

## Historical Conglomerate

### The Americans: A Social History of the United States, 1587-1914,

by J. C. Furnas, *New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1969. 1015 pp. \$12.95.*

HERE IS a heroic effort to summarize all the nonpolitical activity in this country, from the arrival of the first European settlers to the coming of World War I, within the compass of a single binding. As a sociological project it deserves high commendation. As a unified literary production it falls far short.

That was probably inevitable. Like a Jacques Louis David painting of the Napoleonic era the magnitude of the canvas defeats the artist's effort to achieve a synthesis. By piling detail upon detail all clarity of the whole is lost. No definable conclusions struggle out from the welter of more than 400,000 words of text. And the author's somewhat self-important style makes consecutive reading doubly tiresome. It is like sitting down to seek coherence from a year's supply of *Time* magazine.

The book is developed chronologically so that, in spite of the title, well over half the timespan antedates the United States. This means that no single subject can be followed systematically. Whether it be architecture or xenophobia the theme is constantly interrupted and the treatment is consequently spotty. We learn, for instance, why clapboard houses originated in colonial times and, six hundred pages later, why the steel bridge had to precede the skyscraper. But there is no unified consideration of the evolution of American architectural thinking, even though the field is one to which Mr. Furnas has obviously given much study.

This author's definition of social history is the very dubious one coined by G. M. Trevelyan a generation ago—"History with the politics left out." But man, according to Aristotle's more enduring aphorism, "is

a political animal." To leave politics out of any significant segment of his story is therefore to eliminate the backbone which gives it both continuity and strength. The remains are disarticulated limbs and organs, which is what readers of this book will find. Illustrative is the fact that it contains only one passing reference to *The Federalist*, our country's greatest contribution to political thought, and in the forty-page Index that one is wrongly paged. So more than the virtue of a unified study is lacking. Even as an encyclopedia of their myriad undertakings *The Americans* is deficient. Only if the author intended to emphasize formlessness in our national life has he indeed succeeded.

Because of its amorphous nature one cannot properly criticize the choice of subjects that Mr. Furnas attempts to cover in this book. With so many at hand some must of necessity be slighted. This reviewer would have welcomed more attention to the ornate paddlewheel steamers, now gone with the wind, which in his youth made travel by our inland waterways so fascinating. In the matter of transportation the author is more interested in the romance of early railroading and the short-lived era of canals. At the other end of the kaleidoscopic social spectrum he dwells at length on what is called: "the overweening belief of American women in the superiority of their sex—first more sensitive, then more righteous, now [in the time of Frances Willard] monopolizing common sense." This point, as equally pleasantly in other contexts, is illustrated by quotations of contemporary doggerel:

Husband and wife are one,  
Says the perfect law divine.  
That one the man, says human law  
With its distinctions fine.  
But in the W.C.T.U.,  
New realm of law and life,  
Husband and wife are often one,  
But that one is the wife.

If one cannot disagree about the customs and crotchets that Mr. Furnas selects it is

otherwise when he treats a subject with obvious partiality. Of such is the section on the rise of corporate business. Condemnation of the methods of the "robber barons" during the "gilded age" is of course wholly in order. This, however, is carried on to a sweeping attack on the market economy as such for "lending itself to clever rascality as readily as horse racing." We are told that ". . . the corporation supplemented the growing banking system in taking over the economic function of the lottery." There seems to be no realization that strongly centralized government can, and does, exploit the citizen far more effectively than the most infamous individual manipulator. "In 1864," says the author in this context, "the greenback paper currency touched bottom at thirty-four cents gold." He would have to sound more deeply to find a bottom value for the greenbacks of today.

By stopping his narrative at 1914 Mr. Furnas immunizes himself from dispute on what has happened since. Nevertheless he offers a generalized forecast which seems to discount somewhat the time and effort he has put into the particularization of distinctively American characteristics. "America's chances of weaning itself from cultural colonialism," he concludes, "had never been high." And even after Europe's second "serious effort to commit suicide" he finds that: "Accounts are still in the Old World's favor in many matters."

The "analytical candor" which Mr. Furnas claims for this book must in turn be applied to it by any serious reviewer. To do so is not to suggest that the volume lacks value. One may open it at almost any page and find it absorbing—until the theme shifts, say, from the development of baseball to that of electric lighting. Many subjects, education in particular, are treated in depth, though it is a bit sardonic to be told that the coeducational college "soon became a four-year equivalent of sending the girl to the right dancing class." Unfortunately there are quite a few places where Americans of my day would label as "smart Alec" what this author seems to regard as

"analytical candor."

On many subjects of current concern—mob violence, crime, racial disorder, student agitation, juvenile delinquency—Mr. Furnas is reassuring by recalling all but forgotten troubles of the past. He reminds us, for instance, that the draft riots in New York in 1863 were, more accurately, a hideous outbreak of racial war which left, by what we would today call "body count," a toll of over a thousand dead. A decade later that outspoken diarist, George Templeton Strong, was confiding to his journal the thought that it would benefit the country if Irish Catholics and Orangemen could be brought together, well-armed in some walled enclosure, for mutual extermination.

There is much careful research behind this book. It is well documented and the reproductions of contemporary prints are more than decorative, especially those taken from the charming drawings by Captain Basil Hall of the British Navy during his American travels in 1827/28. If the net impression is somewhat chaotic, so have been the lives of the great diversity of creatures poured into the melting pot over many generations to produce the typical American of today—if you can find him.

Reviewed by FELIX MORLEY

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### *Lord Russell's Obsessions*

**The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell**, Vol. III (1944-1969), *New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969. 339 pp. \$8.95.*

*The following review was written just before Lord Russell's death at the age of ninety-seven years.*

THE CHARACTER of Bertrand Russell as a writer and philosopher falls into a trident pattern. One prong represents his quality as a stylist. His prose is an admirable blend of conciseness, precision, and clarity—a clean, classical prose that is widely enjoyed and generally envied. Another prong represents his humanistic outlook, his view of the