

WILLIAM APPLEMAN WILLIAMS



the tragedy of empire

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WILLIAM APPLEMAN WILLIAMS

The Tragedy of Empire

PAUL M. BUHLE

and

EDWARD RICE-MAXIMIN

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
New York London

First Published in 1995 by

Routledge
29 West 35th Street
New York, NY 10001

Published in Great Britain in 1995 by

Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE

This edition published 2011 by Routledge:

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
711 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10017

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
2 Park Square, Milton Park
Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

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Series design by Annie West

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Buhle, Paul, 1944–

William Appleman Williams—the tragedy of empire / Paul M. Buhle,
Edward Rice-Maximin.

p. cm. —(American Radicals)

Includes bibliographical references (p. 297) and index.

ISBN 0-415-91130-3 (hb : acid-free paper). — ISBN 0-415-9113-1

(pb : acid-free paper)

1. Williams, William Appleman. 2. Historians—United States—

Biography. I. Rice-Maximin, Edward Francis, 1941– II. Title.

III. Series

E175.5.w55b84 1995

973.92 092—dc20

[B]

95-19420
CIP

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To our days in Madison

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge Harvey J. Kaye for his initiative in suggesting this project, and for seeing it through (with the collaboration of Elliott J. Gorn) a change of publishers in midstream. We wish to give our deepest thanks to those Williams family members who gave us their recollections and encouragement in interviews and family documents: Jeannie Williams, Corrinne Williams, Wendy Williams, and Kyenne Williams. Our critics and close readers, who gave us enormously helpful comments, include Alfred Young, Leonard Liggio, David Krikun, Michael Meeropol, Carl Marzani, Michael Sprinker, Jonathan Wiener, Harvey J. Kaye, Allen Ruff, George Mosse, Larry Gara, Elliott J. Gorn, Jim Lorence, Lloyd Gardner, and Bruce Cumings. Mari Jo Buhle's contributions significantly reshaped the manuscript. Interviewees especially eager to help us included, in addition to Williams family members, Merle Curti, the late Fred Harvey Harrington, Gerda Lerner, Alan Bogue, Lloyd Gardner, Theodore Hamerow, Thomas McCormick, Peggy Morley, and Peter Weiss. Hans Jakob Werlen supplied us with translations from German scholarly journals. The staff at the Pauling Papers, Kerr Library, Oregon State University, was helpful beyond the call of duty in many ways, but especially in making available all the Williams Papers most expeditiously. Likewise, the staffs at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin; Columbia University, Special Collections; the Nimitz Library; the history department at Oregon State University; and the Jeffries Archive of the U.S. Naval Academy extended every measure of assistance. We received extensive documents, otherwise unavailable, via Brian D. Fors, Mary Rose Catalfamo, Bea Susman, William Preston, Ed Crapol, Scott McLemee, Neil Basen, Henry W. Berger, Lloyd Gardner, Martin Sherwin, Walter LaFeber, William Preston, Karla Robbins, Gerald McCauley, and above all, William Robbins. (Many of these documents, with the permission of the holders, have been subsequently turned over to the OSU collection). Letters and phone calls exchanged with David Noble, John Higham, David Montgomery, Nando Fasce, Peter Wiley, James O'Connor, Howard Zinn, Staughton Lynd, Volker Berghahn, Paul Ringenbach, Martin Sherwin, James P. O'Brien, Mike Wallace, Paul Richards, Lee Baxandall, James B. Gilbert, James Weinstein, Paul Breines, and Charles Vevier, to name only a few, illuminated many dark reaches of Williams's past. And Christine Cipriani at Routledge polished off the production process. We are grateful to them all, and we hope that our book justifies their faith in our effort.

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INTRODUCTION

"I PREFER TO DIE AS A FREE MAN struggling to create a human community than as a pawn of Empire," wrote historian William Appleman Williams in 1976.¹ Annapolis graduate and decorated Naval officer, civil rights activist and president of the Organization of American Historians, Williams (1921-1990) is remembered as the preeminent historian and critic of Empire in the second half of the "American Century." More than any other scholar, he anticipated, encouraged, and explained the attack of conscience suffered by the nation during the 1960s. Radicals have hailed him as a supreme anti-imperialist, while libertarian conservatives have seen him as the "second Charles Beard," renewing the perspectives of the nation's foremost historian. Fellow historians consider him a great figure in American thought, one who looked for large patterns and asked the right questions. A physically small man with large hands and a wide smile, he seemed indifferent to the abuse heaped upon him from the political mainstream and to most of the praise he earned as well, choosing simply to walk alone.

His *Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, first published in 1959 and then expanded in subsequent paperback editions destined to reach tens of thousands of readers during the 1960s and 1970s, is probably the most important book ever to appear on the history of U.S. foreign policy. For more than thirty years, scholars have vigorously debated Williams's challenge to the prevailing assumptions. As a key source of dissenting wisdom cribbed by antiwar authors and orators, *Tragedy* helped frame the public discussion of the U.S. role in Southeast Asia. Williams explained this moral catastrophe as neither misguided idealism nor elite conspiracy but instead as the inevitable consequence of deeply rooted, bipartisan assumptions. Williams's *Contours of American History* (1961), one of the most influential scholarly books of the age, traced the roots of American expansionism to the nation's origins and attributed the rise of the security state with its planned deception of the public to the impossibility of managing a world empire. In these and other volumes, Williams also pleaded for a democratic renewal, a revived citizenship based upon the activities and decisions of local communities rather than upon the demands of a distant welfare-and-warfare state.

Williams's unique insights could be traced to his penetrating economic perspectives and to his long view of modern history. One of his best recent interpreters, Asia scholar Bruce Cumings, describes a twofold process of reading America "from the outside in," as those abroad have felt the effects of U.S. policy; and conversely, re-reading the historic documents of U.S. diplomacy for American leaders' understanding of the larger world developments at work.² Williams framed these insights with his own interpretation of the ways in which distinct social and economic systems evolved, from the rise of modern class society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the present. This dual or threefold approach is *sui generis*, and his development of it will shortly be seen through a close examination of his life. But its significance can be grasped preliminarily in several large ways.

Williams first of all inverted the dominant assumptions of American intellectuals by viewing conventional liberalism not as a great liberating force but as a suffocating ideology that has preempted both solid radicalism and thoughtful conservatism. In doing so, he drew upon long-neglected Anglo-American traditions of communitarianism and misunderstood traditions of what might be called a judicious paternalism. A Christian socialist and an undoubted patriot, he sympathized with writers as varied as John Ruskin, Brooks Adams, Lewis Mumford, and G. D. H. Cole, who all felt that too much had been lost with the collapse of the pre-modern order. He found in the politics of Tory radicals like Lord Shaftesbury and cautious statesmen like John Quincy Adams and Herbert Hoover the sense of equipoise and the pursuit of commonwealth missing in war leaders Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt.

For Williams the true antithesis of Empire was the heterogeneous tradition of community spiritedness, rather than the socialization of labor envisioned by Karl Marx and the Marxists. He therefore shared the dismay of those at various points across the political map who gauged the recklessness of modern government. Moderates and conservatives found in Williams what they could not find elsewhere in radical thought: the understanding that Empire had its roots not only in State Department and corporate aims but also in the expansionist assumptions of ordinary Americans that social problems could be successfully externalized and postponed through a constantly moving frontier. As he wrote a few years before his death, "America is the kind of culture that wakes you in the night. The kind of nightmare that may [yet] possibly lead us closer to the truth."³ This was Greek tragedy in a modern setting, with the audience sharing the stage. Williams nevertheless stubbornly held to his own ideal vision of a *possible* America, running like a golden thread from the historic tragedy of self-deception toward a better future for America and the world.⁴

Seen from other quarters, Williams's message has had a profoundly international and cultural significance that might have surprised the confirmed Middle American. One of the most controversial critics of recent decades, Edward Said, has attributed to Williams the fundamental insight that Empire, more than an economic or political or cultural system, has organized modern thought and encompassed all else within it.⁵ On the same note, the editors of the recent and perhaps definitive *Cultures of American Imperialism* suggest that their 672-page volume, with its many distinguished contributors, essentially "aims to explore more fully Williams's . . . understanding."⁶ William Appleman Williams's contribution, by these related assessments, cannot be rendered obsolete by the passage of events. His value grows as we approach the twenty-first century.

Williams rarely wrote about culture as such. Yet in his final work, condensing the wisdom of a lifetime, he defined a myriad of words and phrases to explain how the empire operated at the level of internalized (or what theorist Sylvia Winter would call "auto-instituted"⁷) logic. Thus, for instance: dynamic=aggressive, enterprise=overtake, modernize=outstrip, order=regulate, discipline=surveillance, secure=patronize, and benevolent=lord-it-over, or in the most benign redefinitions, innocence=grant-a-favor and tolerance=reform. In each case, Americans took control of the land and its inhabitants. In the process, they transformed each term's meaning *for themselves*, often benefitting materially, but rarely understanding the full consequences. The various historic developments that Williams interpreted as a consequence of the "open" (or forcibly opened) space available to Americans, the almost unlimited resources and the commercial success they experienced in the colonial days and afterward, can also be seen as the shaping influence in the dominant cultural sensibility of the nation.

Amy Kaplan, co-editor of *Cultures of American Imperialism*, carries this dialogue between Williams and cultural studies a step further. She finds in his early work a “major challenge to what might be called the paradigm of denial,” the absence of Empire from a scholarly or popular self-understanding of American history.⁸ Privileging economics, Kaplan insists, the Williams of *Tragedy of American Diplomacy* insisted upon the strict economic rationality of Americans’ expansionism. *Empire as a Way of Life* transcended these limitations, and in so doing, reached out to the future of international experience, Coke bottled in Russia and McDonald’s opening shop in Beijing.⁹ Williams, with his roots in the small-town America of the Depression, had managed to see these massive, world-changing developments from the inside.

William Appleman Williams passed from the scene just as the collapse of the Eastern Bloc had reached a crucial stage. Those who had vigorously opposed him in life quickly proclaimed their self-vindication: the cold war, with all its deleterious side effects from nuclear terror to environmental damage, had been a noble crusade or at least a necessary strategy after all. The long challenge to free enterprise was over, and the world’s only surviving superpower could face the future relatively confident of its own status. Indeed, according to the frequently heard optimistic projections of the early 1990s, liberal democracy faced a golden future.

Not everyone was so optimistic, of course. George F. Kennan, who might rightly be called the father of cold-war strategy, wondered aloud whether the terrifying cost of the crusade had not long since outweighed its benefits.¹⁰ Within a few years and a dozen or more continuing or impending disasters, from civil war and extreme economic uncertainty in Eastern Europe to the accelerating extermination of the planet’s biological storehouse in its surviving rainforests, things did not look so good after all. Closer to home, regional issues such as the Haitian crisis recalled the ugly legacy of U.S. support (and CIA guidance) for almost incomprehensibly brutal, light-skinned elites. Doubts continued to plague Americans about many domestic issues as well, including their cities, their children, and their health.

Perhaps most revealing was an absence of any fresh solutions. Growth was finally, as it had always been before, seen as the key mechanism to create a happier society. “Liberal democracy” as a world plan or ideal for success and security outside the United States actually promoted a drastically sharpening division of social classes, growing petrochemical stress upon the environment through the explosion of automobile use, and a popular disillusionment that threatened ominously. No wonder personal detachment, mean-spiritedness, and cynicism remained the intellectual order of the day. The encompassing hate-love fascination of celebrity, from murder trials to the radio talk shows to Congress, seemingly filled the gap left by an exhausted political dialogue. The newer New Right rode to political tri-

umph promising to finish off failed liberalism with the uncompromised rule of the market and the unabashed Pax Americana. Its leaders, as Williams would have predicted, claimed the legacy of Roosevelt and Truman for themselves.¹¹

Williams had called the America of the later 1980s a “tired and nostalgic” society, at once weary of politicians’ double-talk and terribly hungry in a spiritual sense for the reassurance that manipulated historical images offered to the gullible. He offered his readers, and Americans at large, a profoundly different possibility—but not a painless one. To dialogue seriously with their past, they had to wrestle with truths about themselves that politicians would never acknowledge, let alone face boldly. He never asked them to succumb to paralyzing guilt, or to repudiate their self-identity. Everyone, he believed, could learn from history. Decoding the empire, freeing its subjects at home and abroad from the tyrannical logic of the system, was for Williams the final, grand task of the citizen and the civilization.

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A LITTLE BOY FROM IOWA

WILLIAM APPLEMAN WILLIAMS BEGAN HIS DAYS as he would end them, far from the centers of metropolitan culture. He often claimed that his origins explained his insight into U.S. history and had undergirded his moral strength to sustain himself through political hard times. Seen more objectively, the issues of his life look very different, far more contradictory and more pathos-ridden than he could admit. And yet something about his self-evaluation rings true. As he grappled to interpret his experiences through his historical studies but also in personal interviews, a private family memoir, and an unpublished novel, he could not possibly escape the stamp of the small-town Midwest, the Depression, and the fatherless family. But he had also spent his life literally discovering a wider world and trying to make sense of it in his own highly personal terms.

Attacked frequently as an America-hater, Williams cared about the nation passionately, even obsessively, as if from a sense of family responsibility. He believed that his family background and his life as a Naval officer

reflected the economic development and the imperial mission that gave the modern nation its shape. But he also believed that the same resources and initiative could make possible a society organized along very different lines. His fondest political hopes were doomed to disappointment. But his capacity to marshal intense scholarship within a large philosophical framework permitted him a very unique insight into America as a civilization. Few others could have framed such insight in a sustained historical narrative, and Williams himself had enormous difficulty in doing so.

A Midwestern literary regionalist, some modern-day Hamlin Garland, might be able to capture through fiction the emotional toll exacted on the historian's life as he struggled to make sense of society and of himself. The novelist would have to contend, as well, with Williams's own fictionalizing. In attempting to explain or to interpret the sources of his immanent critique of American society, Williams created through screened memory a vividly nostalgic, heavily stylized childhood and native setting.¹ Decades after penning an appendix to his master's thesis, which described closely and without sentimentality the elite rule of his little hometown, he thus reinterpreted the same place in near-idyllic terms. It had become, quite remarkably, a site of approximate social equality and deep-felt community where citizens learned the importance of both public participation and individual restraint.

Here lay the source of the rending tension which might also be seen as the driving contradiction of Williams's life. The locale of community, for him the modern-day version of the Greek city-state, is likewise the source of Empire. Its ethos is successful in its own terms—and tragic as well. He projected this historical experience in all directions, from his idiosyncratic interpretation of agrarian history to his strained views of feminism and the family to his understanding of what a socialist movement might be and do. He also internalized the tension, as he sought to control the story of his life and give it a unified meaning.

Examined carefully and without his blinders, Williams's life and life's work express again and again the same contradictions of individualism and community, Empire and anti-Empire. Woven in and around the saga of boyhood, military academies, war, graduate school, scholarship and political engagement, the tensions reveal themselves.

Williams's own late-shifting version of the past reflected his growing disillusionment with the direction of the country and likewise his despair with the radical left. But he had another purpose, which he pursued through a last burst of non-history writing.² He had a large personal debt to acknowledge and, if possible, to repay. He later wrote repeatedly of various individuals and groups who had "honored" their "traditions" in one way or another.³ They had done rightly, earning his praise and support, unlike

those who fecklessly cast off the past without considering its consequences for the present and future. He blessed his childhood home, the mother and grandparents who raised the boy without a father.

Between the lines of the memoir, he asked himself why it had been William Appleman Williams, the most unlikely intellectual, who finally wrote controversial and influential books. He continued to set down his responses to the riddle even as his life drained away; he never finished. No wonder a high-school classmate, asked at the time of Williams's death about his classmate's notorious Marxism, answered matter-of-factly that no one could have anticipated anything like it. The sweetheart of his high-school years and wife of his youth agreed with this judgment.⁴ The personally secretive Midwesterner and unabashed romantic eluded even his intimates' efforts to understand the sources of radicalism in his background.

Nor would they have been able to explain his rise into the nation's most important historian. To do so would be to unravel what Williams himself never could fully or candidly analyze: the complex chain of events leading him from childhood and adolescent years to Naval officership to civil rights activist and historian-in-training, or from Depression-era Iowa to wartime Annapolis to post-World War II Corpus Christi and late-1940s Madison, Wisconsin. Full understanding would require deep insight into a character fragmented by childhood tragedy, rebuilt through personal determination, challenged by world events, and settled as firmly as it could be settled through the self-identification of the citizen-scholar.

Some of his more perceptive friends found him looking perpetually for a community like the one he believed he had left behind. Others would say that the later Marxist internationalist, jazz buff, and intimate friend of gay intellectuals—during the days of hiding and persecution—had become a bohemian, if not necessarily an outsider, precisely in response to the claustrophobia of small-town life. Perhaps these two alternatives are not so contradictory after all.⁵

I

William Appleman Williams, during his days as a radical graduate student, carefully depicted his native Atlantic in commercial terms. Shipping center for crops, poultry, and livestock, this town of several thousand residents was also a commercial-retail locus of fertile southwestern Iowa in the later nineteenth century. Among the mostly German and Danish descendents, a small group of extended families dominated manufacturing, financing, merchandising, the judiciary, and political clout. If Atlantic nurtured one resident's radicalism and historical perspective, it most likely did so by fostering a boy's sense of contrast, perhaps the contrast between the small community's day-

to-day social life on the one hand and the real power-wielding on the other. But this begins the story too late; Williams the memoirist insisted that his legacy be traced back several generations at least.

Williams's mother, Mildrede, who deserves to be called the most enduring influence on his life, traced her family back through the Appleman line to a Welsh-born Redcoat who deserted General Howe to join George Washington's forces. This Welshman's Philadelphia wife had ancestors in America long before the Revolutionary war. Williams's father, William Carlton Williams, could find still another revolutionary soldier in his family tree, a New Hampshire militiaman blinded in combat.⁶ In short, Williams's family had been more than present at the primal act of national independence: he was self-conscious heir to the great tradition.

If Williams often felt "that American History is a pot of imperial porridge . . . of who fought where for what conquest," he could nevertheless find a family exception here and there. His mother's great-grandfather, Zopher Hammond, bought his son's way out of service in the Civil War and insisted that the North should have seceded first or simply let the South go its own way. Born in Patchogue, New York, in 1804, Zopher may have been the original "Little America" believer in the family, unwilling to pay the price for Empire. Zopher's son, Joseph, Williams's great-grandfather, attended Hillsdale College in Michigan and resettled in Marshall County, Iowa, in 1866. His Iowa-born wife, Amanda Louis Havens, was reputedly the first "strong-minded" woman of several generations of them to come. The couple moved by wagon to Iowa's southwest, claiming through the Homestead Act some of the richest farmland anywhere on earth.⁷

Williams neglected to mention the less rational, helter-skelter qualities of settlement and the troubled memories left behind. A naturally beautiful region of the Nishnabotna River Valley and the main drainage basin of southwestern Iowa, it had once been home to the Ioway, the Oto, the Omaha, and other tribes. Before its settling, James Audubon had praised the beauty of its trees, native wildflowers, and fabulously beautiful birds (a county was subsequently named after him), which were mostly destined like the Indians themselves to disappear for productive agriculture and commerce. The Mormons had crossed en route to the West in 1846, and a generation of later settlers debated the name of a nascent municipality. Thinking mistakenly that they were exactly halfway between the two oceans, they tossed a coin to decide whether to call their new place by one or the other. "Pacific" won, but another town had already been given that name, so they christened it "Atlantic."⁸

Williams's ancestors had made a shrewd economic choice. The farmer of the 1860s was no primitive pioneer but a modern agrarian. He needed mechanical mowers, hay rakes, reapers, corn planters, seeders, along with

improved plows and decent weather, to realize a profit on his considerable investment. Still, corn, wheat, oats, rye, and other crops afforded abundant yields, while hogs, cattle, and (in southern Iowa particularly) even sheep production raced ahead. Decades later, the entire region would be known as the “Corn Belt,” an oversimplified appellation that signified rich soil, adequate rain, and a summer heat which could make daily life extremely uncomfortable (not to speak of the bitter winters with their savage plains winds), but which also made possible a good living.

Iowa community life naturally reflected the intense self-consciousness of its businessmen-farmers. The local and regional newspapers described in detail the agricultural and market developments which made one line or another profitable or unprofitable. Farmers and their journalists put special emphasis on improvement of stock and a range of other innovations such as veterinary sciences (including rudimentary pesticides).⁹ Williams took great pride in the solid business sense of his ancestors and their communities. A major investor in Atlantic had convinced the Rock Island Line to build its main trunk system for the region through the town and to stop every train there. As he wrote in the introduction to *Roots of the Modern American Empire*, the fathers of Atlantic then “plotted the town by plowing a furrow straight south from the spot they selected for the depot.”¹⁰

Grids went up in the 1870s for the development of wide streets suited to civic affairs, while Joseph and Amanda Hammond established themselves outside town on a spread not far from the future golf course of the well-to-do. In Williams’s imaginative recreation, they regularly joined perhaps five hundred neighbors on market days to sell surplus, take shaves or haircuts, buy calico, and gossip. Historians’ accounts, indeed, describe this period as the “golden age” of the county fair, a market day writ large with exhibitions of machinery and seminars on scientific husbandry along with various competitions, including “female equestrianism.”¹¹

Williams’s predecessors surely played their part in the rituals that he regarded with admiration. They raised churches with stained-glass windows, created schools, founded a public library, scheduled a lecture series and musical events. He viewed it as a “marvelous mix of town and country,” much the way that Lewis Mumford had described the early nineteenth-century New England village. If considerably less picturesque than the rocky hills that many Yankee residents had left behind, Atlantic was at once human scale and connected by its visiting trains to New York, Chicago, Omaha, and San Francisco. Thus the great anti-imperialist Williams could write, without a hint of irony, that “Atlantic was part of the empire.”¹² And not an insignificant part: according to his own account, Atlantic made itself the major agricultural-merchandizing center between Des Moines and Omaha. With less than six thousand residents, it reputedly maintained the

nation's highest rate in turnover of retail goods for many years, off and on, until the Depression.

Atlantic and the surrounding region also entertained its share of dissidents and even radicals for at least an occasional moment in the nineteenth century. John Brown had briefly made his headquarters in Tabor—itsself named for the legendary Czech city of communal resistance against king and clergy—during the 1840s. Never a major center of agrarian agitation like nearby Kansas or Nebraska, Iowa saw its Greenbackers and Populists mount third-party challenges during the 1870-80s. The major weekly of agrarian movement during the middle 1880s, *Industrial West* (later, the *Farmers' Tribune*) was published in Atlantic. One of its editors, Knights of Labor activist J. R. Sovereign, used the Atlantic base to project himself into Grand Master Workman of that fading organization a few years later.¹³ After these unsettled days, modestly successful agrarian reforms and the rise of a world market for local commodities prompted Atlantic to become staunchly conservative, in politics and moral alike.

Given worldly success and social homogeneity, its citizens seemingly had no more pressing reason to doubt or to wonder. Less sympathetic observers might have described them as indifferent or hostile to the dramatic rise of the Socialist Party with its many small-town locals in Kansas or Oklahoma, likewise toward the Industrial Workers of the World headquartered in nearby Chicago. The great hopes and the savage repression of radicals made little impression on them because they evidently had other things on their minds. Indeed, during the war, a local manufacturer of folding stoves and Army cots produced nearly five million dollars of goods for the government. Afterwards, the large Atlantic Canning Company plant added sweet pumpkins to its profitable line of corn, converting the globes into pulp and sending the seeds as far away as China. From the perspective of the Atlantic Legion Memorial Building, which served as a community center, life was no doubt good.¹⁴

Writing about Atlantic during his graduate student days, Williams dissected the *mentalité* of the elite. Their way of seeing the world, he claimed, was based on parroting the ultraconservative *Chicago Tribune* positions on national and international issues. Local newspaper editorials—as Williams related from his own personal experiences—were hammered out at a breakfast club composed of the elite's second string. Their view of the world, notably of foreign affairs (and especially revolutions abroad, i.e., threats to continued U.S. economic expansion) lacked any element of enlightened conservatism let alone liberal acceptance. Perhaps this had been manipulation of small-town democracy from the metropolis, but it was not one that local elites resisted. They had chosen to respond to events in strictly business terms. It did not make them mediocre minds, or mediocre stylists. Indeed,

the paper's savant Edwin Percy Chase won a Pulitzer Prize for the best editorial of 1934. But it limited their capacity to see other possibilities.¹⁵

But through the rose-colored glasses of the later Williams, the flourishing life of the county seat had been, if perhaps a "disorienting distortion of the reality of America," nevertheless "the best that *could* happen." He proved it with that most elusive evidence—memories of his childhood and the recollections of neighborliness which mattered to him most. Thus, for instance, he recalled Jewish and black families perfectly integrated into the community, when in reality so few existed that segregation would have been all but impossible.

Williams had his own version of the dark side of Atlantic social life. The town's proprietors sold medicinal whiskey and laudanum over the counter of the nominally dry town, and thousands of gallons of moonshine liquor mysteriously found their way into waiting hands. Railroad workers, farmhands, traveling businessmen, and prostitutes ("soiled doves" in the police blotter of the local press) drank and carried on beneath the averted eyes of the authorities. When law-breaking occasionally turned violent through the misdeeds of a frontier-style gang of criminals, citizens acted in concert to crush it. Williams's own great-grandmother died with a gun still under her pillow. She never used it, but presumably would not have hesitated had the need arisen.

The degraded and sometimes dangerous lower classes existed only at the margins of Atlantic life, certainly never becoming likely protagonists of social change. Hired agricultural workers were no more than "bummers," transients hired for harvest but expected to be gone soon. Railroad laborers, more stable but still fewer in number, kept to themselves.¹⁶ To all this we might easily trace Williams's later aversion to class models of socialism, and his hopes for the "ordinary" middle class as the agency of redemption.

Williams's ancestors experienced troubles of their own, but rather than economic or social ones, these were more likely to be personal difficulties or perhaps a restlessness prompted by the psychological narrowness of small-town life. Great-grandfather Ed Hammond made a good living and belonged to the founding circles of local fraternal organizations like the Odd Fellows and the Masons. He emerged as an impressive local figure, probably too much so for his strong-willed mate, who sought more for her life than a comfortable home and an absentee husband. Their beloved first child had, as a teen, given birth to a baby out of wedlock, a grave embarrassment to a respectable family at that place and time. Their second child, Maude, always feeling ignored by the family, distanced herself from them through mental self-cultivation (eventually she would become a Christian Scientist). She also sought a marriage of acknowledged equals. Her choice, Porter Ikeler Appleman, would be the grandfather who played a central role

in young Bill Williams's life. Four inches shorter than his wife, he was a man too playful to grow up entirely.

"Tossie," as the acrobatic figure was fondly called (Porter could, reputedly, leap over a handkerchief held out toward him), had attended a "normal" or teachers college in Shenadoah, Iowa, after his family moved west from Pennsylvania, and had opened a business office for loans, insurance, and real estate. An independent-minded Congregationalist and charter member of the local Elks, he was also a skilled shot and above all "magic with dogs." He won top prizes and trained the dogs for shipping across the U.S., Europe, and even Asia. Prone, however, to impractical investments and speculation, and self-indulgent about cars and clothes, Porter spent too much time with his friends in the bars and too little time at home. In doing so, he attained the negative virtue of removing himself from the business-minded Puritanism of his parents' generation. The community, of course, never took him seriously.¹⁷

For all his weaknesses, which would grow worse in time, he raised his one daughter as a sort of free soul. A young woman who could not only name birds and flowers but could shoot a gun accurately and became one of the first women in the county to drive a car, Mildrede (she added a final "e" to distinguish herself in grade school from two other Mildreds) was intelligent and musical, playing leading roles in school plays and opera. She was also, reputedly, part of a modest sexual revolution in early twentieth-century small-town life. She enjoyed being alluring on the dance floor with the Charleston or Black Bottom, yet she restrained herself from the increasingly common practice of "going into the bushes" with potential lovers.¹⁸ In her son's retrospective view, she could be at once sexy and personally responsible: she had "pizzazz." Less sympathetic observers saw the same impulses as evidence of her fundamentally cold and domineering character.

She fell in love with only one man, the original "Billy" Williams. His parents and grandparents had made themselves prosperous around De Kalb, Illinois, with their prize cattle and hogs. They had also showed some interest in politics (as northern Democrats opposed to Republican support of railroads and banks). Billy's father, when they came west, was to become the first Democratic postmaster of Atlantic, and his mother became an amateur painter.

Billy went off to college and then joined the fledgling air force in World War I, while Mildrede attended the Indianapolis Conservatory of Music, with special work to qualify her to teach part-time in Iowa grade schools. Her beau, hopeful of becoming a flying ace and war hero, was so skilled with the experimental equipment that the service made him a demonstration pilot to prepare others. His marriage with Mildrede, although the result of a "Grand Passion" (in their son's eyes), began in physical separation and never achieved a long-run stability. When the war ended in 1919, Billy found himself unwilling to return to the mundane life of Iowa.

He had real adventures as a barnstormer. The best, no doubt, was running nitroglycerin across the border to Mexicans consolidating their revolution against the Church and against the U.S. State Department's wishes. Billy had little interest in the revolutionaries' politics as such. But he had the instincts of a small-town iconoclast mistrustful of contemporary America's business culture. From that standpoint, he appreciated his Mexican clients' romantic quest for freedom and their hostility toward the rich. Short on cash, the revolutionaries gave him classic Mexican pottery which remained the one art collection of the Williams household, redolent of faraway places and exotic history. When the work gave out, Billy turned to safer private jobs hauling wealthy clients. Still later he became a car salesman while Mildrede substitute-taught school, devoted his leisure to bridge and golf, and seemed to spend a lot of his time gazing into the sky.¹⁹

William Appleman Williams was born in 1921, after a labor so frightening that the parents determined to have no more children. Billy the father might have settled down for that reason alone, until the spectacular flight of Charles Lindbergh, Jr. (whom he knew slightly) across the Atlantic Ocean. Lindy's subsequent publicity tour through America led him near Atlantic, and at his fellow flyer's request he passed overhead, wagging his wings in recognition as the whole family sat in the front yard and waved. Most remarkably, the son later reinterpreted Lindbergh, Jr., as personifying the imaginary escape from corporate bureaucracy, a "last national hero from the past" preserving the "nineteenth century dream that the individual could become one with his tools and his work."²⁰ This observation hints at Williams casting his father as a man who also had one last chance to elude twentieth-century depersonalization and took it desperately, knowing the risks.

It would not be hard to imagine a more distant scientist-father figure for the boy: that favorite son of Iowa, Herbert Hoover. Solidly Republican, Atlantic shared a particular fondness for the engineer-president born in West Branch, whose political and intellectual reputation Williams the scholar would continually seek to rehabilitate. Until the Depression, Hoover represented the proud contribution of Iowan ways to Washington, the mixture of know-how, moralism, and resistance to centralization.

Within a year of Lindy's aerial visit, at any rate, Billy had joined the Army Air Corps to return to flight duty. His son, who claimed to have had such an active childhood libido that he kissed the girl next to him on the first day of kindergarten, poured greater love and energy into model airplanes, styling many versions of Lindy's "Spirit of St. Louis." In old age the famed historian returned to making the Lindbergh model as if recovering a piece of himself lost somewhere along the way.²¹

Lt. Williams seemed to love his new life of male camaraderie and mechanized excitement. Mildrede and their son shared his excitement vicariously. The airman was scheduled to be given a permanent commission to Captain after the major war games of March 1929, although he still had private reservations about a military future. Mother and son made a special visit to him in Texas as he prepared to take part in the war games. One early morning of the games, he executed a dive and his plane failed mechanically. He crashed, mortally wounded with multiple skull fractures. It was unquestionably the worst moment of the boy's life. Many times later, Williams would return to the painful memory of seeing his father go off in the morning, cheerfully assuring the boy of his return—only to disappear forever.

Mother and son returned home to a funeral attended by much of Atlantic, and to a flood of sympathetic mail that continued for weeks. Nothing could console the two, abandoned in the world by a figure they had already learned to idolize at a distance. Young Bill had recurring nightmares which were so horrible that, decades later, he could still not bring himself to describe their contents even to his family.²² Every child has dark moments, of course. But these anxieties may have not really passed, only gone into abeyance and taken other forms. Perhaps his later secretiveness, the inwardness masked by stern self-reliance, had its origins as much here as in Midwestern Protestantism.

Too stricken ever to marry again, Mildrede raised her boy with the help of her mother and father. Her in-laws, and the farm life outside Atlantic that they might have offered, never figured in her projection of the boy's future career track. He would visit his paternal grandparents from time to time and maintain a nodding friendship with an uncle who worked as a garage mechanic in Atlantic, but Mildrede's family had claimed him. He would become what she wanted, even if she could not be on the scene personally to supervise his rearing.

After her son's eighth birthday party she enrolled at Iowa State Teachers College in Cedar Falls, placing Billy (scarcely aware of any other name, he was uniformly called "Billy" throughout his youth) in a sort of parental limbo with her as an occasional visitor. His grandfather, Tossie, and his grandmother, Maude, would be Mildrede's surrogates.

Bill nevertheless thrived. As he looked back on this time, he could recount an early-twentieth-century Midwestern pattern of life slipping away even then. Caring for the root cellar, learning the mysteries of the ice box, using hand tools to make a soap-box racer, shooting a BB gun (he recalled that he had killed a sparrow and on the spot lost his love for gunning down living creatures), playing the piano, and vegetable gardening occupied much of his time and attention. He claimed in an autobiography-

ical sketch to have been “reared in an extended family consisting of literally countless people” related by kinship or friendship, a “joyful and illuminating experience.”²³ One can be skeptical of these claims without disputing the best of his small-town experiences. He spent little time with paternal grandparents or cousins, but neighbors and friends of the family were almost certainly sympathetic to the fatherless child.

A bright boy too active to be unusually studious, he later considered himself very fortunate to be situated in a town that believed staunchly in education. With his playmates, he often returned Saturday mornings from a film matinee to the public library, only later moving on to the ball field. At home, he poked through a stock of free thought-oriented family books unusual in Atlantic, from *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall, the first widely-distributed lesbian novel, to Margaret Sanger’s birth-control volumes and Hemingway novels, to the standard of Poe or Tom Swift available in many Atlantic households. Probably the more avant-garde volumes had been bought by his father. At any rate, the family bookshelves were open with no prohibitions on what he might choose to read. Like so many future intellectuals, he browsed and absorbed what interested him.

Still, as his mother grew more deeply involved in school (so much so that an association of women enrolled in primary education at Iowa State made her their president), young Billy suffered another round of severe nightmares about abandonment. He imagined himself terrifyingly alone, missing the father who had rarely been present for long. He concluded later that Mildrede, driven by her need for a profession, had deprived herself and obviously him as well of the intimacy of a normal mother-child relationship. She, too, he now admired mostly from a physical distance. He must have felt, from early years, a need to be emotionally self-reliant and, more than that, to be strong for her.

Despite her career successes Mildrede suffered serious depression, and suggested unwisely in her letters to the boy that she believed her good life was over. During a mother-son driving trip undertaken to restore their relationship, Billy found her crying uncontrollably in a country outhouse, and he ran screaming to get help. Emotionally, the two recovered together, traveling all the way to California and enjoying each other’s company. Meeting old flyers along the way, they had adventures memorable for the boy. A stranger in a hotel apartment in Long Beach, California, where they stayed for a few weeks, initiated him in the game of billiards. “The joy of being treated as an equal taught the boy to understand the true sense of skill and sport,” he remembered.²⁴ One might as well call this experience the source of his later passion for the pool table and the pool hall atmosphere of male camaraderie, alcohol, stogies, and bloodless combat. At any rate he was growing emotionally, preparing for life without his mother again.

These episodes invite further psychological exploration, if only because Williams himself was so taken with the psychological theories of personality development in a later era. Williams strictly avoided Freudian theories with their inevitable Oedipal component. One of his favorite alternative prophets, Abraham Maslow, proposed the self-creation of the personality through “peak experiences,” energizing moments which can reshape approaches to life. In Maslow, the instinct for creativeness and for meaningful existence possesses an importance at least equal to subconscious sexual desires. This species of existential psychology, a variant on the existentialism of such contemporary philosophers as Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, permitted Williams to recast his youthful traumas as forced opportunities for personal growth. Gestalt psychology, another of Williams’s preferred theories, viewed the surrounding environment and the subject’s current situation as critical to development and reorientation. The “life-space” of mental and physical factors was decisive to life possibilities, helping to frame a self-actualization, the individual’s growth toward what he (or she) might potentially be.²⁵

There are other hints along the same lines. Little in the boy’s family background suggested the self-conscious, sentimental Welshman that Williams’s close friends claimed to perceive so clearly later. Any memories of the old country were generations back. Only his stature, which levelled off at under 5’10”, and his sometimes almost maudlin manner evoked images of the popular sentimental film, *How Green Was My Valley*, with its singing coal miners—surely a nonexistent species in Iowa. If young William Appleman Williams needed to create a persona, he obviously drew upon and probably improvised resources deep inside himself. He wanted urgently to be *different*, to be special, as his first wife emphasized. To do so, he would assume *sui generis* identities sometimes quite charming and sometimes troublesome to those around him.

2

The next period in his life demanded all his psychic creativity for somewhat different reasons. By the time he and his mother recovered from their mutual crisis, the Depression of the thirties had struck. Like so many other American towns and cities, Atlantic was soon prostrate. The corn-canning factory, for decades the largest such enterprise in the world, went bankrupt. The fertilizer plant managed to stay open only by switching to synthetic fertilizer and drastically trimming its personnel. Atlantic rebounded slowly through a shift to growing cereals for feed cattle and other future meat animals. But Williams remembered best the rural desperation at the close of the day, when through

the wild shadows flung across the barnyard by a swinging kerosene lamp, [one saw] the desperate fear and fatigue in the very soul of an uncle as he scuffed his shoes clean with a worn corn cob. And, sometimes, to see his deep frustration at not having the corn to feed the pigs, erupt in an angry outburst during a conversation with his wife or children—or myself.²⁶

Williams's immediate family was only a little better off. Grandfather Porter lost everything, a terrible defeat that wiped out his various investments and left him mulling over his dog trophies and drinking to kill the disappointment. A tiny government pension, along with some military and civilian insurance, helped Mildrede pay for her own continuing education, and she made Billy's clothes with her foot-powered sewing machine.

In Williams's recapitulation of the period, these were also times of sharing and intensified community sentiment. No doubt he captured the best of Atlantic in his images of judges handing down suspended sentences for theft of food, theater managers looking away when kids opened the back door for their poorer friends, and storekeepers keeping a "tab" that they rightly suspected would never be repaid. As he also observed, "women were at the center of the community during the depression years" around America. Later feminists, he reflected, might see such women's lives as "limited, demeaning and destructive," but "the issue was survival."²⁷ He was proud of Atlantic's women (obviously including his mother and grandmother) *because* they used their strength to hold the family together, and not to assert their independence from it.

His memoirs were more frank. Grandmother Maude wearied of it all, falling into a deep personal depression. "So much for the claims of capitalism to provide opportunities for everyone to realize their full potential," Williams remarked with a rare suggestion of bitterness about his younger days. His grandparents, like hundreds of thousands of Protestant Midwesterners, left Republican ranks for the first time in their lives, if only temporarily. Crisis drove them into the arms of Roosevelt and the New Deal. The terrible price of economic recovery, when it finally came, would not be learned until later.²⁸

Mildrede got a regular job teaching third grade in Atlantic. At that stressful time, more and more children appeared in class undernourished and sullen, their parents unable to understand what value an education might hold in a jobless future. She could only offer them hope of better times and more opportunities, for which education would serve them well. For her pains, she earned less than \$800 per year. The family cut expenses to the bone. Any luxuries, such as athletic equipment, Saturday movies, a new model airplane kit, or music lessons were reserved for Billy. She took a better job across the state, bringing Billy along with her. But neither of

them could adapt to the stress of single parenthood in an unfamiliar scene. He found himself alone and lonely in their apartment after school, waiting for her, imagining that his father was actually alive and destined to return.

The two came back to Atlantic, Mildrede reluctantly accepting a pay cut in order to see the boy through high school. Williams views this sacrifice as a mark of her personal maturity. But he adds that for himself, "life in the slow lane with Maude was more interesting and meaningful than life in the fast lane with Mildrede." He missed the quiet diversions of a relaxed home setting. His grandmother, with all her troubles, had been more of a mother to him than his own mother. In her struggles, Mildrede made an uncomfortably intense partner for a child who preferred security above all.

Strange memories rise up here, in this extended family reunion. Grandfather Porter, who had abandoned his customary drinking en route to home, now limited himself to a single tumbler of whiskey which he drank while playing cribbage and talking with the boy: he would fill a pitcher with water and then replace the imbibed whiskey, sip by sip. It was surely a discipline to drink in measured fashion. But to down a quarter pint in this rigorous fashion was at once self-justifying and self-deceiving in a deeply Protestant way, as if his grandmother had gone through liquor-tinted patent medicine by the case. Decades later, Williams confided (or rationalized) to a close friend, in the same vein, that alcohol taken at specific periods perfectly balanced his body's respiration; a scientific explanation that only a heavy drinker could take seriously.²⁹

Intense adolescent family conflicts emerged, pitting mother against son over William's playing varsity basketball and drumming, rather than singing in the glee club and chorus. Grandmother mediated, and Williams emerged a small-town sports star, even an idol to younger boys—quite an accomplishment for a youngster of rather small stature. With sheer determination, fast hands, and the acquisition of good shooting skills, he made himself into the hero he had hoped to become. He acquired from his father's reputation the awesome importance of performing not just well but brilliantly if possible. And like many a lower-class or minority youngster successful in sports, he quelled inner demons if he could not eradicate them. Meanwhile, he excelled in English, Math, Physics, Biology, History, and Citizenship.³⁰

Williams had also become a lifetime sports fan, however much he would later complain about the commercialization of athletics and control of play from the bench. Like so many youngsters, he admired the irrepressible Babe Ruth. But Red Grange, the "Gallopig Ghost" from neighboring Illinois, also naturally caught his attention. Indeed, Grange was the first star of professional football, quickly putting the Chicago-area team on the map. A later Williams clearly appreciated athletic dexterity, but he especially liked

to imagine himself in the leadership status of the coach or manager, quarterback or the captain of a basketball team.³¹

Jazz offered yet another dimension. By the middle thirties, dynamic developments in radio and record distribution had reshaped popular music, bringing in waves of black musicians and singers including Louis Armstrong, Mary Lou Williams, Bessie Smith, Count Basie, and above all, Duke Ellington, whom a later Williams considered "a master of the age." For a young Williams, jazz accommodated black contributions to American culture, even in little Atlantic.³² Playing the drums was a way to literally tap into the excitement of American popular culture at its best.

Williams had thus gained an important measure of self-confidence all around, enough to be a winning personality comfortable with his recent success. Mildrede could feel satisfied that her boy acquired a good high-school education, even if he were considered popular rather than brilliant. He was regularly elected a class officer. Now and then he could shine academically, as when he wrote a prize-winning essay for the Daughters of the American Revolution-sponsored contest on "Citizenship." For his own part, he had begun to make plans. An Eagle Scout, he was selected for the Iowa delegation to the International Scout Jamboree at the Chicago World's Fair of 1933 with his way paid by philanthropic Atlantic businessmen.

There he fell in love with the buildings of Louis Sullivan, an architect he would later criticize for creating exquisite physical structures which symbolized centralized power and the triumph of the corporation over the individual. He almost certainly also glimpsed the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. One of the great and also typical intellects of the Midwest, Wright built on a human scale and, when he retreated, did so by embracing the organicism of the family and community that Williams held sacred.³³ The boy dreamed of going to Iowa State in Ames to study architecture.

He also began to earn his own first pocket money. A newspaper route was one of the few ways then for a boy in school to acquire an income. Desperate to get the job, he haunted the outgoing delivery boy until it was passed along to him. Williams later claimed that, while delivering the paper, he learned sociology and psychology by closely examining the daily life of his customers across the social spectrum and interacting with them.

During his junior year, he struck up a serious romantic flirtation, his first, with Jeannie (or Emma Jean) Preston. Bright and spirited, small of stature like him, she was the daughter of the town's barbershop owner, a hard-working and kind-hearted businessman who dreamed of seeing his children acquire a college education. In a typical high-school romance, as he recalled later, the two could "make an ice cream soda last an hour."³⁴

Ties went deep in small-town social life. Her mother and his mother, with birthdays on the same day, had once, in childhood, had a party

together. Later, Bill's father had taken Jeannie's mother to the high-school prom, and still later Bill and Jeannie had shared music teachers and both attended meetings of the Bach Juvenile Society. Attending separate public grade schools, they lost touch; a year ahead of him, she had no classes with him and little contact at all afterward. But teenaged Bill, full of life and often dating several girls simultaneously, dared Jeannie to sit with him in a balcony of a movie theatre; then they began seeing each other regularly.

They shared many interests, from books to music, but especially Jeannie's writing for the school paper, *The Needle*, a year before Billy would be eligible as a senior to follow her as a cub journalist. The two naturally attended all social functions together. Her younger brother, Sam, became Bill's devoted follower, shadowing the older boy's trajectory from high-school sports to later military-school training. Perhaps by then Bill Williams had acquired at last the larger family that he had yearned for; he seemed more emotionally secure than ever before. He and Jeannie envisioned a married life together. Mildrede, more than protective, subtly and not-so-subtly resisted anyone threatening to take her Billy away. She suspected, as parents often do, that her son was well on his way to sexual adventures. She tried, without success, to limit his participation in dances and outings.³⁵

In the most extraordinary passages of his memoir, Williams describes his mother ("a full-bodied, handsome woman") overinterpreting the courtship as a threat to chaste youth. Calling him to her room as she dressed, she put on her bra and her silky step-ins trimmed with lace, then the rest of her clothes in front of him. She warned him not to "play" with the sensitive part of a woman's body, and through sobs urged him to hold the line at some modest petting. "How she did it," he reflects, her son "will never quite understand. It was surely one of her bravest, most magnificent moments." A different interpretation would see a woman so desperate that she engaged unconsciously in borderline seductive behavior toward him. A half-century later, he claimed to hear the sound of her rustling silk in the rush of the Oregon tides.

She nevertheless readied him, and also herself, for the wider world. In the summer of 1938, Jeannie Preston prepared to leave Atlantic for Simpson College, a small coeducational liberal arts school in Indianola, Iowa, and Mildrede attended a summer session at Columbia Teachers College, taking an exuberant son along for the New York World's Fair. He heard Duke Ellington live and also Mildrede's own favorite, the debonair Cab Calloway. They were small-town bohemians at home in the metropolis.

Mother and son seemed, at last, to have put their troubles behind them as he passed from boy to man and she finished her degree, moving from Atlantic to a job at Central State Teachers College in Stevens Point, in central Wisconsin. Williams later took immense pride in her favorable

graduate teaching evaluations as a tough but fair instructor who would go on to head the local American Association of University Women chapter. She was surprised but deeply gratified to hear that he had won a basketball scholarship in 1939 to Kemper Military Academy in Booneville, Missouri, grasping the only possible financial opening for a college education. Like his mother, he was leaving Iowa for good, returning only for family visits.

His grandparents lived on in Atlantic, the last of them dying in 1962, and his mother remained in Wisconsin until she died of cancer in 1978. Williams remained emotionally close to them and proud of them. But he had set his life on a wider course than Atlantic or Iowa or even the Midwest would allow. Many middle-class children from similarly small and generally prosperous towns had been prepared to leave home for wider opportunities. But few would spend so much of their lives intellectualizing the significance of it all.

There was another childhood issue which returned to him repeatedly in later life: his mother's struggle to bear the responsibility of the family and also to become her own person. He recalled that a friend of his mother's told him shortly after her death that "independence for a woman of [her] generation was a two-edged sword. We thought about it as members of a community, and [then] that [possibility] kind of disappeared."³⁶ This memory may have well been shaded by Williams's predilections, for Mildrede *was* an independent woman. But if she, the exceptional person, had won out, she had also been worn out by the fight. And so one can see the great themes of Williams's life: community and the individual, the achievements of the independent-minded American and the immense price imposed upon those who also yearn for peace and security.

William Appleman Williams later made much of the mixture of community and individualism that he had known in Atlantic. He believed that the country needed a specifically American brand of communal and regional socialism created by the kind of independent-minded, diligent, and determined "ordinary" citizens with whom he had grown up. How that vision related to his real home scene that Jeannie remembered as strikingly cold, where a youngster growing up read the newspaper at dinner to avoid conversation with the adults, remained to be seen. He pushed the frontiers of historical scholarship further than any other American of his time, but Williams always—at least in his own mind—remained rooted, spiritually, politically and philosophically, in his own idealized heartland. The great Pan-African historian C. L. R. James, like Williams an astute critic of Empire, once observed that the average American, while achieving an unprecedented degree of individual autonomy, for that very reason craved an elusive fellowship and community with others.³⁷ The Williams family could have been James's proof positive.