

THE CIVILIZATION OF THE UNITED STATES

AT Belshazzar's feast 'there came forth fingers as of a man's hand, writing' The last volume of Charles and Mary Beard's enormous work¹ is scarcely as epigrammatic as the 'Mane, Thecel, Phares' of the Book of Daniel; indeed, each of the three volumes contains more than eight hundred pages; but the writing on the wall can clearly be discerned in the vast accumulation of the authors' erudition.

With patience, unending research, fine organization of material, real eloquence, detachment, culture and an occasional pleasant acerbity, the two authors have traced the cultural history of the United States from before the landing of the Pilgrim Fathers until the day before yesterday. Their first volume covers the whole period from Elizabethan days until the eve of the Civil War; the second from 1860 until the Harding Administration; the third extends to the winter of 1938. Somewhat mysteriously entitled 'America in Midpassage,' this last volume was published in the Autumn of 1939, near the beginning of this latest war.

The date of publication was, then, timely, for controversy is now raging, in the United States at least, on the respective and perhaps clashing claims of civilization and war. A Catholic Senator was quoted in the columns of the *Tablet*, a month or two ago, as saying that he was in favour of England and France taking up arms against Nazism, but that he himself was returning to the States in order to do all in his power to keep them out of the war. Why? Because, he said, he hoped in that way to preserve what would be the last refuge of civilization. It is fortunate that we should have the opportunity in these three volumes, and especially in the last of them, so generous and

¹ *The Rise of American Civilization*. 2 Vols. By Charles and Mary Beard. *America in Mid-passage*. By the same authors.

objective a presentation of the civilization which the Senator is anxious to preserve.

It is, indeed, a magnificent picture which the two authors delineate. The scale of their volumes is only commensurate with the vast sweep of their material, the continental outlines of their subject. One reads of the four enormous regions successively acquired by the white man, the Eastern Seaboard, the overflowing into the Mississippi Basin, the march over the prairie lands to the Rockies, and the final spill-over on to the Pacific coast beyond. One reads of the huge accumulations of populations and wealth; the range of achievement in science, learning and organization; the variety of the physical scene between Southern California and Maine; and the long epic of the human polity, the great names of Americanism, Washington, Hamilton, Lincoln, Lee and Roosevelt. One cannot but admire the picture of so vast a section of the human race in so ornate and admirable a frame.

What is American civilization? The authors themselves, in their first volume, ask the question and defer the answer. In their third volume they make a statistical statement which is, perhaps, relevant to the question. In 1925, in a population of 25 million families, there were to be found 25 million automobiles, 15 million telephones, 3 million radio sets, and a sale of 25 million cinema tickets *per diem*. In 1918 there were 42,000 persons with incomes of over 30,000 dollars a year; and in 1924 one out of every seven marriages ended in a divorce. The suggestion is unavoidable that, whatever the aim of American culture may have been, its most outstanding achievement is a material one; and there is more than a suggestion that the material advance has been offset by a recession in morals.

The sources of this development may be found in the very inception of the movement for American Independence. The revolution was not only against George III; it was a Declaration of Independence of a theological domination as well. The Puritan clergy had established something like a theocratic ascendancy in several of the States; and Benjamin Franklin was as much in revolt against Bit-

ton Mather and Jonathan Edwards as was George Washington against Lord North. Many of the Fathers of the Constitution were, if not atheists, at least strongly antinomian in religion, and, leaving their imprint upon that Instrument, the element of pragmatic agnosticism seems to have become formal in the whole build-up of American culture. Strong though the Puritan influence still is, material progress in the achievement of human comfort must be adjudged the key-note of the American effort. How far the process of secularization has gone might be adduced from the description of the Genesis narrative by Mr. and Mrs. Beard, as the 'simple epic made immortal by *Milton*.' The same kind of religious colour-blindness makes them, in their frequently illuminating parallels between the American and Roman civilizations, oblivious to the fact that the Church, and with the Church culture, survived the collapse of the Roman political domination in the West. So, too, after a passage in which they denounce the effect of sex-films upon the young, they choose to associate the protests of the Catholic Church in this matter with Totalitarian interference over political films, rather than with their own moral indignation. The trouble is that, like so many people, they associate the Catholic Church with authority rather than with morality, and the whole question of authority looms, bulky and distressingly vague, through all the nine hundred pages of their latest volume.

Democracy: it is a distracting problem. The American would perhaps adduce the democratic spirit as the non-material element which justifies his culture. Yet the Fathers of the Constitution regarded the idea with horror, and the most complete manhood-suffrage has not effectively achieved it. Autocracy is easy to define in a real way; democracy is not easy to define, even nominally. 'Maybe,' the authors quote Mr. Archibald MacLeish as saying,

'Maybe God Almighty wrote it out;
We could shoot our mouths off where we pleased and
with what and no Thank yous.
But try it at River Rouge with the Ford militia.
Try it if Mr. Ford's opinions are otherwise.
Try it and see where you land with your back broken.'

But yet Mr. MacLeish *can* still 'shoot off his mouth,' while the Ford operative cannot. Where do we draw the line? Where should authority step in? Mr. MacLeish is clearly talking about economic problems. The fog of war is temporarily obscuring for Englishmen the writing on the wall, but it is still obvious to the eyes of Americans. An enormous economic machine has grown up, and it is now too elaborate to be comprehended or controlled; what is worse, it only operates with the most disastrous consequences. Is it democracy which allowed the Vanderbilts, Mellons and Rockefellers to build up this machine? Is it democracy when the all-embracing legislation of the New Deal attempts to stem the disasters wrought by the Lords of Creation? Is it democracy when England and France acquire War Cabinets with almost dictatorial powers in order to protect free nations from the invasions of Hitlerism? Is democracy more than a kind of temper in politics deriving from a moral outlook based upon religion? 'A free, virtuous and enlightened people,' said President Monroe, 'must know well the principles and causes on which their happiness depends.'

'By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept.' England and France have, for twenty years, sought the same material standard of culture as the United States. They have clung, for perhaps too long, to peace in the name of comfort. They are now fighting under, and for, another standard. 'War,' said President Cleveland in 1895, 'is better than a supine submission to wrong and injustice and the consequent loss of national self-respect and honour.' We have flung aside the life of comfort for something which, we hope, will be worthy of the name of liberty. Gainful motives, political unwisdom, have been alleged against us for resorting to war; but, in truth, there comes a time when a shot must be fired in the streets of Concord. 'Familiarize yourselves,' said Lincoln after the Dred Scott decision, 'with the chains of bondage, and you prepare your own limbs to wear them.' The Polish Guarantee was our Boston Tea-Party in this new war of Independence, and we like to think that it is from the free temper of the Western Frontier that we have learned to take our desti-

nies in our hands again. Whatever may be the cruelties and inequalities of the economic scene, the social influence of American egalitarianism has been enormous and beneficial for humanity, and we may indeed hope that, the United States being spared the miseries and restrictions of this struggle, future generations may continue to see the Statue of Liberty rising above the waters of Babylon.

P. URBAN FOSTER, O.P.