

*Liberalism,  
Puritanism  
and the  
Colonial Mind*

Main Currents in American Thought,  
*Volume I*

Vernon Louis Parrington

*With a new introduction by Bruce Brown*

*Liberalism,  
Puritanism  
and the  
Colonial Mind*



# Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

*Liberalism,  
Puritanism  
and the  
Colonial Mind*

Main Currents in American Thought,  
*Volume I*

Vernon Louis Parrington

*With a new introduction by Bruce Brown*

 Routledge  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

Originally published in 1927 by Harcourt, Brace and Company. Inc.

First published 2011 by Transaction Publishers

Published 2017 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

New material this edition copyright © 2011 by Taylor & Francis.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Notice:

Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 2010045084

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Parrington, Vernon Louis, 1871-1929.

[Main currents in American thought]

Liberalism, Puritanism and the colonial mind / Vernon Louis Parrington.

p. cm. -- (Main currents in American thought ; v.1)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Originally published as: Main currents in American thought. Poole [England] : New York : Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1927.

ISBN 978-1-4128-1868-1 (v. 1 : acid-free paper) 1. American literature--History and criticism. 2. United States--Intellectual life. I. Title.

PS88.P33 2011

810'.9--dc22

2010045084

ISBN 13: 978-1-4128-1868-1(pbk)

TO THE MEMORY  
OF  
J. ALLEN SMITH  
SCHOLAR TEACHER DEMOCRAT GENTLEMAN

*Omnium Amicus erat  
qui  
Justiciam amat.*



# Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

## CONTENTS

Introduction to the Transaction Edition, Bruce Brown . . . . .	xvii
Foreword . . . . .	xxxiii
INTRODUCTION: The theme stated; part played by European intellectual movements; influence in colonial America of old-world liberalism—English Independency, French romantic theory; incoming of a diverse philosophy—English <i>laissez faire</i> ; significance of theology and politics in colonial America . . . . .	xxxv

### BOOK I: LIBERALISM AND PURITANISM

New England a product of old-world custom and institutions, modified by new-world environment. Emergence of two classes: yeomanry, gentry; and two ideals: Puritan and Yankee . . . . .	3
---	---

#### PART I

#### The Puritan Heritage—1620-1660

I. ENGLISH BACKGROUNDS	
I. Carolinian liberalism an attempt to create a new social system to replace the feudal, resulting in the doctrine of natural rights, democracy, and equalitarianism. The result of changing economics. Puritanism primarily middle-class. Types of church polity—monarchical, aristocratic, democratic. Separatism the left wing of Puritanism . . . . .	5
II. Diverse theologies of Luther and Calvin. Reactionary nature of Calvinism: established in absolutism—universality of moral law, determinism, reprobation—denial of natural rights. . . . .	11
II. THE TRANSPLANTING OF IDEAS	
I. The settlement of New England came in the middle period of the Puritan movement. Pilgrim and Puritan. . . . .	16
II. The Puritan Presbyterian: Social station—aristocratic, yet with middle-class ambitions. Hostility to ideal of Separatism. Sanctions of the oligarchy, of the theocracy. A Utopian venture . . . . .	17
III. Certain Mistakes: The Plymouth covenant-principle—stages in the nullification of the Separatist principle: the fellowship of the churches; statutes erecting a state church; the climax reached in the Cambridge Platform. The adoption of a freehold tenure of land. Webster's interpretation . . . . .	22



### III. THE CHIEF STEWARDS OF THEOCRACY

- I. Master John Cotton—Priest: Representative of priestly stewardship. Scholar and intellectual. Doctrine of an ethica laristocracy and carnal liberty. A scripturist, seeking to check the drift towards democracy. His *Model of Moses his Judicials*. Rejection of natural rights, of hereditary aristocracy. *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared*. Debate with Roger Williams—freedom to follow the law of God . . . . . 27
- II. John Winthrop—Magistrate: Lay representative of theocracy. A cultivated gentleman. Reasons for removal. Influence of the Bible. His leadership; conception of magistracy ennobled by Puritanism. Implied absolutism—political philosophy. Struggle with the deputies; distrust of democracy. Absolute authority of law—the Little Speech. Liberty to the good, just, and honest. Consequences . . . . . 38

### IV. THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF INDEPENDENCY

- I. The clash between Presbyterianism and Independency—the right of individual freedom. Liberal leaders—Hooker, Williams. Two commonwealths—Connecticut, Rhode Island . . . . . 51
- II. Thomas Hooker—Puritan Liberal: A moderate. Sprung from low social origins. As a preacher in England; removal to Hartford. Democratic order of the commonwealth due to Hooker. His *Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline* . . . . . 53
- III. Roger Williams—Seeker: Embodiment of radical independency, and forerunner of later generations. A provocative figure. Stages in his intellectual development. A mystic and Christian democrat, concerned with a new social order. His political theory: the compact theory and theocratic absolutism; conception of the state—of government; the compact a constitution, government an agent, and the end the common well-being. Theory of toleration. A great political thinker. The constitution of Rhode Island . . . . . 62

### V. OTHER DREAMERS IN ISRAEL

- I. Nathaniel Ward—Elizabethan Puritan: A Puritan wit and belated Euphuist. The *Simple Cobar of Aggawamm*—a mingling of satire and politics. A constitutionalist, pleading for a written compact to delimit prerogative and popular rights. His body of law. . . . . 76
- II. John Eliot—A Theocratic Utopia: *The Christian Commonwealth*. Ordered to be suppressed. His plan of a Christian state. A rigid social order . . . . . 81

## PART II

### The Twilight of the Oligarchy—1660-1720

The spread of provincialism and the consequences. Formalism in the church; superstition. The psychology of the Salem outbreak. The muddling of the oligarchy and the end . . . . .	85
I. SAMUEL SEWALL—YANKEE—First representative of the new order. The Sewall of tradition; the real Sewall: middle-class, governed by a prudential morality. Uncreative, conservative, conventional. The other side—generous, kindly, the first embodiment of village friendliness . . . . .	
	88
II. THE MATHER DYNASTY	
I. Difficulties involved in attempting an estimate. Certain Harvard contributions . . . . .	98
II. Increase Mather: An arch conservative, bred by a conservative environment. His sympathy for the Genevan system; attempts to strengthen discipline; steps in his Presbyterianizing. Intolerant—his biographer quoted. Unread in political theory—dictatorial. As agent at the English court. His bitterness. Not a great Puritan—compared with Samuel Hopkins. His <i>Illustrious Providences</i> —not scientific. The last of the New England Presbyterians . . . . .	99
III. Cotton Mather: Victim of a provincial environment. Subject for a psychologist. His egoism; his quarrels. The <i>Diary</i> . His venture into politics. A natural Tory. His writings: <i>Wonders of the Invisible World</i> ; the <i>Magalia</i> . The futility of his dream . . . . .	106
III. STIRRINGS OF LIBERALISM	
I. John Wise—Village Democrat: Before Dudley; at Quebec. Character—a liberal. His <i>Vindication of the New England Churches</i> —based on the doctrine of natural rights. Defense of democratic Congregationalism against the movement to Presbyterianize. Comment of Cotton Mather. His contribution to the paper-money controversy. His later influence . . . . .	118
II. Social Drifts: Economic forces—a chasm opening between old England and New England. The village and Toryism: Joseph Dudley and the carters. First newspapers: <i>News-Letter</i> ; <i>New-England Courant</i> ; <i>New-England Weekly Journal</i> . . . . .	125

## BOOK II: THE COLONIAL MIND

The middle eighteenth century undistinguished, yet it created the individualism that was the source of a new democratic psychology . . . . . 131

### PART I

#### The Mind in the Making—1720-1763

- I. COLONIAL BACKGROUNDS
  - I. New Stock: Economic motive of immigration. The Scotch-Irish influx; indented servants—the Germans; diary of John Harrower . . . . . 133
  - II. The Frontier—Lubberland: *Journal* of Madam Knight—frontier leveling, poverty. *History of the Dividing Line*, Col. William Byrd—the backcountry, lubberland, impatient of law . . . . . 137
  - III. The Frontier—Land of Promise: *Letters* of Crèvecoeur: A French Physiocrat; his travels in America; first interpretation of the influence of the frontier in economic terms—*Ubi panis ibi patria*; a new type; influence of the middle settlements, the frontier. *More Letters*: Crèvecoeur the Loyalist—dislike of American Whiggery. 140
- II. THE ANACHRONISM OF JONATHAN EDWARDS
  - I. Backgrounds: Decay of Calvinism; beginnings of rationalism. A free environment and the dogmas of total depravity and election. The major question of determinism . . . . . 148
  - II. Edwards a Puritan mystic. Sought to establish theology in philosophy. Idealistic philosophy. Desire to magnify God—interpreted in terms of will. Defended threatened dogmas. *On the Freedom of the Will*—the triumph of the theologian. *Narrative of the Surprising Works of God* and the psychology of conversion. The Great Awakening. Father of later Congregationalism. The tragedy of his position . . . . . 152
- III. BENJAMIN FRANKLIN—OUR FIRST AMBASSADOR—A Democrat in an aristocratic world. A free soul; product of environment. Compared with Defoe. His rise. Enters politics. Agent in England. Corruption of English politics. A sociologist; our first economist. Economic theories: *A Modest Inquiry into the Nature and Necessity of a Paper Currency*. Labor the measure of value. Accepted Physiocratic views: *laissez faire*, agrarianism. Distrust of industrialism. *Principles of Trade*. Political views: imperial federation, Whiggery. In the Constitutional Convention—a unicameral system. A child of the eighteenth century . . . . . 164

## PART II

### The Awakening of the American Mind—1763-1783

I. IMPERIAL SOVEREIGNTY AND HOME RULE		
I. Background Facts: Causes of the Revolution obscure. Home rule and imperial centralization. Native liberalism. Three areas and three diverse interests. The imperial problem. Grievances of merchants, planters, yeomanry . . . . .	179	
II. Argument and Propaganda: American case based on the British Constitution; on natural rights. Theories of representation, English and colonial. Powers of Parliament. Natural rights and Locke—reasons for his appeal . . . . .	186	
III. Certain Social Consequences: Emergence of republicanism. Attitude of upper class. Expulsion of Loyalists. Influence on American culture. Rise of middle class; political centralization . . . . .	190	
II. THE MIND OF THE AMERICAN TORY		
I. Thomas Hutchinson—Royal Governor: The House of Hutchinson. Character and intellectual attainments. Insincerity of the Tory philosophy. Situation on his accession to the governorship. Prerogative and democracy. Proposals for remodeling Massachusetts government. The Town Meeting. Affair of the letters. The problem of sovereignty. Government by ministerial instructions. Comment on his enemies. His failure . . .	194	
II. Daniel Leonard—Tory Lawyer: Character. <i>Massachusettsensis</i> . A follower of Hobbes—the leviathan state. The sin of rebellion and the law of treason. Groundlessness of American sedition—the virus of republicanism. On the right of revolution . . . . .	207	
III. Jonathan Boucher—Tory Priest: Character. <i>A View of the Causes and Consequences of the American Revolution</i> . Influence of Filmer's <i>Patriarcha</i> . Doctrine of obedience. Evil effects of republicanism. Government a divine institution—the patriarchal nature of kingship. An extreme Tory . . . . .	214	
III. JOHN DICKINSON—THE MIND OF THE AMERICAN WHIG—A moderate—spokesman of the colonial Whigs. Essence of Whiggery—the rule of property. His social position; conception of political stewardship. A constitutional lawyer. Accepted parliamentary sovereignty, right to regulate trade. Taxation and Whiggery—a tax and an imposition. Not a republican. His <i>Two Letters on the Tea Tax</i> . In the Constitutional Convention. <i>Letters of Fabius</i> . His views old-fashioned . . . . .		219

- IV. SAMUEL ADAMS—THE MIND OF THE AMERICAN DEMOCRAT  
—An agitator and practical politician. Member of the opposition. Advocate of home rule. Understood the ways of Tory government. Master of political theory. Three lines of argument: natural rights, constitutional rights, the charter compact. Influence of Locke, of Coke. Reliance on public opinion. Use of publicity, organization, town meetings. Newspaper articles. Motive of attacks on royal officials. Faith in the people. A democrat. The cost in reputation . . . 233

V. LITERARY ECHOES

I. The Whig Satirists

1. John Trumbull: A lover of *belles lettres* drawn into the strife. *M'Fingal*. The note of humor. A potential intellectual; a moderate liberal. An echo of Connecticut opinion . . . 248
2. Francis Hopkinson, Esq.: The state of Philadelphia culture. A dilettante. A potential Tory turned Whig. *The New Roof; Objections to the Proposed Plan of a Federal Government*. A Federalist . . . 252

II. The Tory Satirists

1. Jonathan Odell: A bitter nature. His satires—an embodiment of class prejudice. *The American Times*. Estimate of Whig leaders . . . 255
2. Samuel Peters: His curious ambition. His *History of Connecticut*. Explanation of the cause of the Revolution—ministerial neglect. The cure—establishment of a colonial aristocracy . . . 259

BOOK III: LIBERALISM AND THE CONSTITUTION

PART I

The Agrarian Defeat—1783–1787

I. AGRARIANISM AND CAPITALISM

- I. Background of Ideas—English and French contributions. The struggle between political realists and humanitarian liberals. Influence of English middle class. Puritan ethics of work and capitalism. Attitude towards current liberalisms—the state. Influence of Harrington, Locke, Adam Smith. The new individualism. Rousseau and French humanitarianism—decentralization and the paternalistic state. Reasons why English influence prevailed . . . 267
- II. The Political Situation: Party alignments. Weakness of agrarians. The composite group of Federalists. Odium attaching to democracy—confused with Popu-

	lism. Shays's Rebellion. Reaction from natural rights to economic realism. The return to seventeenth-century republicanism . . . . .	273
II.	THE GREAT DEBATE—Inadequate theory of republicanism. Earlier English liberalism undemocratic. Democratic theory undeveloped. First debate: republicanism and the majority rule—Madison's view; the Whig doctrine of property rule. Second debate: opposition to checks on majority will. <i>The Federalist</i> —its repute, the augmented state, theory of faction, economic basis of government. <i>Letters</i> of R. H. Lee—analysis of economic conditions, the Constitution undemocratic. Emergence of parties . . . . .	279
III.	POLITICAL THINKERS—THE ENGLISH GROUP	
	I. Alexander Hamilton—The Leviathan State: Representative of conservative interests. A master of finance, administrator rather than thinker. Inadequate intellectual equipment. A political realist: men are swayed by self-interest; the rule of the strong. Undemocratic. The doctrine of <i>vox justitiae</i> . His plan of government—the fallacy of his argument. As a statesman: necessity of allying the wealthy with government: position on funding, taxation, the tariff, the industrial revolution. Statesman of the rising capitalism . . . . .	292
	II. John Adams—Realist: Compared with Dr. Johnson—apostle of common sense. Shift from earlier position. Intellectual qualities. His early constitutionalism—a federated British empire. <i>A Defense of the Constitution of Government</i> , and <i>Discourses on Davila</i> . Opposition aroused by latter. His political philosophy: theory of human nature, doctrine of rivalry, the class struggle, natural aristocracy. Foolishness of French doctrines of equality and fraternity. Faction the weakness of democracy—the end anarchy or absolutism. The fact of property rule. Hence need for system of checks and balances. Sources of his philosophy—Harrington. Hostility to Hamilton. A notable political thinker . . .	307

## PART II

### Political Democracy Gets under Way—1787-1800

- I. THE IMPACT OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION—Stirred party passions afresh. Popularized democracy in America and provided a body of philosophy: doctrines of the majority will, expediency, local self-government. Later party divisions. Democratic clubs. The *odium theologicum*.

Paine's *Rights of Man* and J. Q. Adams's *Publicola*. The shift of positions . . . . . 321

## II. POLITICAL THINKERS—THE FRENCH GROUP

- I. Tom Paine—Republican Pamphleteer: An internationalist. Odium attaching to his name. A social inefficient. *Common Sense*—appeal to expediency; attack on monarchy and the British Constitution. Political philosophy: doctrine of continuous compact, of the *res publica*. *The Rights of Man*—a reply to Burke's theory of civil contract and the expediency of aristocratic rule. The business of the revolution. *Agrarian Justice*: civilization and poverty; relation to Babeuf; theory of unearned increment; a tax proposal. *Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance*—an attack on funding. A pacifist. Sources of his philosophy. His position in contemporary American opinion . . . . . 327
- II. Thomas Jefferson—Agrarian Democrat: Position. His inconsistencies due to a slowly clarifying philosophy. An intellectual, holding to American experience. Chief doctrines: the social compact, the *res publica*, the diminished state—a philosophy of decentralization. Belief in the excellence of an agrarian economy—a Physiocrat; fear of cities and industrialism. Suspicious of appeal to past experience: the evils of the past due to leviathan state; consolidation would repeat those evils in America. Excellence of home rule; the majority will. Fear of judicial encroachment, the Common Law. Class rule serves class interests. Faith in the common people. The industrial revolution and a new centralization . . . 342

## III. THE WAR OF BELLES LETTRES

- I. The Federalist Group . . . . . 357
  1. The Hartford Wits: Arch conservatives. Sources of Connecticut Federalism—Calvinism and business. The Connecticut fear of democracy. Members of the group. Theodore Dwight. Timothy Dwight—his contemporary reputation, likeness to Increase Mather, a clerical Federalist. His literary work . . . . . 357
  2. *The Anarchiad*: Political writings of the Wits. Character of Lemuel Hopkins. The theme of the work—an attack on populism and democracy . . . 363
- II. The French Group . . . . . 367
  1. Philip Freneau—Poet of Two Revolutions: A revolutionary volunteer—effect on his reputation. A radical advocate of all liberal movements. Effect on his poetic career. Spirit of his satire—attack on

England. His desire to strip colonial loyalties from the American. Influence on Freneau of the French Revolution. <i>The National Gazette</i> —a leader of anti-Federalism. The consequences. His growing reputation . . . . .	368
2. Joel Barlow—Jacobin: Early career: his experience abroad and his adoption of Jacobin views. Cost to his reputation. <i>Advice to the Privileged Orders</i> : the doctrine of <i>res publica</i> ; social responsibility for the individual. <i>Letter to the National Convention of France</i> , and the machinery of a democratic state. <i>The Columbiad</i> —a republican poem . . . . .	382
3. Hugh Henry Brackenridge—Free-Lance Democrat: An independent critic of the shortcomings of democracy. <i>Modern Chivalry</i> —a frontier book, a satire of current manners. Democracy must not be sacrificed to selfish individualism—the folly of the political climber and of the electorate. A notable book . . . . .	390
CONCLUSION . . . . .	397
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	399
INDEX . . . . .	405





# Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

INTRODUCTION TO THE TRANSACTION EDITION  
VERNON LOUIS PARRINGTON

*Bruce Brown*

*"Ideas are not godlings that spring perfect-winged from the head of Jove; they are not flowers that bloom in a walled garden; they are weapons hammered out on the anvil of human needs."*

—Vernon Louis Parrington

THE FIELD AT THE FAIRGROUNDS in Guthrie, the capital of the Oklahoma Territory, was frozen but free of snow for the kickoff of the big college football game on New Year's Eve 1897. The contest, which was actually the prelude to the day's main event, the Territorial Intercollegiate Oratorical Contest, pitted the University of Oklahoma against another Oklahoma school, Kingfisher College.

It was the fledgling University of Oklahoma football team's first game that far from home, and during the early part of the contest they had some tough sledding. Oklahoma end Bill McCutcheon was being punished particularly hard by a heavy-set Kingfisher tackle. "He hurt me every time he hit me," McCutcheon recalled later. Closer inspection revealed that McCutcheon's opponent was wearing armor: Beneath his jersey he had concealed an elbow of stovepipe over each shoulder and arm.

Although McCutcheon's opponent was forced to shed his extra gear, Kingfisher continued to dominate Oklahoma, and carried an 8-6 lead to the bench at halftime. There is no record of what the Oklahoma coach told his beleaguered team as they warmed themselves during the break, but its results were evident during the second half in classic college football fashion. The Oklahoma offense came alive, eating up the field with plays that called for the tackles and ends to cross-block their opposite numbers while the ball carrier swung through the gap

boosted by supporting backs, for in those days, football offenses relied as much on pushing from behind as blocking in front.

Midway through the second half, the game was interrupted by the Logan County sheriff, who had never seen a football game before, and supposed the action on the gridiron to be a brawl in progress. It took the appeals of several notables present, including University of Oklahoma President David Ross Boyd (Oklahoma was by then leading), before the sheriff would let the game be completed. Finally relenting, he gave the affair a Wild West touch by firing his gun over his head to restart the contest, prompting the spectators to respond with the appropriate rodeo cries: "Hold that steer!" "Ride 'em cowboy!" "E-yip-eeeeeeee!"

Out on the playing field, the flavor was not so much Red River as Crimson Wave. Although Oklahoma's young Harvard-educated football coach had chosen not to play in this game himself, the Sooners still bore the strong mark of Harvard football, that rough rugby/soccer amalgam which won first the Ivy League colleges and ultimately all of America away from traditional soccer. Striding the sidelines in a tweed suit and tie, the Oklahoma coach exhorted his men. They were an odd crew, composed of a professional baseball player, a Chickasaw Indian, some local farmers and a smattering of University of Oklahoma students, but now the drilling he had put them through paid off and they won handily by the score of 17 to 8.

This was the first of many hurrahs for both University of Oklahoma football and its tweedy coach and English professor, Vernon Louis Parrington. During the four years he coached the Sooners, Parrington, then a darkly handsome young man in the Robert Louis Stevenson mold, only lost twice, and one of those games turned on what was later revealed to be an illegal drop kick by the University of Arkansas Razorbacks, according to Harold Keith's *Oklahoma Kickoff*. After shutting out the last four opponents Oklahoma faced at the close of the 1900 season, Parrington retired forever from football coaching with what is at this writing still the second highest winning percentage in the history of Sooner football after Bud Wilkinson.

Parrington's explanation for the move was that he wanted to devote more energy to the teaching of English, but his motives, like everything else about him, were far from simple. A voracious reader who actually hated Harvard and the old Brahmin-dominated culture it represented, Parrington also wanted more time for personal questing. As William Allen White recalled in his Pulitzer Prize winning autobiography, Par-

rington was part of a crowd of young fellows “too proud for pool, too wicked for prayer meetings, too lazy for baseball—although Vernon Parrington pitched a mean outcurve for the Emporia Browns—too sophisticated for the local poker game, and too young and full of vision to let the world go by without trying to understand it.”

Parrington’s real passion of the moment was poetry, which he wrote and published in the local newspapers. He also spent several years in intense Bible study while at Oklahoma, as a recent article by Lark Hall in the *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* shows. In time, the wide ranging intellectual curiosity that was a life-long characteristic carried him from Victorian poets to the arts and architecture to English and American literature to political science and the history of ideas, and finally landed him on shores far removed from the close-drawn world of his early Presbyterian schooling.

Although the glory he achieved on the gridiron and the diamond would be considered crowning achievements for many fondly remembering their careers, they are for Parrington a mere footnote compared to his later accomplishments in the arena of intellectual history. Long recognized as one of the brilliant teachers of his generation, Vernon Louis Parrington reached the apex of his career in 1928 when the first two volumes of his epic study of the development of American culture, *Main Currents in American Thought*, were awarded the Pulitzer Prize for history.

He was felled by a heart attack the next year, but his influence continued to grow posthumously. By 1940, even Lionel Trilling, who was highly critical of Parrington, acknowledged that “his book now stands at the center of our thought about America.” Parrington’s reputation has fallen so drastically during the intervening decades, however, that younger students of American literature may be surprised to learn that his writings were once thought of comparable importance to those of Oswald Spengler, Alfred North Whitehead, and Vladimir Lenin.

The same cycle of style that made Parrington seem so hopelessly old-fashioned a few years ago may now be bringing him back, though, for our own time bears more than a passing resemblance in terms of the interests and the excesses of the high 1920s, an era which both produced Parrington his greatest work and gave him his first global acclaim.

VERNON LOUIS PARRINGTON was six years old in the spring of 1877 when his father decided to give up the law and office work for

farming. A restless idealist of a sort more common to the previous century than our own, John Parrington had already been a high school principal, commanded black troops in battle as a captain in the Union Army, been elected to county office, herded sheep, and practiced law.

Now he concluded that physical and mental health demanded an agrarian life, and so he moved the family from Aurora, Illinois, to the town of Americus, Kansas, and then on to the 160 acre homestead he proved up outside town. The farm's improvements amounted to a 50-foot well which "yielded an abundance of slippery-tasting, alkaline water," as Vernon later recalled, a four room house (with blue clay from the well in the walls for insulation), and a rude stable. The land itself was almost perfectly flat with only one wild tree, a broken-crowned cottonwood that stood a half mile from the house.

In an unpublished autobiographical reminiscence he wrote for members of his family in 1918, Parrington said Hamlin Garland's classic agrarian novel, *Son of the Middle Border*, accurately pictured every "detail of ugliness and discomfort" of the years he spent on the farm outside Americus, but added that for him the life was not an entirely drab or hopeless existence. "It was filled with poignant emotions," he recalled. "To go to bed with ... the wild fascination of a prairie fire in the soft darkness of a spring night ... and then wake in the morning to the call of the prairie cock from a low ridge half a mile away—a call that was compact of the dawns and freedoms of the untamed places—was that not to sleep and wake in the very Land of Desire?"

Although he left the farm for good by the time he was twenty, Parrington credited it with making a lasting contribution to his intellectual makeup. "[F]rom the vantage point of our farm, two and one half miles north of the village, I saw the border move beyond us and the countryside change from a wild, unploughed prairie, to a well-tilled farming region. Of the diverse experiences of my life I value none more than this. In the most receptive years of my life I came under the influence of ... the frontier with its democratic sympathies and democratic economies. From that influence I have never been able to escape, nor have I wished to escape. To it and the spirit of agrarian revolt I grew out of, I owe much of my understanding of American history and much of my political philosophy."

When the Parringtons moved again in 1877 to Emporia, the largest town in the vicinity, with a population of about 8,000, it was partly to

enable John Parrington to better carry out his new duties as probate judge, and partly to give the Parrington boys a chance for a better education than was available at the one-room school house at Pumpkin Ridge. Both Vernon and his brother John were promptly enrolled in Emporia College, a small Presbyterian academy which Parrington described as "provincial—quite wholesomely I now think." Although academically minimal in many respects, Emporia College did Vernon the great service of introducing him to two ideals that were to play important parts in his life: the curveball and art.

"I was fifteen when I first saw an out-curve thrown," Parrington wrote in February 1918 when he was forty-seven years old. "Time, place, circumstance, the way the great Pack twisted the ball in his palm and delivered it with a full arm sweep, the lucid explanation of the theory—these things are still fresh in my memory ... for these are among the golden experiences of youth. In that moment new fields, fresh interests were opened to me, and thereafter I was assiduous in practice until I could throw a curve that the most skeptical must acknowledge." More than that, he quickly developed into one of Kansas' better players, touring the area at age nineteen as part of an all-star battery that local baseball teams hired to come in for important games.

Meanwhile, other interests were already competing for his time, particularly painting, which he studied for several years at Emporia. "When I was 16 I had definitely determined to be a painter," he wrote. "By the time I was 18 ... an increasing realization of economic demands had driven this idea out of my mind; but not before some realization of the significance of art in the life of men had come to me—a realization which later was to make such writers as William Morris my intellectual masters. The love of beauty rather than the love of truth was to dominate me and turn me aside from the stream of scientific learning which bore away so many of my generation."

By the time he graduated from Emporia with a bachelor of arts degree in 1891, Parrington had begun to cut a swath outside Emporia and Kansas. An essay of his, "History and God," was published in *College Life* magazine, and that fall he went away to Harvard on a full academic scholarship. Although he graduated two years later with Oswald Garrison Villard and William Vaughn Moody in the class of '93, Parrington largely loathed his time in Cambridge. "I was too inexperienced to know the ropes," he wrote, "and I got an appalling percentage of shiftless and stupid instructors."

While in Emporia, Parrington had begun a habit of heavy reading in the public library with an emphasis on Victorian novelists such as Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Trollope, and Reade. At Harvard, he continued the practice on a broader scale. Like Hamlin Garland, who “took his degree” in the Boston Public Library, Parrington made self-directed study a major part of his education. Later, he would observe with an ironic glimmer that it was the “library and not the college that opened my mind to English literature, preparing me for the work I was to take up.”

Parrington had never consciously decided to be a teacher, but upon his graduation from Harvard he was offered a position as an English instructor back at Emporia College, and he accepted. He also played baseball professionally during the summers, pitching, catching and managing for the Emporia Browns in the Kansas League. He seemed to have considered professional baseball as a career (despite the poor pay and low social status the game enjoyed during those days), but the heat of the summer, the six game a week schedule, and the responsibility for keeping his players out of the bars finally took the bloom off the sport for him. Then, too, he was discovering at Emporia College that his gift for teaching might be greater than his one with the small white sphere.

The four years he spent at Emporia as an instructor were probably the busiest of his life, combining teaching English and French, earning his masters degree, playing baseball, courting an occasional young lady, handling a raft of his students' extra-curricular activities, and seeing friends like William Allen White, the editor of the *Emporia Gazette* and author of the influential essay, “What’s the Matter with Kansas?” which helped swing the tide against populist William Jennings Bryan and elect Republican William McKinley president in 1896. Parrington himself was headed in the opposite direction politically. He voted for Bryan in 1896 (his first break with the staunch Republicanism of his father), and was soon borne farther to the left by the general distress that afflicted American agriculture during this period, and specifically by the decline in the Parrington family fortunes.

John Parrington had lost his judgeship some years before, and by 1897, after a decade of low corn prices and unrealized schemes, he was about to lose the only thing he and Vernon’s mother had left—the farm. In his family reminiscence, Parrington recalled warming himself by the stove on his parents farm during the winter of 1897 and listen-

ing as full big ears of corn burned “briskly, popping and crackling in the jolliest fashion. And if while we sat around such a fire watching the year’s crop go up the chimney, the talk sometimes became bitter about railroads and middlemen, who will wonder? We were in a fitting mood to respond to Mary Ellen Lease and her doctrine of raising less corn and more hell.”

Assuming financial responsibility, Vernon asked Emporia College for a raise to save the family farm from foreclosure. The president would not grant it, but a short time later Vernon obtained the needed money by taking a job teaching English at the University of Oklahoma in Norman. Despite the good times he was to find in Norman, the experience was in some ways an ordeal, as is immediately apparent from Parrington’s description of his introduction to the town and campus. “A searing wind blew great dust clouds from the southwest as I stepped off the train and started for the University. I passed through a stretch of burnt-up, slovenly village, and out along a quarter mile of plank walk—the very nails of which were partly drawn out by the heat—and at last came to the University grounds, a small patch of brown prairie with a single red brick building topped off with a wartlike cupola.”

Parrington’s response was to throw himself into his labors, both academic and otherwise. “He would lay out for himself a given amount of work, and he was unhappy if he didn’t get it all done,” recalled his wife, the former Julia Williams, whom he married in 1901 when he was a professor at Oklahoma. “After his coaching and teaching came his evenings of work on his chief love, the writing of poetry. Always his great desire was to have more time to write. He felt that the true fullness of life came only through the imagination. Facts were dead lumber to him and he must reconstruct in his own imagination.” By his own estimation, he was then “still the bookman, drawing my nourishment from *belle lettres*.”

Although certainly not a pedant, he was nonetheless undistinguished in his thinking, and might have remained so had not great good fortune come to him in the form of personal disaster. The bad news was that in 1908 Parrington was fired from his position at the University of Oklahoma, which had by then come to include responsibility for directing the English and Athletic departments as well as teaching. Although in no way personal (Parrington was one of 23 people refused new contracts, including the president of the university, in the political turmoil that accompanied Oklahoma’s statehood), the loss of his



livelihood was nonetheless distressing on a number of scores, among them the fact that it meant that he would have to give up the new house he had just designed and had built in Emporia.

The good news came a few weeks later when University of Washington President Thomas Kane made a special trip to Emporia on the recommendation of outgoing Oklahoma President Boyd to talk with Vernon Louis Parrington. Kane offered him a job before he got on the train out of town that night, and Parrington followed Kane to Seattle almost immediately. The verdant forests, island-strewn expanses of water, and volcanic peaks of the Pacific Northwest were as refreshing to him as the burnt prairie of Norman was oppressive. He already had friends and relatives in Seattle (he and Julia had been married there), and soon added more from the faculty of the University of Washington, among them Edward McMahon, William Savery, Frederic Morgan Padelford, and most important of all from an intellectual standpoint, J. Allen Smith, whose seminal Progressive history, *The Spirit of American Government*, had appeared the year before.

Although Smith was eleven years Parrington's senior and a member of the History rather than the English department, the two were remarkably similar in background and interests. Both had grown up in the Midwest, attended college, taught, and been fired by institutions of higher learning there. Both shared a fondness for Herbert Spencer and William Morris, and a perhaps not unconnected belief in Progressive ideals. The two became close friends, freely sharing their intellectual impulses, and in the process, the older man helped crystallize the younger man's thinking in several areas, among them the use of economics as a tool for cultural analysis. "When I quitted Norman the economic interpretation of history had not yet risen for me," Parrington wrote, "but it lay just below the horizon and was soon to become the chief luminary in my intellectual sky."

One obvious manifestation of Vernon Louis Parrington's deepening command of English and American literature was the tremendous popularity his classes attained. Still fit and handsome, with a full head of dramatically white hair, he had a powerful classroom presence that kindled a spark that still burns in his surviving students. "He was the best classroom teacher I ever saw or heard," declared Gladys Savage, eighty-two, a former student who later taught English herself at U.C.L.A. By the early 1920s, a course with Parrington became the *sine qua non* of liberal education at the University of Washington.

E. H. Eby, a former student and colleague of Parrington's at the University of Washington, reflected that "the source of that popularity was the personality of the teacher, together with his gift for presenting ideas and provoking a response. By means of a Socratic cross-examination, Parrington made the student discover his intellectual deficiencies; while the class, to its astonishment and delight, found the quest for truth both elusive and exciting."

All during this time Parrington was also quietly working on a book. As far back as his Oklahoma days, Parrington had been thinking about a study of American literature. Finally in 1913, five years after he came to Washington, he began to write *The Democratic Spirit in American Letters, 1620-1870*. The book was finished in 1918, but lack of interest by publishers forced him to put it on the shelf. Returning to it during the 1920s, Parrington continued to expand, strengthen, and polish it, until finally in 1927, seventeen years after he began it, the book appeared as *Main Currents in American Thought, vol. I and II*.

NINETEEN TWENTY-EIGHT was a vintage year for Pulitzer Prize recipients. The drama award that year went to Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*, while the novel award was won by Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, and the poetry award was claimed by Edward Arlington Robinson's *Tristram*.

However, for sheer originality and force of imagination—to say nothing of depth of study—none of these works could compare with that year's winner of the Pulitzer for history, Vernon Louis Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought*.

Parrington's opus was not only the first comprehensive history of American letters and thought to appear in this country, it was the first major work to consider American literature as an expression of American culture, rather than some academic aesthetic schema. We now take both of these perceptions so much for granted that it is easy to forget the bedrock contribution Parrington made to both literary criticism and intellectual history in America.

Working alone in Seattle, Parrington realized that much of American literature was crude by refined critical standards. Furthermore, if the reader was restricted to those dainty morsels fit for the period's contemporary aesthetics, most of the best American writing would be thrown out. Parrington therefore seized on the idea of treating American literature and letters as an expression of the central American cultural value, democracy.

“And indeed in this country, with its long history of democratic aspiration, why should there not be a grand history of thought and letters celebrating the democratic theme?” Richard Hofstadter wrote of Parrington in *The Progressive Historians*. “Why should not someone, at last, use the history of letters to illuminate national life and thought, and discuss literature, in the tradition of Sainte-Beuve and Taine, as an index of culture?”

There had previously been a couple of minor efforts at American literary history by writers like Barrett Wendell, but none had come close to the breadth of Parrington’s study, nor exhibited the felicitous quality of his prose. Similarly, a few efforts at American intellectual history had been attempted by writers like Moses Coit Tyler, but the subject had been almost entirely ignored by conventional academic historians, giving the old Sooner footballer an open field.

In Parrington’s hands, American literature, which had been a ragtag poor relative of the literatures of England and the Continent, was suddenly transformed, almost before the reader’s eyes, into a noble creature worthy of all the world’s attention, since it embodied so compellingly one of history’s great social experiments. While it is not entirely true that Parrington created the study of American literature in the nation’s colleges, it is fair to say that he did more than any other critic to hasten its initial acceptance, and thus paved the way, with the subsequent contribution of the great American novelists and critics of the 1930s and 1940s, for the unquestioned acceptance it enjoys today.

In developing the concept for what would become *Main Currents*, Parrington drew on intellectual sources as diverse as his rich fare of study. From Hippolyte Taine’s *History of English Literature*, which made a big impression on him during his college days, he absorbed three important lessons: the idea of using literature as a means of portraying national culture; the idea of organizing a grand literary history around a series of biographical and critical portraits; and lastly, the idea that environment plays at least some role in forming the art of a given era or nation. From William Morris and John Ruskin, Parrington picked up elements of the Victorian tradition of moral-aesthetic criticism, as well as something of their refined 19th century style. Thomas Jefferson gave him the marrow of democracy, while George Santayana provided germinal phrases like “winds of doctrine,” and J. Allen Smith, the pioneering Progressive historian, impressed upon him the importance of economics as a cultural determinant, and fostered his reading of Karl Marx.

Out of this and much more, Parrington wove a clear and consistent picture of the development of democracy in America during the 300 years between 1620 and approximately the beginning of the twentieth century. He saw in this nation's literature the record of the tremendous struggle between the forces of majority and minority rule that spanned generations and even centuries to link writers as diverse as John Winthrop, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, Theodore Parker, and Theodore Dresser in a grand and continuing debate about the very nature of America. For Parrington, the crux of this debate was embodied in the clash between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, the former representing the best of America's indigenous agrarian democratic tradition, and the later representing the rising power of the business oligarchy issuing from the marriage of the unearned increment to the centralized state.

Journalists, essayists, historians, propagandists, and satirists were all given consideration in *Main Currents*, along with the more traditionally literary writers such as novelists and poets. Parrington was primarily interested in tracing the development of "certain germinal ideas that have come to be reckoned traditionally American," but this did not deaden him to aesthetic concerns when they were warranted. He was one of the first influential twentieth century critics to champion both Walt Whitman and Herman Melville, and his own writing immediately reveals a distinctive aesthetic sense. Parrington was a master of the apt quote, the illuminating image, and the epigrammatic expression.

As a mature critic, Parrington demanded only one thing: that art have some bearing on the real world that produced it. He no longer had any patience with the idea of beauty for beauty's sake, and little more for the belle lettristic critics. "Do they understand the origin and significance of those ideas which they study so lovingly?" he asked in a 1917 essay, "Economics and Criticism."

Ideas are not godlings that spring perfect-winged from the head of Jove; they are not flowers that bloom in a walled garden; they are weapons hammered out on the anvil of human needs. Freedom to think is bought with a price; and to ignore the price is to lose all sense of values. To love ideas is excellent, but to understand how ideas themselves are conditioned by social forces, is better still. To desire culture, to enjoy commerce with the best that has been known and thought in the world is excellent also; but to understand the dynamics which lies back of all culture signifies more. Men who will be free, struggle to be free, fashion themselves ideas for swords to fight with.

To consider the sword apart from the struggle is to turn dilettante and a frequenter of museums.

Regarding his partisanship on the larger social and political issues, Parrington was equally straightforward, writing in the foreword to volume I of *Main Currents*, “the point of view from which I have endeavored to evaluate the materials, is liberal rather than conservative, Jeffersonian rather than Federalist ...” This bias provided the values which lay behind Parrington’s judgments, but did not prevent him from memorably portraying figures he did not particularly admire. Regarding Hamilton, for instance, Parrington conveys the considerable magnitude of the first Treasury Secretary’s genius (“Certainly no other man in America saw so clearly the significance of the change that was taking place in English industrialism, and what tremendous reservoir of wealth the new order laid open to the country that tapped them”), as well as what might be called the moral blindness that led him to advocate child factory labor and the rule of the wealthy.

A self-taught architect who loved the balance and proportion of Gothic cathedrals, Parrington strove to impart a similar balance to his recounting the great American debate concerning democracy, as is evident in his pointed pairings of opposing views on essential questions. Thus Fisher Ames (“The essence and almost quintessence of good government is to protect property and its rights”) is set against James Fenimore Cooper (“A government founded on the representation of property ... is radically vicious. It is the business of government to resist the corruption of money, not to depend on them”), John Dickinson is set against John Adams, Robert Treat Paine against Horace Greeley, and so forth. Parrington was the rarest of all partisans in that his biases were honed, not in the darkness, but rather against the brightest intellects that divergent thought could provide.

*Main Currents* bears the mark of Parrington’s intellectual openness throughout. He was more than willing to follow the logic of situations and history wherever they might lead, even when they ran counter to his deepest assumptions and conditioning. It was Vernon Louis Parrington, the son of a Union Army officer and an abolitionist, who kindled in twentieth century America an appreciation of Southern writers like John Pendleton Kennedy (author of *Swallow Barn*), and who traced the history of a regional literature that has continued to grow in stature and importance since his death with the work of Wil-

liam Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Alice Walker, and many others. Similarly, Parrington, who devoted the final twenty years of his life to celebrating the theme of democracy in America, was all too aware of the problems at the heart of American democracy.

From his own youth, Parrington knew that the spirit of American democracy was rooted in the freedom of the frontier, but also realized from first-hand experience that the frontier ethos carried within it the seed of its own destruction. "In the presence of vast, unpreempted resources, the right of every man to preempt and exploit what he would [became] synonymous with individual liberty," he wrote, "and if the small man were free to enjoy his petty privilege, the greater interests might preempt unchallenged ... Where the policy of preemption has run its course, the function of government is seduced from its social purpose to perpetuate the inequalities which spring from the progressive monopolization of natural resources, with the augmenting corruption and injustice."

Parrington's sudden death in 1929 at the age of fifty-eight, while seemingly in the peak of health and at the height of his powers, prevented him from finishing volume III of *Main Currents*, but from what he left of the last volume, it is clear he believed the hour was late for the America he loved. "In the welter that is present day America," Parrington wrote in a passage which has a distinctly contemporary ring, "militant philosophies with their clear-cut programs and assured faiths are wanting. The old buoyant psychology is gone and in the breakdown and disintegration of the traditional individualism no new philosophies are rising. Builders of Utopias are out of a job. Political and economic theory is in the charge of the paymasters and is content with the drab rim of the familiar landscape."

Vernon Louis Parrington never lost the agrarian faith of his youth, nor the hope of Jeffersonian democracy it entailed. A realist to the end, however, he clearly saw the fate of that aspect of the American tradition, and described it in characteristically memorable fashion. "The philosophy of Jefferson and John Taylor," he wrote in the introduction to volume III, "with its physiocratic bias, its antipathy to a money economy, its love of local autonomy, has been buried in the potter's field."

Although he died before the Great Depression, the election of Franklin Roosevelt, and the New Deal, he could see that liberalism must embrace the centralized state, but that the risk in such an enterprise was great. Writing to a friend, Parrington succinctly described the

dilemma that subsequently has eaten America alive: “We must have a political state strong enough to deal with corporate wealth, but how are we going to keep the state with its augmenting power from being captured by the force we want to control?”

THE INITIAL CRITICAL reaction to *Main Currents in American Thought* was overwhelmingly positive. Henry Steele Commager called it “the finest piece of creative criticism in our literature,” while the *Saturday Review* found it as “accurate as sound scholarship should be,” and Howard Mumford Jones noted how it compelled “all other histories of literature ... to pale their fires ... Here was a useable past, adult, reasonable, coherent.”

During the 1930s, *Main Currents* became one of those rare popular books that galvanizes minds and changes lives. My mother recalls how the many volumes at the Library of Congress were continually worn out and replaced, and in Malcolm Cowley and Bernard Smith’s *Books That Changed Our Minds* (1938), Parrington ranked roughly on par with such seminal authors as Spengler, Whitehead, Lenin, and I. A. Richards in terms of frequency of mention by those nominating books for inclusion.

In fact, the only serious initial critical reservations about *Main Currents* arose, not from its specific treatment of American literature and letters, but from the originality of its conception, especially to the field of history. “There was so little regard for this kind of history, as history,” noted Hofstadter, “that *Main Currents*, even though it received the Pulitzer Prize in the field, was not at first taken by most historians as a historical work ...”

By 1940, however, critical assessment of *Main Currents* had begun to shift, partly because of the new material that continuing historical and literary research had brought to light, and partly because certain original aspects of Parrington’s analysis challenged academic convention. Perry Miller at Harvard was one of several New England scholars who questioned Parrington’s interpretation of Roger Williams, and Clifford K. Shipton contested Parrington’s treatment of the Mathers.

More damaging to Parrington’s overall reputation was the emergence of a new group of literary critics who were primarily interested in detailed textual analysis and wished to avoid the contamination of literature with base concerns such as politics—in short, a group of critics in the very belletristic tradition that Parrington had stung so bitterly. Lionel Trilling led the charge of the “New Critics” against Par-

rington with a scathing reassessment of *Main Currents* that originally appeared in the *Partisan Review* in 1940, and was later collected in *The Liberal Imagination*.

Parrington was not a great mind; he was not a precise thinker or, except when measured by the low eminences that were about him, an impressive one. . . . Separate Parrington from his informing idea of the economic and social determination of thought and what is left is a simple intelligence, notable for its generosity and enthusiasm but certainly not for its accuracy or originality. Take him even with his idea and he is, once its direction has been established, rather too predictable to be continuously interesting. It does not occur to Parrington that there is any other relation possible between the artist and reality than this passage of reality through the transparent artist; he meets evidence of imagination and creativeness with a settled hostility the expression of which suggests that he regards them as the natural enemies of democracy.

Trilling even suggested that some of Parrington's alleged critical gaucheries were due to what Trilling imagined to be sexual repression, while in *The Anatomy of Nonsense* (1942), Yvor Winters accused Parrington of "brutally crude thinking" and "vulgar floridity," pronouncing *Main Currents* "obsolete before it was written." Of all the critics who turned against Parrington during the 1940s, Alfred Kazin was among the more tempered in his judgement. In *On American Grounds* (1942), recently reissued in a 40th anniversary edition, Kazin faulted Parrington's "simplicity of judgment" which led him to see "his own image in the rebels of every generation," as well as "the indifference to literary values which his book displayed" in the treatment of literature. And yet Kazin also recognized that Parrington himself was an excellent writer and perhaps the outstanding Progressive intellectual.

Some of the criticisms of Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought* were certainly warranted, for he could in fact be prolix and repetitive, and in his effort to single-handedly span the width and breadth of American letters, he sometimes spread himself thin. It is hardly fair to blame Parrington for developments that have occurred since, but one can not help wish he had been acquainted with certain writers available during his own time. For instance, Lewis Henry Morgan, who in 1851 first outlined the Native American contribution to the concept of democracy made by the Great Law of the Iroquois, could have greatly enriched Parrington's concept of democracy, and perhaps made him see America as something more than a seedbed for the flowers and weeds of Europe to multiply. On at least a few of the



nearly 1,500 pages of *Main Currents* it is clear that Parrington did not really have a complete grasp of the beast he was wrestling.

Yet as critic Roger Sale observed in 1976, "it is a vastly better work than its subsequent detractors have tried to realize, one that people who share none of Parrington's bias can read with admiration and pleasure." One reflection of this, perhaps, has been the steady sales *Main Currents* has enjoyed over the years. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich has had the book in continuous print for fifty-eight years with total sales through 1985 of 380,000 copies in combined hardcover and paperback editions. Moreover, it has continued to sell: According to Harcourt, nearly 70,000 copies of the paperback editions have been sold in the fifteen years since 1970.

And so, Vernon Louis Parrington remains a great Ozymandian figure of American literature and letters, nearly buried and forgotten in the drifting sands of aesthetic fashion, but still in touch with the American bedrock of which he was also a part. His visage has been defaced by vandals as well as those wishing to build monuments to other causes, but what remains today is still powerful enough to impress the unsuspecting sojourner with the wonder of a great heart and mind, and the America that made them.

## FOREWORD

IT is with a certain feeling of temerity that I offer the present study of a field of American letters which has been pretty largely neglected. That feeling springs from no sense of the slightness of the materials treated of, or their remoteness from present-day interests. To one who has dwelt for any length of time amidst the polemics of colonial debate, a conviction of the greatness of the issues and the intellectual honesty and masculine vigor of the disputants, comes home with compelling force. The subjects with which they dealt are old-fashioned only in manner and dress; at heart they were much the same themes with which we are engaged, and with which our children will be engaged after us. The feeling springs rather from a sense of the complexity and many-sidedness of the materials, with their ramifications into theology and politics and economics, and with backgrounds that conduct to remote origins in European systems of thought; and it is quickened by the realization that the interpretation here offered, runs in many points counter to that frequently given. The point of view from which I have endeavored to evaluate the materials, is liberal rather than conservative, Jeffersonian rather than Federalistic; and very likely in my search I have found what I went forth to find, as others have discovered what they were seeking. Unfortunately the *mens aequa et clara* is the rarest of attributes, and dead partisanship has a disconcerting way of coming to life again in the pages of their historians. That the vigorous passions and prejudices of the times I have dealt with may have found an echo in my judgments is, perhaps, to be expected; whether they have distorted my interpretation and vitiated my analysis is not for me to determine.

Of the present volume portions of Book One have already appeared in a much abbreviated form in the *Cambridge History of American Literature*, and certain passages of Book Three have appeared in *Selections from the Connecticut Wits*, of the *American Authors Series*; and I am indebted to the courtesy of G. P. Putnam's Sons and of Harcourt, Brace and Company for the privilege of reprinting them here. My obligations

to many students are too great to be adequately acknowledged in a few words; they appear at large in the footnotes. I find myself especially indebted to the critical historians who for the past score of years have been working with such fruitful results in the Revolutionary and Constitutional periods of our development. Without the assistance of their searching investigations the difficulties in the way of understanding those complex times would have proved insuperable. To the sane and acute scholarship of my friend and colleague, Prof. Edward McMahon, and to the generous counsel and encouragement of the late Prof. J. Allen Smith, I am under particular obligations; but in those instances in which I may unwittingly have gone astray, the fault is mine. In a study dealing with so long a period of time and with such diverse and difficult fields, I can scarcely hope to have escaped the many traps laid for the unwary. Perhaps I should add that the seeming neglect, in the present volume, of southern backgrounds, has resulted from the desire to postpone the detailed consideration of the mind of the South to a later volume.

V. L. P.

*Seattle, January 1, 1926*

## INTRODUCTION

I HAVE undertaken to give some account of the genesis and development in American letters of certain germinal ideas that have come to be reckoned traditionally American—how they came into being here, how they were opposed, and what influence they have exerted in determining the form and scope of our characteristic ideals and institutions. In pursuing such a task, I have chosen to follow the broad path of our political, economic, and social development, rather than the narrower belletristic; and the main divisions of the study have been fixed by forces that are anterior to literary schools and movements, creating the body of ideas from which literary culture eventually springs. The present volume carries the account from early beginnings in Puritan New England to the triumph of Jefferson and back-country agrarianism. Volume II concerns itself with the creative influence in America of French romantic theories, the rise of capitalism, and the transition from an agricultural to an industrial order; and Volume III will concern itself with the beginnings of dissatisfaction with the regnant middle class, and the several movements of criticism inspired by its reputed shortcomings.

Such a study will necessarily deal much with intellectual backgrounds, and especially with those diverse systems of European thought that from generation to generation have domesticated themselves in America, and through cross-fertilization with native aspirations and indigenous growths, have resulted in a body of ideals that we reckon definitively American. In broad outline those germinal contributions were the bequests successively of English Independency, of French romantic theory, of the industrial revolution and *laissez faire*, of nineteenth-century science, and of Continental theories of collectivism. Transplanted to American soil, these vigorous seedlings from old-world nurseries took root and flourished in such spots as proved congenial, stimulating American thought, suggesting programs for fresh Utopian ventures, providing an intellectual sanction for new experiments in government. Profoundly liberalizing in their influence, they gave impulse and form to our native idealisms, and contrib-

uted largely to the outcome of our social experience. The child of two continents, America can be explained in its significant traits by neither alone.

In the present volume, I have examined with some care the bequests of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe to the colonial settlements, and in particular the transplanting to America of old-world liberalisms. In the main those liberalisms derived from two primary sources, English Independency and French romantic theory, supplemented by certain contributions from English Whiggery. From the first came the revolutionary doctrine of natural rights, clarified by a notable succession of thinkers from Roger Williams to John Locke, a doctrine that destroyed the philosophical sanction of divine right, substituted for the traditional absolutism the conception of a democratic church in a democratic state, and found exemplification in the commonwealths of Rhode Island and Connecticut. But unfortunately the liberal doctrine of natural rights was entangled in New England with an absolutist theology that conceived of human nature as inherently evil, that postulated a divine sovereignty absolute and arbitrary, and projected caste divisions into eternity—a body of dogmas that it needed two hundred years' experience in America to disintegrate. From this clash between a liberal political philosophy and a reactionary theology, between English Independency and English Presbyterianism, sprang the broad features of the struggle that largely determined the course of development in early New England, with which Book One is concerned.

Book Two deals with new beginnings from the raw materials of European immigrants, in other colonies than New England, who came hither singly and unorganized, and took immediate imprint from the new environment, creating during the eighteenth century the great body of yeomanry that was to determine in large measure the fate of America for a hundred years or more. It was to these scattered and undistinguished colonials that French romantic theory was brought by a group of intellectuals in the later years of the century, a philosophy so congenial to a decentralized society that it seemed to provide an authoritative sanction for the clarifying ideals of a republican order, based on the principle of local home rule, toward which colonial experience was driving. Exploring the equalitarian premises of the doctrine of natural rights, it amplified the emerging democratic theory by

substituting for the Puritan conception of human nature as vicious, the conception of human nature as potentially excellent and capable of indefinite development. It asserted that the present evils of society are the consequence of vicious institutions rather than of depraved human nature; and that as free men and equals it is the right and duty of citizens to re-create social and political institutions to the end that they shall further social justice, encouraging the good in men rather than perverting them to evil. Romantic theory went further and provided a new economics and a new sociology. Since the great desideratum is man in a state of nature, it follows, according to the Physiocratic school, that the farmer is the ideal citizen, and agriculture the common and single source of wealth; and that in consequence the state should hold the tillers of the soil in special regard, shaping the public policy with a primary view to their interests. And since social custom is anterior to statutory laws, since the individual precedes the state, government must be circumscribed in its powers and scope by common agreement, and held strictly to its sole concern, the care of the social well-being. The political state, rightly conceived, must be reckoned no other than a great public-service corporation, with government as its responsible agent.

But while French romantic theory was spreading widely through the backwoods of America, providing an intellectual justification for the native agrarianism, another philosophy, derived from English liberalism of the later eighteenth century, was taking possession of the commercial towns. Realistic and material rather than romantic and Utopian, it was implicitly hostile to all the major premises and ideals of the French school. It conceived of human nature neither as good nor bad, but as acquisitive; and it proposed to erect a new social and political philosophy in accordance with the needs of a capitalistic order. It was concerned with exploitation and the rights of trade, rather than with justice and the rights of man. Its aspirations were expressed in the principle of *laissez faire*, and in elaborating this cardinal doctrine it reduced the citizen to the narrow dimensions of the economic man, concerned only with buying in the cheapest market and selling in the dearest. It would reduce the political state to the rôle of policeman, to keep the peace. With humanitarian and social interests, the state must not intermeddle—such functions lie outside its legitimate sphere. An expression of the aspirations of trading and

speculating classes, it professed to believe that economic law—by which term it glorified the spontaneous play of the acquisitive instinct—was competent to regulate men in society, and that if freedom of trade were achieved, all lesser and secondary freedoms would follow.

In the light of such over-seas bequests to the American venture, the choice of materials for the present volume is predetermined. The line of liberalism in colonial America runs through Roger Williams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson. The first transported to the new world the plentiful liberalisms of a great movement and a great century; the second gathered up the sum of native liberalisms that had emerged spontaneously from a decentralized society; and the third enriched these native liberalisms with borrowings from the late seventeenth-century natural-rights school and from French romantic theory, engrafting them upon the vigorous American stock. Over against these protagonists of liberalism must be set the complementary figures of John Cotton, Jonathan Edwards, and Alexander Hamilton, men whose grandiose dreams envisaged different ends for America and who followed different paths. The Carolinian Seeker and the Jacobean theocrat, the colonial democrat and the colonial Calvinist, the Physiocratic republican and the capitalistic financier, embody in concrete form the diverse tendencies of primitive America; and around these major figures lesser ones will group themselves, parties to the great struggle of those early years, the eventual outcome of which was the rejection of the principles of monarchy and aristocracy, and the venturing upon an experiment in republicanism continental in scope.

That our colonial literature seems to many readers meager and uninteresting, that it is commonly squeezed into the skimpiest of chapters in our handbooks of American literature, is due, I think, to an exaggerated regard for esthetic values. Our literary historians have labored under too heavy a handicap of the genteel tradition—to borrow Professor Santayana's happy phrase—to enter sympathetically into a world of masculine intellects and material struggles. They have sought daintier fare than polemics, and in consequence mediocre verse has obscured political speculation, and poetasters have shouldered aside vigorous creative thinkers. The colonial period is meager and lean only to those whose "disedged appetites" find no savor in old-fashioned beef

and puddings. The seventeenth century in America as well as in England was a *saeculum theologicum*, and the eighteenth century was a *saeculum politicum*. No other path leads so directly and intimately into the heart of those old days as the thorny path of their theological and political controversies; and if one will resolutely pick his way amongst the thorns, he will have his reward in coming close to the men who debated earnestly over the plans and specifications of the Utopia that was to be erected in the free spaces of America, and who however wanting they may have been in the lesser arts, were no mean architects and craftsmen for the business at hand. The foundations of a later America were laid in vigorous polemics, and the rough stone was plentifully mortared with idealism. To enter once more into the spirit of those fine old idealisms, and to learn that the promise of the future has lain always in the keeping of liberal minds that were never discouraged from their dreams, is scarcely a profitless undertaking, nor without meaning to those who like Merlin pursue the light of their hopes where it flickers above the treacherous marshlands.





# Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

# BOOK ONE: LIBERALISM AND PURITANISM



# Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

## BOOK ONE

### LIBERALISM AND PURITANISM

COMMON report has long made out Puritan New England to have been the native seat and germinal source of such ideals and institutions as have come to be regarded as traditionally American. Any critical study of the American mind, therefore, may conveniently seek its beginnings in the colonies clustered about Massachusetts Bay, and will inquire into the causes of the pronounced singularity of temper and purpose that marked off the New England settlements from those to the south, creating a distinctive New England character, and disciplining it for later conquests that were to set a stamp on American life. The course of its somewhat singular development would seem from the first to have been determined by an interweaving of idealism and economics—by the substantial body of thought and customs and institutions brought from the old home, slowly modified by new ways of life developing under the silent pressure of a freer environment. Of these new ways, the first in creative influence was probably the freehold tenure of landholdings, put in effect at the beginning and retained unmodified for generations; and the second was the development of a mercantile spirit that resulted from the sterility of the Massachusetts soil, which encouraged the ambitious to seek wealth in more profitable ways than tilling barren acres. From these sources emerged the two chief classes of New England: the yeomanry, a body of democratic freeholders who constituted the rank and file of the people, and the gentry, a group of capable merchants who dominated the commonwealth from early days to the rise of industrialism. And it was the interweaving of the aims and purposes of these acquisitive yeomen and gentry—harmonious for the most part on the surface, yet driving in different directions—with the ideal of a theocracy and the inhibitions of Puritan dogma, that constitutes the pattern of life to be dealt with here. The Puritan and the Yankee were the two halves of the New England whole, and to overlook or underestimate

the contributions of either to the common life is grossly to misinterpret the spirit and character of primitive New England. The Puritan was a contribution of the old world, created by the rugged idealism of the English Reformation; the Yankee was a product of native conditions, created by a practical economics.

# PART ONE: THE PURITAN HERITAGE

## 1620-1660

### CHAPTER I

#### ENGLISH BACKGROUNDS

##### I

THE body of thought brought to America by the immigrant Puritans, and which gave a special cast to the New England mind, may be summed in a phrase as Carolinian liberalism. It was the confused bequest of a hundred years of English idealism, struggling with the knotty problems of a complex society in transition from the old static feudal order to the modern capitalistic; and it took a particular form and received a narrow ideology from the current ecclesiastical disputes concerning the nature and governance of the true church. It was exclusively a product of the Reformation, unleavened by the spirit of the Renaissance. But though English Puritanism was wholly theological in its immediate origins, it gathered about it in the century and a half of its militant career all the forces of unrest fermenting in England. Economics and politics joined hands with theology; the center of gravity of the total movement tended to sink lower in the social scale; and in the end all England was involved in the great struggle.

In its deeper purpose Puritanism was a frank challenge of the traditional social solidarity of English institutional life by an emergent individualism, and far-reaching social readjustments followed inevitably in its train. If the evolution of modern society is conceived of as falling into two broad phases, the disintegration of a corporate feudal order into unregimented individual members of society, and the struggles of those free individuals to regroup themselves in new social commonwealths, the historical significance of English Puritanism may perhaps become clear: it was one of the disruptive forces that disintegrated the traditional solidarity of church and state by creating a revolutionary philosophy of individual rights that purposed to free the individual, both as Christian and subject, from subjection to a fixed corporate status.