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ART IN AMERICA

WE know of only one really good book about the civilization or culture of the United States, *The Roots of American Culture,* left incomplete by the author, Constance Rourke, who died prematurely, and which was finished by Van Wyck Brooks and published in 1942 by Harcourt, Brace. Brooks wrote in his Preface:

> Was it true, she asked herself, that we had failed to produce a culture in which the arts could flourish? If this was true, it was serious, it was ominous indeed, for no art had ever reached a point where it could speak a world-language without an inheritance of local expression behind it.

Being convinced that almost from the beginning America had had her arts, Constance Rourke set out to demonstrate this fact and gathered material to make three volumes, which came into Brooks's hands to edit and organize. After looking through her manuscript and notes, Brooks said:

> Constance Rourke shows how the fumblings of our nascent culture sprang from a life and experience that were peculiar to the country. There was no phase of American culture that she had not planned to include in this monumental survey, and it is more than regrettable that she was unable to finish the very ambitious task she had set for herself. . . . As they stand, these fragments, side by side with her other books, reveal the rich stores of tradition that lie behind us, the many streams of native character and feeling from which the Americans of the future will be able to draw.

She begins by quoting from several of the founding fathers, first of all Ben Franklin, who said that "To America, one schoolmaster is worth a dozen poets, and the invention of a machine or the improvement of an implement is of more importance than a masterpiece of Raphael." George Washington declared "that only arts of a practical character would for a time be esteemed," adding that it was easy to perceive the causes which have combined to render the genius of the country scientific rather than imaginative. John Adams regretted that he had not the time to cultivate the "elegant and ingenious arts of painting, sculpture, architecture, and music." A century later Mark Twain's Connecticut Yankee was made to remark: "I would not give sixpence for a picture of Raphael or a statue of Phidias," adding, "The age of painting has not yet arrived in this country and I hope it will not arrive very soon."

As for the founding fathers in general:

> No one of these statesmen expected the emergence of a professional class whose occupation was the arts. "We have no distinct class of literati in this country," wrote Jefferson to John Waldo in 1813. "Every man is engaged in some industrious pursuit." Twelve years later, almost at the end of his life, he wrote to a correspondent in England, "Literature is not yet a distinct profession with us. Now and then a strong mind arises, and at its intervals of leisure from business emits a flash of light. But the first object of young societies is bread and covering."

Yet the founders were far from indifferent to the practical arts, as distinct from the fine arts. Constance Rourke writes:

> As to the character of the practical arts, Jefferson offered certain broad suggestions when he explained the purposes he had kept in mind in writing that supreme example of practical letters, the Declaration of Independence. For one thing, such writings need not be original in thought or manner. Jefferson sought "not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent. . . . Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind." . . . The nub of the idea lay in the phrase *"common sense*," which Tom Paine had also employed with the same ample implications not only in the essay bearing that title but in all his revolutionary pamphleteering. Thus such practical

> letters might draw upon difficult or subtle literary sources but they must communicate common beliefs. Jefferson's stress upon the necessity for ready communication was strong.

In a summarizing passage, Constance Rourke says:

> The concern of Franklin, Washington, Jefferson and Adams with the arts as common utility provides a broad chart for an approach to American culture which by no means excludes the fine arts or the derivative forms of expression but which keeps the center of gravity within that social complex out of which the arts must spring. . . . The main values must remain human values. In segmented views of a culture the great human themes are sometimes forgotten: life, death, love, nature. What did our young nation do with them? In what sphere were its hopes, fears and aspirations most articulate?

Interestingly, the substance of drama came with our involvement in relationships with the Indians. Constance Rourke speaks of works which describe these relationships:

> In most of these works dramatic episodes were outlined in terms of character and dialogue with an interplay of action between the Indians and the whites. This relationship found its most complete expression in the Indian treaties, set down in amplitude as early as 1677. These treaties were essentially plays—chronicle plays—recording what was said in the parleys, including bits of action, the exchanges of gifts, of wampum, the smoking of pipes, the many ceremonials with dances, cries and choral songs. Even the printed form of the treaties was dramatic: the participants were listed like a cast of characters, and precise notations were made as to ceremonial action. Symbolic phrases were used to seal promises, even to raise questions. . . .
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> Indian speech was characteristically grave and rhythmic, but it attained a sharp and witty realism in the discussion of rum, trappers, traders and white trickery. The Indian style of address was generally accepted and used by the white men, even to the sly introduction of humor, and the Indians imposed their own rituals of procedure. . . .
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> Some fifty of these treaties are known to have been printed: their cycle has epic proportions as well as an epic theme. In the exact sense they are incomparable, nothing like them exists in our own literature or any other. Quite strictly they belong to practical letters; they were created for practical ends, yet these products of two races were poetry of a high order. In their own time they had a wide currency not only because of their political significance but for their rich episodes, their bold portraitures, their singular fragments of human history. . . . The treaties have never been included within the sequence of our drama, yet they are in truth our first American plays.

The first American drama on a native subject was *Ponteach,* by Robert Rogers—"a frontiersman, a great strapping giant with a bold humor, a genius for organization and a dream of empire." According to Constance Rourke he was also "an unscrupulous Indian trader, a merciless destroyer of Indians." He seems to have set down episodes from his own ruthless career, in which all the whites, "lie, cheat, fill the Indians with cheap rum, and are so short-sighted, so greedily concerned with the wealth of the forest—fur—that they plunge themselves as well as the Indians into disaster."

> Ponteach, on the other hand, is a noble figure: he was the Ottawa chief who figured largely in the French and Indian War. Rogers had known Ponteach at Detroit when he led his rangers there at the end of the campaign, and, though the nobility of the chief's character has been questioned by a few contemporary historians, on the whole the portrait in the play has been accepted pretty much as Rogers drew it. Parkman and others have followed its outline.

The first American composer of note was William Billings, an artisan of Boston, "a tanner who used to chalk out tunes on the hides hanging in his shop." He was a friend of Samuel Adams. He was a "picturesque yet not attractive figure, blind in one eye, with a withered arm, legs of uneven length and a loud voice which he insisted must be heard."

> Before he was twenty-five he had given up tanning for music and become the first American composer—so far as we now know—to make music his profession. If he died in poverty, he had obtained abundant recognition. The immediate acceptance of his *New England Psalm Singer,* published in 1770, was followed by a warm recognition of his later books. His innovations were widely accepted. If they were also disparaged and even fought, the ensuing warfare only proved their vitality. . . .

> Billings, as we have seen, was a tanner. Oliver Holden of Charlestown, whose *American Harmony* was published in 1792, followed the trade of carpenter until he became a teacher of singing schools. . . . Social singing became a fever, a passion: the schools burgeoned in towns and hamlets and country places. Jacob Kimball deserted the legal profession to become a teacher and composer, lured perhaps by the considerable sale of the song-books as well as a liking for the life. He died in the almshouse, as a consequence, one must suppose, but not before he had compiled a *Rural Harmony,* particularly intended for country folk.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a time of the heroic formation of communities, and while they were religious rather than artistic in their inspiration, new forms sometimes resulted from their work. Constance Rourke selects the Shakers as an example.

> Of all these communal organizations, those of the Shakers were among the earliest. They became the most widely spread, they established the most richly integrated culture, and they were the most enduring. In spite of poverty and persecution, they founded some twelve communities in the five years between 1787 and 1792, at New Lebanon, Watervliet and Groveland in New York, Hancock, Tyringham, and Enfield in Connecticut, Harvard and Shirley in Massachusetts, Canterbury and Enfield in New Hampshire, Alfred and New Gloucester in Maine. Some thirteen years later, the foundation of Shaker colonies in Kentucky and Ohio began, with a wider geographic spread and the beginnings of prosperity. Yet in 1780 the original band under Ann Lee had numbered only twelve. Because of their practice of celibacy, they seemed, of all these communities, the least likely to survive, yet their numbers steadily increased, with strong additions as whole families fulfilled the rigorous requirements exacted by the sect and young people learned and furthered its beliefs and traditions.

After a long description of their beliefs, which is intensely interesting, Constance Rourke turns to their handicraft:

> The stripping of the objects made—furniture, weaving, and the like—to what was demanded by mere use was later followed with closer exactions. Rejection of all ornament quickly became part of the Shaker philosophy, complementing the stress on use, not only use in the crude sense but adaptations for use: there was nothing set or fixed in the Shaker development of the crafts, . . . the Shakers set up trades, harness-making, weaving, chair-making. The industrial unit was the "family," which might embrace a number of natural families. From the first, the chair-making was notable, At Watervliet, chairs were said to have been made for sale as early as 1776, and the Shakers later claimed to have been the first to engage in the business. Certainly they were among the first to initiate what may be called mass-production, although it was their craftsmanship that was to make them famous. Part of this was no doubt derived from honest traditions in furniture-making that were long since established in New England, but the Shaker way of life heightened certain of their inherent qualities. . . .

> Whatever the Shakers turned their hands to seemed to be accomplished not only well but with a final perfection of workmanship. Their seeds were put up in simple but exquisitely designed and printed packages. Their aptitude for the handicrafts appeared in many details, in finely woven braids for upholstery and beautifully finished woodwork for their buildings. . . . What they achieved within a remarkably short time was not only prosperity or even a sufficient abundance. It was something that may be described as creative fluency. Their favorite balances were achieved: agriculture was offset by mechanics, the finer handicrafts by blacksmithing, the making of hoes and small tools—the Shakers were among the first to manufacture cut nails—as well as the making of bricks and shingles. All were willing to undertake common tasks, and a measure of rotation seemed to make possible the full use of Shaker gifts.

In a chapter devoted to the expression of Black people, Constance Rourke says:

> Even the Uncle Remus stories and the spirituals collected soon after the Civil War belong to the nearer foreground of time. Records of travels in America of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century are full of small references to Negro music. Negro rowing-songs rose like barbaric chants along the Ohio and the Mississippi and were remembered by travelers on their way into the farther West. A Western poet declared that Negro songs celebrating the vicissitudes of river navigation and the excitements of the coon hunt were among the earliest original verses of the West. These rudimentary pieces have been lost for the most part: but up and down the country the Negro was soon drawn on the stage in a series of sketches which attempted a close-portraiture. These were boldly continued in the early thirties by

Jim Crow Rice, who was white. His songs, dances, and lingo followed those of Negroes on the plantations and rivers of the Southwest. A few years later, in 1842, blackface minstrelsy took up the strain.

Describing minstrelsy, Constance Rourke says:

The climax of the minstrel performance, the walkaround, with its competitive dancing in the mazes of a circle, was patterned after Negro dances in the compounds of the great plantations. Often the walkarounds were composed only of bold pantomime and matched dancing, accompanied by strident cries and the simplest binding of words, which gained color from slave life. Plantation cries, wailing cries, stirring shouts with a tonic beat ran through all early minstrelsy. With these came the color of a regional life. "Sugar in de gourd" and "honey in de horn" were heard in minstrel songs as well as in southwestern talk. . . .

Early blackface minstrelsy revealed indeed the natural appropriations of the Negro from the life about him: but the persistent stress was primitive, the effect exotic and strange with the straying figures and black faces of the minstrels lighted by "uttering gas flames or candlelight on small country stages or even in the larger theaters. . . . The note of triumph, dominant in all early American humor, appeared in these reflected creations of the Negro, but not as triumph over circumstance. Rather this was an unreasonable headlong triumph launching into the realm of the preposterous. It could be heard in the careless phrasing of the songs, in the swift pulsations of their rhythms. Yet defeat was also clear. Slavery was constantly imaged in brief phrases or in simple situations. . . . Primitive elements survived in blackface minstrelsy long after its outlines had been stylized in the seventies and eighties, and the minstrel show had become a medley of Irish and German songs and even of Jewish impersonations. . . .

Tilts took place between genteel critics and a few lawless spirits who saw in the minstrel songs a new and original art. The songs were welcomed abroad. Whitman found in the Negro dialect hints of "a modification of all the words of the English language, for musical purposes, for a native grand opera in America.". . . On the whole the Negro tradition has been no more unfortunate than many other popular American strains; a great bulk of our native lore has been lost, and much is still to be recovered. With the full assembling of the Negro tradition a gauge might be provided against false exploitation, and the finer productions of the present days might take on unexaggerated values. Regarded as the outcome of a slowly established lore, a swift or sudden development would not be expected either from the Negro or from those white artists preoccupied with Negro themes who have had so many homely predecessors. It might be easier to remember that the progress of all literatures has been that of a gradual enrichment.

It is evident to the reader by now that the arts, for Constance Rourke, are a natural and spontaneous expression of human beings. They blossom out of doing things well, as with the Shakers, so that we now may recognize a great deal of common sense in the views of our founding fathers.

It becomes reasonable, then, to say that a renewal of the arts comes about when artists, feeling an emptiness in the forms called "art" in their time, return to the crafts for fresh inspiration. The last sentence in Constance Rourke's book is this: "Perhaps the American artist cannot now assume those simple and intuitive attitudes which the artist always wants—which most of us want—but he may consciously work toward a discovery of our traditions, attempt to use them, and eventually take his inevitable place."

Finally, it seems well to remember here that the archaic Greeks had no word into which we can translate either "art" or "artist." This is pointed out by Eric Havelock in a long note in his *Preface to Plato* (Harvard University Press). The closest we can come to the modern meaning of these words is skill in the performance of action, leaving out the sense we assign to "aesthetics." Havelock says: "The possibility of a notion of aesthetic, as a distinct discipline, first dawns with Aristotle." Art, then, as Constance Rourke conceives it, might be likened to the attitude of the archaic Greeks, which seems an altogether healthful tendency.

REVIEW
THE LAND REPORT

THE *Land Report* is published three times a year by the Land Institute in Salina, Kansas, to place on record the research of the interns who take part in the work of the Institute and to explain its general purposes. We have at hand the Fall 1987 issue, devoted to the meaning of sustainable agriculture, and intended to show that the attitude toward the land developed by the Land Institute should in time become the attitude of people generally. For this reason we make the Fall 1987 *Land Report* the subject of our review. The Land Institute investigates the possibility of perennial prairie grass plants as potential human food crops, maintaining that such crops would in time save our fast disappearing soil because the root system of perennials keeps the soil from washing away. The fundamental point of the research at the Land Institute is that the soil is the foundation of all civilization, and that care of the soil is the basis of future life for mankind.

In a study of eastern gamagrass by Patricia Boehner, the writer says:

> As a food source, the nutritional value of gamagrass grain is impressive. The protein content of the grain is 27% while that of wheat and corn is about 17 and 10%, respectively. Gamagrass grain also has twice as much of the amino acid methionine as corn and is about 51% carbohydrate, Gamagrass is readily digestible and, in addition, tastes good. It has a distinctive corn-nutty flavor when popped or ground into flour.
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> While the quality and quantity of gamagrass grain is respectable, there are other attributes of this species that make it particularly suitable for a perennial polyculture. As a perennial, the below-ground rhizomes and associated propagules allow gamagrass to survive the winter and begin growth again in the spring. As a grass species, gamagrass would be intercropped with a legume and/or composite species in the attempt to resemble the prairie's balance of species. Grass species in a polyculture are important because of their extensive root system and leafy canopy. Both aid in deterring soil erosion and compaction, and, once established, perennial grass species are effective in keeping many weeds out by reducing the light and nutrients available to other species. . . .
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> The Land's gamagrass research program began about ten years ago with Marty Bender and Jim Peterson. . . . In addition to the research done by The Land and affiliate groups and individuals, gamagrass has been extensively studied from its genetic make-up to its ecological status. This wealth of information, along with many attributes of gamagrass which make it extremely responsive to selective breeding, will greatly aid in the development of this species towards a food crop.
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> We need to study gamagrass more to find out which of its characteristics will match those needed in a sustainable agriculture. We are fortunate that many other researchers are looking at eastern gamagrass as a species of great potential. We are also fortunate that nature has worked out many of the difficulties in maintaining a healthy plant population, and we need only try and copy nature's "techniques." With these combined efforts, gamagrass is well under way in becoming an important member of The Land Institute's collection of potential grain crops.

In another article in the Fall *Land Report,* Roger Lebovitz writes on "The Prairie: a Model and Metaphor for Sustainable Agriculture." He begins by saying:

> The prairie takes the part as a living symbol of ecological integrity to which, as a standard, the faults of ten thousand years of farming (epitomized in the inadequacies of present practices) may be held up. The prairie runs on sunshine and accumulates soil; the local wheat and sorghum fields are dependent on fossil fuels and are losing soil. This stark contrast exposes much of the reason for our use of the prairie as a standard for agricultural sustainability. . . .
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> One relevant definition of a "model" is a pattern from which something is to be made. We think the prairie is a pattern from which a sustainable agriculture can be made. This pattern is ultimately the ecological principles (tight nutrient cycles, for example) that are unaltered by episodes of disturbance. The use of these principles as a model for sustainable farming (the use of the prairie) is therefore still valid when we consider the vegetational history. . . . As a metaphor, the prairie is essentially a living vision of the characteristics of sustainability. Running on sunshine, retaining its soil, accumulating ecological capital, it is a stark contrast with the crop

fields plowed from it. Knowledge of the prairie's vegetational history extends the metaphor backwards in time.

Aided by the more thorough "sense of place" which we can gain from studying vegetational history, we can proceed in our efforts to develop a sustainable agriculture modeled after the prairie.

The question, "In Farming, Bigger Is Better—or Is it?" is examined by Jess Ennis. He begins:

Kansas is America's—no, the world's—breadbasket. It harvests more wheat and it mills more flour than any other state and plenty of other countries. And no other state in the U.S. raises or slaughters more cattle or produces more red meat than Kansas does, nor does any state produce more sorghum grain or silage (both used to feed livestock). Just drive from one end of the state to the other along Interstate-70 and see for yourself. Kansas is vast expanses of pasture and more cattle than people; enormous acreages of green, and later, golden wheatfields and tremendous combines that can harvest an acre in a few minutes; rust-colored sorghum fields; and tall white grain elevators that pierce the treeless horizon miles ahead and announce the location of almost every town and city. . . .

Farms in Kansas, as in the rest of the U.S., have been growing larger, and farmers fewer. In 1925 there were about 167,000 farms in Kansas with an average size of 264 acres. By 1986 there were about 70,000 farms in the state with an average size of 684 acres. So of course the average total production on each remaining farm has increased, especially since farmers have at the same time managed to coax higher crop yields per acre of land by using chemical fertilizers and pesticides and genetically altered seed. Thus, each remaining farmer, on the average, feeds more people. But is this "progress"? Is bigger really better?

Skipping to a later period, we find Jess Ennis saying:

During this boom period of the 1970s and early 1980s American agriculture rode on a crest of prosperity. Many reasoned that with the world's population ever increasing, world demand for American farm commodities could only continue to grow. With such a bright future apparently ahead, many farmers borrowed heavily at high interest rates against their then highly valued land and greatly expanded their operations, buying more land and larger machinery.

But then what happened? Other countries which had bought much wheat from us began to grow more for themselves. A world recession led to diminished capacity on the part of many countries to purchase food from us.

Several large importers of U.S. farm products began to suffer severe debt problems. Mexico nearly went bankrupt in 1982 and now owes over $100 billion. Brazil's debt is slightly larger than Mexico's. Peru announced in 1986 that it would no longer keep up with its debt payments. . . .

Many competing exporters increased their production, and their governments often subsidized wheat exports. Just as U.S. wheat farmers increased their production dramatically, so did Argentine, Australian, Canadian, and European farmers. . . . In a matter of five years, then, U.S. wheat exports dropped by almost half, from about 1,611 million bushels to about 884 million. The cash value of wheat exports dropped even more precipitously because of a drastic decline in the world price. U.S. receipts from exporting wheat fell from $7.8 billion to $2.9 billion.

Again we skip, more or less to the present.

That large-scale production, because it depends upon heavy mechanization, specialized cropping, chemical fertilization, chemical pest-control, and petroleum, imposes other costs which the farmer himself bears only partially or not at all. Nitrates from chemical fertilizers and confined livestock feeding operations run into rivers and leach into groundwater. So do certain agricultural pesticides. In Kansas, where underground sources contribute 85% of the water used in the state, agricultural chemicals often contaminate groundwater. No one knows for sure what levels of contamination are "safe" for drinking. The longterm health effects are especially elusive to measure. . . .

According to a recent *New York Times* article, "hundreds of farm families in Kansas, and thousands of others scattered across the Midwest . . . are grimly holding off bankers and creditors, and hanging on to their farm by doing without basic needs, including food." The same article quoted a rural food pantry coordinator as saying that farm children are showing signs of malnutrition, such as abscessed baby teeth and goiters. One Kansas farmer may be feeding "75

people plus you," but apparently not always himself or his family.

In his conclusion Jess Ennis says:

> The culprit in the whole calamity of American agriculture is our obsessive belief that bigger is better. First we must recognize that it is not, that we pay dearly for bigness. Then, just as we have actively promoted specialized, large-scale farming, we must, for the sake of the economic and environmental well-being of our agriculture, actively promote diversified, smaller-scale farming.

Dana Jackson is the editor of *Land Report* and in her editorial she reports that today there are "sustainable agriculture courses or programs of some kind at seventeen land grant institutions now." Then, commenting, she says:

> The movement for sustainable agriculture education and research did not begin within the state supported land grant universities. It began on the fringes, mostly in small alternative schools, in public interest organizations. . . . Most of the students who have become Land Institute interns were introduced to the idea of sustainable agriculture through liberal arts programs, not colleges of agriculture, in courses as diverse as geography, environmental studies, biology, religion, geology and political science. . . . With all this in mind, there is still an important role for those on the fringe to play as the land grant schools begin to pull sustainable agriculture into the mainstream. The critique of industrial agriculture must continue, and the public discussion of ecological agricultural practices be increased. We must critically explore the meaning of sustainability and not allow jargon to replace substance in the courses and programs offered by our tax-supported institutions.

Here the *Land Report* speaks with the authority of people who have probably done more than anyone else to give sustainable agriculture a central focus in our lives.

COMMENTARY
"SOMETHING TO GIVE"

PEOPLE who drink alcoholic beverages and enjoy the effect probably will not be interested in reading *AA—The Story,* an account of the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous, put together by Ernest Kurtz (and published by Harper/Hazeldon, $16.95), while non-drinkers are likely to be thrilled by the book and hope that some of their friends will absorb its contents.

Regardless of theory, the fact is that the A.A. program has saved many human beings from losing the battle with alcohol addiction. While alcoholism is no longer regarded as "a disease," as Herbert Fingarette has pointed out in his recent book, *Heavy Drinking,* "graduate AA's" regard themselves as recovered but still vulnerable victims of a disease. Fingarette is almost certainly right, yet one might hesitate to recommend his book to a reader who has joined A.A. as a last resort to stop drinking.

Kurtz begins his tale with a conversation between two men in 1934. They were going to have some drinks together, yet one of them declined, saying, "I don't need it anymore: I've got religion." The host, who was Bill Wilson, wondered about his friend: "Had his alcoholic insanity become religious insanity?" But his friend started drinking again, and died "three alcohol-sodden decades later," yet Wilson, after one last binge, would never drink another drop.

There were other lines of influence which shaped the thinking of A.A. members. One of them traces back to Carl Jung, who finally told an alcoholic patient that his was a hopeless case so far as medicine or psychiatry was concerned. He also said that "a genuine conversion," a religious experience, would sometimes bring recovery to alcoholics, but such cases were "comparatively rare."

Wilson was deeply suspicious of the "religious experience" idea, yet he encountered others who had stopped drinking by this means. And he found hope in reading Wiliam James's *Varieties of Religious Experience.* He finally reached the conclusion that the solution lay in "one alcoholic talking to another alcoholic." Wilson wrote:

> My thoughts began to race as I envisioned a chain reaction among alcoholics, one carrying this message and these principles to the next. More than I could ever want anything else, I now knew that I wanted to work with other alcoholics.

As Kurtz puts it: "Until Wilson arrived at the explicit realization that whether or not he wanted to, he *needed* to work with other alcoholics to maintain his own sobriety, Alcoholics Anonymous was yet only coming into being. Two intermingled themes brought Bill Wilson to the verge of the ultimate, recognized founding moment: the hopelessness of the condition of the alcoholic, and the necessity of an experience of conversion."

There are other materials which add to the picture of A.A.'s beginning. All of these materials are important. The heart of the matter is well said by Bill Wilson: "I still need others, but *now* I need them because I have something to give. Precisely *because* I accept my alcoholism, my weakness, my limitation."

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
REPORTS BY PARENTS

A MOTHER in Pennsylvania tells about her inward thoughts and problems as *a* home-schooling parent in *Growing Without Schooling* No. 59:

> As I write up my final brief collection of the year's accomplishments to send to our school district, I find that I am feeling basically good about what went on in our household this year, and I am trying to get a firmer grasp on why I feel this way so that it may help me in those moments of exhaustion or paranoia when everything about homeschooling looks particularly bleak and burdensome.
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> I think evaluation—that word that smacks of tests and grades and destruction of self-esteem—is still an important issue in homeschooling. We have rejected so many of the standard, easy ways of measuring how the children are doing, that can indeed damage self-esteem and detract from the learning process itself, but we still need to be able to look back and feel satisfied with what is going on. And I'm not so much talking about ways to convince a school district that a particular homeschooling program should be approved but ways that parents can tell that things are going basically O.K. . . .
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> Even though I have been convinced by argument and experience that the tests are unreliable and don't test the really important things, I still breathe a sigh of relief when our children test well. But if I am to resist the easy enticements of the standardized tests, I need something with which to replace them. . . .
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> I think I felt genuinely good about this year because I got a clearer idea of our own goals as a family learning together. I saw real growth this year in terms of these goals. Tom and I want our children to be self-directed learners and saw them solving problems creatively and making decisions for themselves based on careful consideration as well as feeling a sense of joy in discoveries they were making. We also want them to have those "basic" skills to be able to negotiate their way in the society we now find ourselves in, and I saw progress in this area: Clare (8), for example, has gone from reading a limited number of words, and only when Tom and I suggested that she read aloud, to bringing home great piles of easy readers from the library and eagerly reading them all herself. She is even taking some tentative steps into the formidable wilderness of books with more print and fewer pictures. If I compared her with her age-mates, I might be somewhat discouraged, but a comparison against herself—what she could do last year or even last month—shows phenomenal progress.

There was an interesting interchange with her older girl:

> I had a significant conversation with Emily (14) one day last spring. Our congressman was sponsoring an essay contest that Emily had been very interested in entering. The deadline was approaching and I thought she might have forgotten about it. I mentioned it to her and she replied somewhat impatiently that she didn't want to talk about it. I asked her if this meant either she didn't want to enter it any more or she didn't want me to remind her, and she quietly replied, "No. It means I'm going to have a tough time starting out and I need you to push me to do it." This is my least favorite role, but it was a genuine request for help, so we decided on a day she would begin, and on that afternoon I plumped up my patience, handed her pencil and paper, said, "Begin," and then accepted no more excuses for delay. I was also willing to sit and let her bounce her ideas off me until she found a focus she was comfortable with. (She did, by the way, win the contest and will spend a week on Capitol Hill as a prize—a surprise happy ending!)

Another (Maine) mother relates:

> Whenever my son wonders aloud to me why he is learning something, I take advantage of his very human desire to have things go quickly and easily. One day we were struggling with multiplication and he asked me why he had to memorize tables. I had him add 2+2+2+2+2+2. Then I had him tell me 2 x 6, which he had already memorized. He saw instantly how much faster was the memorized fact than the work of adding over and over. That's the essence of multiplication—it's faster than adding. What greater reward for learning multiplication? "If you know *this,* then you can do that easier." And that's the essence of learning; the intrinsic reward is enough.

In another part of *GWS*, the editor, Susannah Sheffer, asked Norman Henchey, professor of administration at McGill University, to summarize what he had said in an article about compulsory schooling. He replied:

> I said that the origins of compulsory schooling were basically to protect children from abuse—the abuse of ignorance, the abuse of vice—and that as time went on this became extended so that schooling became not only a service being offered, but, increasingly, the major route available for learning, and then, ultimately, the only legitimate route, for most people. The consequence of this was that governments became more involved—the whole thing became modeled on the industrial method of offering services.
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> The question becomes, now, should we not rethink the whole notion? I see a couple of problems with compulsory schooling. First, it seems to me that we have slammed the doors on all the alternative routes to adulthood other than the secondary school. People who don't find themselves comfortable with that particular approach to growing up are dropouts, people for whom special programs are designed to help them come back in—but the whole notion is that there's something wrong with them. I think that many of the reports from your country and mine [Canada] about what's wrong with secondary education have not paid sufficient attention to this. It's not only a matter of improving the schools, it's a matter of providing a number of other routes to adulthood. There used to be apprenticeship programs, formal and informal learning services, opportunities to do public service other than the army—a whole variety of things might be presented to young people.

"What's your feeling," Susannah Sheffer asked him, "about why there's so often resistance to the proposal that we loosen compulsory school requirements?" Norman Henchey replied:

> In Quebec the requirement is very recent—it goes back only to 1943—and it came after a very long debate, interestingly enough, about the degree to which the state has the right to interfere with the rights of parents. The argument was that schooling, while it was a good and valuable thing, was not something that you should require. I think that here the attitude now is that we simply assume institutional treatment for anything that's wrong. Schooling has become a convenience, like day care, and the demand has increased down to the preschool.

Asked about whether compulsory schooling leads to a classless society, the Canadian said:

> The evidence is that what the hidden curriculum does, through a variety of mechanisms, is to simply re-sort the classes. Sometimes it does allow people to move from one class to another, if they're talented, or their parents are shrewd, or they happen to live in the right place. But in terms of the general structure, I think it simply rearranges classes. I argue, for instance, the main function of Latin, traditionally, was to sort students. Then Latin went into a decline and we began to use mathematics to sort students. In Canada, increasingly, it's the French Immersion program. The problem I have with all this is that, as I see it, the school has the monopoly on learning. . . . When Ivan Illich came out with his book *Deschooling Society,* one of the criticisms of it was that even if his ideas were to be implemented, the rich would still be able to take care of themselves while the poor would be illiterate. That's based of course on the assumption that people who don't go to school are going to be illiterate.
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> What I'm advocating is the opening up of a series of alternatives for people. There's a whole set of services that are available—health services, cultural services—but we don't drag people screaming for ten years into a museum to make them cultured. . . One could imagine, first of all, public schools offering a variety of learning services, some of which would be in the model of the traditional school, some of which would be more like a free school, some of which would be work-study, or tutorial programs.

What seems evident is that, sooner or later, those who are exposed to conventional education are going to have to decide for themselves what they want or need in the way of education. The schools of the country will not provide a student with education any more than the ocean will teach a would-be swimmer how to swim. He has to get into the water himself and learn the strokes, and then he can begin to make choices.

At some point in school teachers should begin to point this out. Children who grow up being taught by their parents at home have already learned self-reliance. They have become self-starters and will not need this warning.

FRONTIERS

The First Casualty in War

A THOUGHTFUL Canadian reader has sent us a page from the *Calgary Herald* (November 11, 1987) in which an English professor at British Columbia's Simon Fraser University, Peter Buitenhuis, relates how he came across the tendency of British and American writers to become propagandists who distorted the facts of World War One. Buitenhuis has written a book about his discovery, *The Great War of Words.* He was, he relates, shocked to find among the papers of Henry James "a collection of propaganda pamphlets he wrote for the Allied cause during the Great War." According to the reviewer in the *Calgary Herald,* John Ferri:

> *The Great War of Words* is the account of how the pre-eminent figures of English literature at the time—H. G. Wells, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling, G. K. Chesterton and many others—were secretly commissioned by the British government at the outbreak of war to write propaganda. They were joined by Canadians like the romantic novelist Sir Gilbert Parker, who was put in charge of distributing propaganda material to the United States and Sir Max Aitken (later Lord Beaverbrook), who became head of Britain's ministry of information. Their efforts—a flood of books, pamphlets, newspaper columns and letters—were to seem to the public a spontaneous outpouring of patriotic sentiment.

Much of the substance of the propaganda was based on "the findings of a British government report on alleged German atrocities during the invasion of Belgium in 1914."

> Led by Lord Bryce, a noted historian, author, former ambassador to the United States and a "man of impeccable credentials," the report found that the invading Germans had been guilty of unspeakable atrocities; "mass rapes, the splitting of babies on bayonets, the cutting off of children's hands and women's breasts, hostage murders, Germans excreting on private possessions. . . ."
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> Buitenhuis says the Bryce report had a "powerful influence" on American public opinion. (The United States did not enter the war until April, 1917.)
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> "And yet the report, as is now generally acknowledged, was largely a tissue of invention, unsubstantiated observations by unnamed witnesses, and second-hand eyewitness reports, depending far more on imagination than any other factor. The witnesses were not put on oath, nor were they cross-examined. There was no attempt at scholarly investigation and evaluation of this evidence. Most significant of all the documents and testimony of the witnesses disappeared from British records at the end of the war, so it has been impossible to make a subsequent check of the evidence."

Never before, Buitenhuis says, had a country's leading writers so willingly done the bidding of politicians. There were, however, a few exceptions, among them Bertrand Russell and Bernard Shaw.

> In disgust, Russell proclaimed that "allegiance to country has swept away allegiance to truth." Shaw launched a vicious assault, arguing that Britain had missed opportunities to prevent the war and insinuating that British officers were no different than the German military caste. In his most famous remark, Shaw urged soldiers at the front on both sides to shoot their officers and go home.

Ferri offers some generalizations:

> The average Englishman had been accepting all his life that if something was printed in the newspapers, then it was true. Now, in the biggest event of his life, he was able to check what the press said against what he knew to be the truth. He felt he had found the press out, and as a result he lost confidence in his newspapers, a confidence to this day never entirely recovered. . . .

Ernest Hemingway's judgment of the propagandists was searching and angry. He said in *Men at War:*

> "The last war, during the years 1915, 1916, 1917, was the most colossal murderous, mismanaged butchery that has ever taken place on earth. Any writer who said otherwise lied. So the writers either wrote propaganda, shut up or fought."

Buitenhuis suggests that the war was lengthened by the propagandists. By making defeats sound like glorious victories, "they perpetuated the careers of incompetent senior officers."

> In addition, by stirring blood hate, they made a negotiated peace unlikely and contributed to the impossible terms imposed on the German people at the end of the war. These, in turn, led eventually to the rise of Adolf Hitler.

There was a further consequence of the propaganda:

> University of Toronto historian Desmond Morton says the British people, remembering the official lies of the previous war, were unwilling to believe the true atrocity stories of the Second World War. "People wouldn't believe that Germans put prisoners in barns and shot them all. They thought: "that's just the Bryce commission."

Except for the few dissenters named, the writers of the time of World War One all fell in line. John Ferri says:

> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes wrote one of the earliest pamphlets, *To Arms,* which extolled the virtues of dying for God and Country. Other nations may question the war, "but fear not, for our sword will not be broken, nor shall it ever drop from our hands until this matter is for ever in order.". . .
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> In another pamphlet that same year, the Oxford scholar and poet Gilbert Murray wrote: "When I see that 20,000 Germans have been killed in such-and-such engagement, and the next day that it was only 2,000, I am sorry."
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> Early in the war, many of the propagandists did not really know the truth of the immense slaughter in Europe. But even those who travelled to the front willingly suppressed information about the horrors they found. . . . As the war ground on, the propagandists characterized as victorious or glorious scraps what they knew to be horrible, useless slaughters, like the Battle of Loos and the botched Battle of the Somme.

It is gradually becoming evident that so long as we have war we shall have liars about war. It was Senator Hiram Johnson who said in 1917, "The first casualty when war comes is truth." If that is so, if we decide to fight, it will be for lies. That seems a good enough reason for not fighting.