into World War I, when sauerkraut became known as "Liberty cabbage."

German performance in all of America's wars, from the Revolution on, was so exemplary that this xenophobia is now completely dead. Nobody can take away from the patriotic service of Johann Kalb, Baron von Steuben, or Herkimer at Oriskany;

from the unbelievable assault by the predominantly German XI Corps on Lookout Mountain, credited by the Secretary of War to "the visible interposition of God"; from the indomitable action of the 32d Division and the aces Wehner and Luke in World War I. By the war of 1941 pro-Germanism was a dead issue.

Today the Germanic influence on American life has all but disappeared or been homogenized. If assimilation is the goal of all minorities, the German-Americans have succeeded beyond all others. The phenomenon has been called an ethnic "disappearance." The Germans, as a group, are vanished.

Mr. O'Connor's book (he dedicates it to a Hessian great-grandfather) is well and clearly written. In detail it is fascinating.

Reviewed by GEORGE MORGENSTERN

The Drift to Starboard

The Conservative Mainstream, by Frank S. Meyer. *New Rochelle, N. Y.: Arlington House, 1969. 488 pp. \$8.00.*

CONSERVATISM has become of age and Liberalism has hanged itself with the lariat rope of the cowboy from the Pedernales. But even before the final chaotic year of the Johnson administration it had become apparent that there was, throughout America, a massive slippage to the Right. The Republican party turned Right in 1964 and stayed Right in 1968. Moreover, the public has moved more rapidly than the present administration, an administration which will find itself in the months ahead moving to the Right. The charges against Right wing radicalism have died away, drowned