

Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind* (1950)

Over a period of two and half centuries, marked by such adventures as few other people had known, Americans had created an American character and formulated an American philosophy. That character all but eludes description and that philosophy definition, yet both were unmistakable. Certainly the hundreds of foreign visitors who swarmed over America and embarked so glibly upon interpretation had no difficulty in distinguishing American from Old World character, and, though the details which they recorded changed from decade to decade, the basic pattern which they celebrated or deprecated persisted. To Crèvecoeur's famous question, "What then is the American?," Crèvecoeur himself, Tocqueville, and Bryce, each separated by half a century, returned much the same answer. It required almost a new vocabulary to do justice to the changes in material circumstances which each successive generation of interpreters discerned, but for the analysis of character the old vocabulary sufficed. Nor did those Americans of 1900 who read Henry Adams' description of their ancestors of 1800 hesitate to claim legitimate descent: the lineaments, the accent, the character were all familiar.

The American character was the product of an interplay of inheritance and environment, both varied and complex. For the inheritance was not only British but European, not only of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but of two thousand years. That America was the offspring of Britain was acknowledged; that the roots of her culture and her institutions traced back to Greece and Rome and Palestine was not to be forgotten; and the basic institutions of state, church, and family which Americans maintained and the fundamental values which they cherished advertised the origin and the relationship.

But the inheritance was highly selective and the impact of environment uneven. Institutions—notably those of a political and juridical character—suffered only minor modifications, but the modification of social organization was so profound as to suggest a departure from the normal course of evolution, while the psychological modification was nothing less than revolutionary. Every American in Britain in the 1940's recognized as familiar such political institutions as the representative system, parties, and civil rights, but few felt themselves at home socially in the Mother Country, while Americans removed but one generation from Italy, France, and Germany experienced in those countries a profound sense of alienation. Nothing was more astonishing than the feebleness of hereditary loyalties unless it was the strength of newly acquired

antipathies, and that people who best represented a cross section of Europe found it most difficult to understand or to sympathize with the Old World.

That so heterogeneous an inheritance should result in so homogeneous a character suggests that environment was decisive. The environment, to be sure, was scarcely less diverse than the inheritance, for, as every politician and student of sectionalism knew, the American continent disclosed a multiformity comparable to that of all Europe. Yet geographical differences were no more effective than racial mixtures in producing profound social diversity: what emerged was rather an amalgam which was distinctively national. The differences between a Yankee, a Southerner, and a Plainsman were insignificant compared with the differences that separated Germans, Frenchmen, Italians, and Poles; and for that matter, Vermonters and Texans could understand each other's language rather better than Yorkshiremen and Cornishmen. Certainly Americans from the cotton fields of the South or the prairies of the Middle Border managed to proclaim their love for rocks and rills, for woods and templed hills, without the slightest sense of incongruity. Local attachments persisted, especially in the rural areas, but the rise of the local-color school and the literary celebration of idiom and idiosyncrasy were testimony rather to their decline than to their vitality; in time, manifestations of provincialism, like Currier and Ives prints, were to become collectors' items.

It was not, in short, particular environments that determined the American character or created the American type but the whole of the American environment—the sense of spaciousness, the invitation to mobility, the atmosphere of independence, the encouragement to enterprise and to optimism. Whereas in Europe, with its age-old traditions of feudalism and nationalism, the particular triumphed over the general, in America, which came to maturity during the industrial revolution and acknowledged few traditions of strong local loyalties with which it had to break, the general triumphed over the particular. That people, which displayed the most diverse racial stocks and the most variegated climates and soils, achieved a distinctive and stable national character with an ease that confounded not only the expectations of her critics but all history and experience.