

BOOK REVIEW

THE AMERICANS. THE COLONIAL EXPERIENCE. BY DANIEL J. BOORSTIN. New York: Random House, Inc., 1958. Pp. 434. \$6.00.

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In this unusual book—full of original and often challenging insights, analyses and prejudices—Daniel J. Boorstin, Professor of American History at the University of Chicago, is embarking upon an impressive venture. He is at work on a three-volume history, of which this is the first, whose purpose is the defining of the American character in terms of the experiences, or institutional developments, of the American people. There is no foreword and no general presentation of his broad design; indeed, it is not until page 151 that the reader is offered an explicit statement of Professor Boorstin's intention.

He is talking of what he calls "the mood of American thinking":

"It rested on two sentiments. The first was a belief that the reasons men give for their actions are much less important than the actions themselves, that it is better to act well for wrong or unknown reasons than to treasure a systematized 'truth' with ambiguous conclusions, that deep reflection does not necessarily produce the most effective action. The second was a belief that the novelties of experience must be freely admitted into men's thought."

The author divides his work into four books which are selective rather than inclusive, which in fact leave out more than they contain, as he seeks to demonstrate that American realities, rather than the intentions, dreams and hopes of Europeans for the new world, were to give "new meaning to the very idea of liberation." Book one, in consequence, concerns itself only with the Puritan settlement of Massachusetts Bay, the Quakers of Pennsylvania, the philanthropic impulse that led to the founding of Georgia, and the establishment of Virginia where a colony founded by English and developed by American gentlemen emerged.

Book two has to do with attitudes and some institutions: the growth of a natural-scientific bent, higher education, the law, and medicine. Book three describes the creation of a uniform American language, the work and interest of American printers and booksellers, and the appearance and limitations of the American newspaper press. Book four has as its subject colonial warfare and colonial militiamen.

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Out of these expositions—frequently from new source materials or those hitherto only cursorily examined; with a wealth of learning equally at home in European and American attitudes; with many curious and amusing asides as he moves backward and forward in time—Professor Boorstin seeks to explain not only the uniqueness of colonial America but, in effect, the creation of those modes of thought and devices for organization and action that have left a permanent impress upon our way of life.

The chapter on the law and lawyers is typical. It repeats the theme already mentioned: "The American provincial age . . . was not an age of genius so much as an age of liberation. Its legacy was not great individual thinking but refreshing community thinking. Old categories were shaken up, and new situations revealed unsuspected uses for old knowledge." (p. 189). Colonial America did not import the European conception of the "high-tone" professions; not only did it refuse to distinguish between the barrister and the solicitor, but it did not tolerate a legal fraternity as such until the mid-18th century. And because there was no single center of appellate litigation, there was no uniform law and hence no legal "monopoly" to expound it.

Lawyers were trained informally; judges frequently were laymen; there were few lawbooks and few treatises on the law. "Colonial America produced no great legal systems or encyclopaedias. What it did produce were the varied, dispersed, and miscellaneous efforts of hundreds of laymen, semi-lawyers, pseudo-lawyers, and of a few men of solid legal learning." (p. 201). All Americans had was Blackstone; Blackstone made the law accessible to all, literate or not; and, consequently, "Blackstone did much to prepare self-made men for leadership in the New World." (p. 202).

Observations of this sort are titillating and tantalizing; they feed our national ego pleurably; yet they promise more in little than the facts as a whole demonstrate. One sometimes wonders if Professor Boorstin, because he is so clever, is not being openly provocative, as he is when he says: "Out of a distrust of lawyers grew a widening respect for law." (p. 205).

These are reservations that are neither trivial nor irresponsible. Two other comments might be made that raise broader questions.

The uniqueness of the American experience is unquestioned; but can one demonstrate it almost entirely by the failure to build utopias, European-model, in the colonies or by witty explanations of American preoccupations with spelling, botanizing, nature-healing, and the nurturing of unprofessional soldiers? Except in one or two asides, Professor Boorstin has nothing to say about economic and political institutions: the great fact that accessibility to property for all (unlike Europe) created capitalism from the start in colonial America and led to that devotion to work and wealth which has set the American experience poles apart from the Old World's, and the ancillary fact that the absence of a feudal class based on prescription encouraged that constant tinkering with political forms (some wise, some

foolish) that has given much of the fluidity and boldness to our community organization.

And what of the American Revolution and the American Constitution—the first two of a number of audacious decisions and therefore great turning points in the American experience? In the first, Americans challenged the British conception of empire; in the second, the resolution to build a nation in the face of the many existing divisive forces—class hostilities, local loyalties, wrong-headed fiscal policies—was taken by a handful of men. It is difficult for us to believe that Professor Boorstin's exposition is all we need to account for the joining of hands of George Washington, John Adams, and Samuel Adams, in the first instance; and of Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and Benjamin Franklin, in the second.

To questions of this sort Americans have the right to look for answers in their writers of history. Frederick Jackson Turner, Vernon L. Parrington, and Charles A. Beard—with whom Professor Boorstin is coupled by his publishers—both raised the questions and furnished the answers; our author, purposely or not, has by-passed both. He is sparkling, ingenious, and annoying; the result, my guess is, is that he will be read by specialists who will disagree with him in detail rather than by the generality whose conception of the American past will be shaped by him in the large.