

Up from Menckanism

Serpent in Eden: H. L. Mencken and the South, by Fred C. Hobson, Jr., Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974. 242 pp. \$8.95.

AS ALL THE WORLD, or at least every lettered Southerner, knows, in or about 1920 Mr. H. L. Mencken, then the undisputed high arbiter of American culture, proclaimed his discovery of the "Sahara of the Bozart." The vast territory between the Potomac mudflats and the Gulf, large enough to swallow up France and Germany, was, according to Mencken, as sterile of art, intellect, and culture—of the beaux-arts—as the great desert. It was a "gargantuan paradise of the fourth-rate," ungraced by a single picture gallery, orchestra, or theater worthy of attention, a single writer who could write, or a thinker worthy of "Portugal, Serbia, or Estonia." The South, in sum, was a land of lynchers and primitive fundamentalists, a humid *ultima thule* where the subhuman peasantry who merely threatened civilization elsewhere in the United States had actually succeeded in extinguishing it.

By Mr. Hobson's lights, Mencken's clanging *alarum* was, for better or worse, a galvanic event in the history of the New South, startling into activity two contentious movements—Southern Liberalism and the Southern Renaissance in literature. Both movements would have come without Mencken, but their advent was hastened and the particular forms they took were irreparably shaped (or warped) by Menckanism. With an admirably impartial temper for what is obviously a regional *devoir*, Hobson has tracked down the ramifications of the Menckonian assault on the Southern mind.

Mencken's slashes against the South, which he saw as benevolently surgical, were fraught with the ambivalence of what the psychoanalysts identify as a love-hate

relationship. His outrage at the degradation of the New South was, in part, a product of his admiration for the Old. This will surprise many, but the Mencken of the "Sahara" thought of the Old South as "a civilization of manifold excellences . . . undoubtedly the best that these States have ever seen." And it was Mencken who wrote that the Civil War was "a victory of what we now call Babbitts over what used to be called gentlemen." Again, it was Mencken—and this was a first-hand and convincing recollection and not simply mythifying, as Hobson, a son of the New South and therefore skeptic of the Old, would have it—who said that his Baltimore was less corrupt than other large American cities because of the honorable influence of ex-Confederate emigrés, "many of whom arrived with no baggage save good manners and empty bellies."

From the "Sahara" until he was diverted by F.D.R., Mencken continued to concentrate on the benighted South, particularly on what he considered its stultifying subjection to a fundamentalist theocracy. Despite his pose of detachment, Mencken in the 1920's and 1930's, it is apparent, played recruiting officer and chaplain for the guerilla forces of Southern Liberalism. He identified and counseled emergent Southern Liberals, published and praised their works, and exhorted them to lay about them hammer and tongs. The Southern Liberals, in turn, revered and emulated Mencken, although with the exception of that venomous scribbler W. J. Cash, his disciples were unable to match the savagery of his attacks. It is an ironic sidelight on the rootless urbanite conservatism of the era: Mencken, the scorner of uplift, the pitiless castigator of do-gooders, he who more than any other unmasked the aggression and vacuity that often underlay the reforming impulse, became, where the South was concerned, a crusader for redemption. In mitigation, it must be said that the Southern Liberalism that Mencken nourished was still unformed, that it might have become, had men like the sociologist How-

ard Odum realized their best, something other than a ragtag camp follower of urban progressivism.

Mencken's relationship to the Southern Renaissance, more specifically to the Fugitive-Agrarians of Nashville, is more problematic, and vividly exhibits, as Hobson shows, his defects as a literary critic. Mencken slighted both the literary and social significance of the Agrarian writers and of their undercover collaborator William Faulkner. That is to say, when the resurgence of Southern high culture he had hoped for appeared, he failed either to recognize or comprehend it. The Agrarians spoke out of portions of the Southern tradition he was not equipped to appreciate. Yet Hobson believes, and perhaps he is right, that Mencken, in the "Sahara" and even more by his cruel covertings at the Dayton "Monkey Trial," was the indispensable antagonist for the Agrarians, that it was he who sent them back to their roots for that periodic renewal Mr. Jefferson had recommended and thus catalyzed *I'll Take My Stand*.

Being gentlemen, the Agrarians, unlike the Liberals, were repulsed rather than exhilarated by the savagery of the public Mencken. Constituting most of what remained in America of articulate Jeffersonian democracy (my notion, not Hobson's), they could not join him in dismissing the yeomanry as *boobus americanus*. To the essentially German Mencken the artistic elite realized itself in destructive rebellion against the surrounding social fabric. The Agrarians, inheritors of a not completely attenuated English patriarchal tradition (not to mention their archaic classical educations) conceived of art as in harmonic tension with its environment. Certainly the burden of their renewal carried them far away from Mencken's premier nostrum for Southern ills—destruction of the prevailing religious orthodoxy. Mencken, they saw, failed to discern the genuine and indispensable *pietas* beneath the evangelical excesses. To Mencken's indictment then, the Agrarians had

no choice but to bring in a verdict of "Guilty, and proud of it!" In so doing, they affirmed what Babbitt and More had already discovered in their own manner: Menckonian conservatism was diverting, it was often useful in a negative way, and its strenuous audacity commanded a certain respect, but in the long run its sustenance was thin.

Reviewed by CLYDE WILSON

The Political Animal

The Social Philosophers, by Robert Nisbet, *New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1973. 466 pp. \$10.*

The Idea of Fraternity, by Wilson Carey McWilliams, *Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1973. 695 pp. \$14.95.*

WHAT IS COMMUNITY? What impells men to enter into society? Is society natural or artificial? Such questions have agitated the interest of men ever since they began pondering the riddles of life and the universe; but these questions are of especial and urgent interest today. When we speak of "community," observes Robert Nisbet, we usually use the word in its oldest sense of "relationships among individuals that are characterized by a high degree of personal intimacy, of social cohesion or moral commitment, and of continuity in time." Closely related to the idea of community is the idea of anticommunity, that is, of the fear of the "social void, of alienation, of estrangement from others, even from one's self, of loss of identity, of great open spaces of impersonality and rejection." Balzac spoke truly when he contended that man possesses a horror of mental, emotional, social and spiritual isolation; and it is this