Letter from America

1946–2004

ALISTAIR COOKE

ALFRED A. KNOPF  NEW YORK 2004

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Introduction

Alistair Cooke was the classic Anglo-American. He embodied the cultural and political bond that linked Britain and the United States during the long half century from the Second World War into the twentyfirst century. In the great game of current affairs, he was an observer, not a player. But like the best observers, he helped define the game.

My parents were ardent Americanophiles. As a result they would sit each week listening to *Letter from America*, like wartime refugees glued to a message from a land afar. Cooke kept them in touch with Strong America in the 1950s, Rich America in the 1960s, Questioning America in the 1970s and Uncertain America in the 1980s and 1990s. He never preached. He was accused of ignoring the dark side of American life, but his bias throughout was that of an East Coast liberal conservative. It was the bias of most of his British listeners.

Alistair Cooke's writing was extraordinary. He wrote in conversation and he spoke in prose. In fifty-eight years of *Letter from America* he perfected the journalism of personal witness, adapting it brilliantly to the medium of radio. His mellifluous mid-Atlantic voice treated Britain and America as if they were two armchairs talking to each other, with 'the Pond' as coffee table. Above all, he knew his craft. He never wrote a dull sentence. He never lost touch with narrative, with the commentator as storyteller, learned from his love of theatre and movies. He understood that listeners wanted more than the old standbys of anecdote and opinion. They craved context and history. As his years lengthened into decades, Cooke's journalism acquired a depth inaccessible to younger practitioners.

Here was a man who could recall Hoover and Roosevelt. He could compare Churchill and Truman as orators, for he had heard them both. He could remember the arrival of air conditioning, the building of freeways, the exploding of the atom bomb and Bobby Jones making the green in one. His letters from America brought the New World into the drawing rooms of the Old, not as a series of sensational events but as a rounded culture. His journalism published and broadcast in the United States returned the compliment. It brought British culture to American

attention. In periods when the two countries seemed at risk of tearing apart from each other, he linked hands and held them tight.

Cooke's work and outlook were rooted in his past. He was born with the name of Alfred in 1908 in Salford, Lancashire. His father was a metalworker, Methodist lay preacher and teetotaller. His early theatrical and writing talent was noticed by his teachers, who encouraged him to a Cambridge scholarship. The upwardly mobile Cooke changed his Christian name to Alistair and applied himself furiously to acting, producing and writing. He founded The Mummers and edited *Granta*. By the age of twenty-two he was suggesting himself to the *Manchester Guardian* and the BBC as a contributor on theatre, poetry and literature. In 1932 he struck gold. He won a Harkness Fellowship to Yale and Harvard. The curtain opened on what seemed an even more glittering stage. For the drama of theatre he exchanged the drama of America.

Cooke's early ambition was to become a leading theatre director. This ambition was cursed by his success in transatlantic journalism and the people he met thereby. He was taken up by another British refugee, Charlie Chaplin, and wrote scripts for him. Cooke married an American model, Ruth Emerson (a relative of Ralph Waldo), and moved back and forth between London and America in search of work, becoming the film critic for the BBC in 1934. He wrote a *Letter from London* for NBC, allegedly clocking up 40,000 words for American outlets at the time of the Abdication in 1936. Back in America, he suggested a similar venture in reverse, for the BBC. With the outbreak of war he risked his reputation on both sides of the Atlantic by taking out American citizenship, granted in 1941.

Cooke's career in America was initially that of a normal foreign correspondent. In the 1940s he worked variously for *The Times*, the *Daily Sketch* and the *Daily Herald*. In 1940 he also began regular broadcasts for the BBC, titled *American Letter* (they became *Letter from America* in 1950). Early records show the producers remarking on 'a tendency to be allusive and glib'. Yet throughout the war Cooke built up an audience approaching six million. In 1945 he was asked to cover the opening of the United Nations for the *Manchester Guardian* . Three years later he became that paper's chief American correspondent at the then huge salary of $14,000 a year, a happy homecoming for a son of Salford. He retained this post for a quarter-century.

Working for the *Guardian* in the 1950s and 1960s allowed Cooke to cover the

emergence of the new global superpower. He was never a normal news hound. Most correspondents in America were, and still are, 'Beltway fanatics'. They paced the corridors and smoke-filled rooms of Congress and the White House, and saw little else. Washington at the time was still a town with a single industry, that of politics. This was not the sort of town likely to appeal to a man with Cooke's wider interests.

He duly covered America from New York, a fact crucial to the content and style of *Letter from America*. This was controversial. The *Manchester Guardian*'s Washington correspondents at the time were Max Freedman and Richard Scott. The fact that the paper's 'Chief Correspondent' was resident in New York was the source of much bickering. It gave Cooke a reputation among journalists as problematic, indeed 'a nuisance'. He was rarely at the scene of events. His witnessing of the murdered Bobby Kennedy — 'like the stone face of a child lying on a cathedral tomb' — was exceptional. He called it 'a casual chance in a thousand'.

Washington reporting, like British 'lobby journalism', was that of politics and the gossip of the political street. Such coverage is necessary, but never sufficient in depicting a country. Cooke's view of America was different. His America was rich in politics, but politics seen as ordinary Americans saw it, including from television. It was from television that he wrote his celebrated Letters after the death of JFK. To Cooke, the most important event of the week rarely happened in Washington. He travelled to every state, missing only Alaska. America was 'happening' in Little Rock or Dallas or Los Angeles or Chicago. It was Ali versus Frazier, or the death of Dorothy Parker. It was a movie or a ball game or the changing leaves of a New England fall.

His presence in New York was also crucial for Cooke's work beyond journalism. Most Americans knew him as a writer and television presenter. He hosted a weekly arts programme, *Omnibus*, for CBS. In 1972 he produced *Alistair Cooke's America*, a television series screened in thirty countries. Recordings are in every public library in America, and the resulting book sold two million copies. He had stopped working for the *Guardian* to produce the series. This in turn led to *Masterpiece Theatre* for the PBS network. In this role millions of Americans came to associate Cooke with the canon of English literature, mostly through the medium of BBC costume dramas. This tweedy, amiable intellectual seemed the perfect

custodian of the temple of English drama, from Shakespeare to *Upstairs, Downstairs*. He was to receive four Emmys for his work.

Cooke's lifestyle was that of an East Coast aesthete. His hobbies were American and fanatical: jazz, movies and golf. His first marriage failed, leaving a son, and in 1946 he married an artist, Jane White Hawkes. She came with two children by a former husband and together they had a daughter. The couple moved between a comfortable (rent-controlled) apartment on Fifth Avenue overlooking Central Park and Jane's weekend house on Long Island. The Cookes would 'season' in San Francisco and visit Britain twice a year to see their British family — such visits usually coinciding with Wimbledon and the major golf tournaments.

Letter from America formed a most remarkable sequence of sustained commentary. Its original remit from the BBC was to record 'the passions, manners and flavour of another nation's way of life'. The mission was hardly innovative — witness Cooke's own heroes Mark Twain and H. L. Mencken — but Cooke put it on radio. The result was not a 'column'. Nor does it merit the pompous style of essay. Though the Letters make much use of the first person singular, they have none of the cloying self-regard of modern 'I-journalism'. Cooke is the observer of events, not a participant. I would apply to the Letters the honourable journalistic term of stories. They tell a tale, sometimes two or three. They are one man's take on the world 'as I saw it'.

Cooke accepted the retort that this made him seem ambivalent, a fence-sitter, 'a moral coward for refusing to take a stand'. He was criticized as pussy-footing on Vietnam, and his biographer, Nick Clarke, records the *Guardian*'s view that 'he had a blind spot about the civil rights movement'. As the years rolled by he moved progressively to the right. His early adoration of Adlai Stevenson was later settled on Ronald Reagan. At the end of his life he accepted the Pentagon line on Iraq. But to every critic he cheerfully replied that 'once every four years . . . I vote'. Beyond that was only 'the discovery that in life the range of irreconcilable points of view, characters, flaws, idiosyncrasies and virtues is astounding'.

The style of the Letters was influential and much imitated in both print and broadcasting. It has come near to parody in its BBC offspring, *From Our Own Correspondent*, anecdotal, herbivorous and mildly self-indulgent. Cooke's version was in a class of its own. Though written and rehearsed for speaking, the Letters remain 'writings', owing a debt to Cooke's tutor, Arthur Quiller-Couch, a

champion of simplicity and clarity. They have the laconic touch of Cooke's hero, the Baltimore columnist H. L. Mencken, and display Mencken's hatred of cant and love of plain-speaking. But the mastery of cadence and colour which made *Letter from America* so fluent on the ear was, in my view, born of Cooke's love of theatre. There is no better training for any writer than to listen to the cry of the actor and feel the lash of the newsroom. Cooke benefited from both.

The shared Anglo-American culture is rooted not in politics but in history. *Letter from America* was never a 'home thought from abroad'. It showed no Browning nostalgia for 'the chaffinch on the orchard bough' from a land of the 'gaudy melon-flower'. Nor was Cooke a post-imperial Kipling. His Fifth Avenue apartment bore little comparison with 'an old Moulmein Pagoda looking lazy at the sea'. The surprise of Cooke's America was its familiarity. It was written for and heard by those who knew America from the cinema, music and newsreels.

Britons still look to America before they look anywhere else. They visit America, they absorb American culture, they enjoy American exports, they marry American spouses. More Britons could name the Mayor of New York City or the Governor of California than the leader of any English provincial city. The metropolises of New York and London are Siamese twins, two districts of one city, two venues of one culture. They have more in common with each other than with their respective hinterlands. Hardly an American magazine or newspaper is without a British byline. Hardly a British radio programme is without an American voice. Business, academia, music, art and architecture operate by mid-Atlantic values from mid-Atlantic institutions.

At the end of the Cold War it was asserted that Britain would now 'choose' Europe. Within a decade, in the so-called war on terror and in Iraq, it was emphatically choosing America. The burst of anti-Americanism which accompanied the war was an aberration, not a norm. Indeed, much of the protest over the Iraq war was itself Anglo-American in origin. At the time of Cooke's death the Atlantic bond seemed as tight as ever and the gulf with the rest of the world as wide.

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, with his long experience of office, called the bonds between America and Britain 'matter-offactly intimate', to a degree 'probably never practised before between sovereign states'. He was echoing de Gaulle's view that Britain 'neither thinks nor acts like a continental

nation'. The most recent custodian of the special relationship, Tony Blair, would tell his staff that not to be by America's side through any crisis or travail was 'simply unthinkable'.

Cooke's lifework was to be Boswell to that relationship. *Letter from America* was his diary and his testament. There may be no one America, single and true. But Cooke's America is the truest we have.

Simon Jenkins
July 2004

Editor's Note

The last collection of Alistair Cooke's *Letter from America* was published in 1979 (*The Americans*) and, along with two earlier collections (*Letters from America*, 1951, *Talk About America*, 1968), has been long out of print. Alistair had always intended to complete a fourth collection of letters taken from the 1980s and 1990s — a collection that he liked to refer to as 'The Last Post' — but as time moved on his energies became exclusively dedicated to the writing of his weekly broadcast letter. He maintained this focus of attention right up until the last letter, number 2869, broadcast on 20 February 2004, just six weeks before he died. When he appointed me as his literary executor he also assigned me the task of preparing this volume selected from the entire period of his broadcast letters, 1946—2004. As his book editor and last British publisher of his two collections of essays (*Fun and Games*, 1994, and *Memories of the Great and the Good*, 1999), Alistair knew that I understood his requirements and fortunately he left clear guidelines for this collection.

In his first published volume Alistair wrote in the Preface: 'A good many of the letters I have had from listeners to the series were from people who can hardly put pen to paper. Their taste seemed to coincide with my own: they got pleasure from talks which I felt had managed to convey some human experience in a language most people can understand. These successes average about one in five, but they are not necessarily the ones that look best in print. But by the time the series had run to two hundred there appeared to be a good handful that would survive the translation into black and white. Accordingly, the pieces that follow were selected by this test. They were chosen on no other principle.' With this in mind, for the years 1946—1980, there was no need to go further than to select those letters that I consider to be the best taken from the earlier books. In this process I was much helped by the writer and editor George Perry, who proved, as always, a sound adviser.

The selections made from 1980 to 2004 required more detailed review. Several folders of manuscript letters marked on the outside in Alistair's handwriting as 'The Chosen' were found and then typed up 'squeaky clean', as he had requested,

by Patti Yasek, his redoubtable assistant. I have been supported in making the final selection not only by Patti but also by Alistair's daughter Susan Cooke Kittredge. They have both provided huge encouragement and I was relieved that this final selection agreed with so many of Susan's own choices. In addition Stuart Proffitt, Publishing Director at Penguin, has contributed many recommendations and has provided valuable advice in relation to the overall selection. With such wealth of material it has been difficult to achieve a perfect balance for each decade and I have decided to give more emphasis to the second part of Alistair's career where none of the letters has, until now, been published in volume form.

As on his earlier collections I have tried my best to apply Alistair's principle, in choosing those letters that work best in print. I have also provided a wide range of contents, and indeed tried to include some surprises that might correspond on the page to the experience of tuning in on a Friday evening or Sunday morning to hear the often unexpected topic that Alistair was addressing that day. As with the earlier collections the letters 'except for a little trimming and polishing, appear here as they were broadcast'.

There is no better preface that can apply to this collection than Alistair's original opening to the first collection published in 1951 which included the following passage:

Some months after the war was over the BBC asked me to go to London and discuss the sort of broadcasting I might do in what was then called the peace. I had been talking about America to Britain since 1934 and from America to Britain since three years after that. My one-man band met the same fate as everybody else's in the autumn of 1939. And through the war years I doubled in brass and learned to play the solemn trombone of a political commentator. Politics will undoubtedly bedevil us all till the day we die, but when General MacArthur stood on the deck of the Missouri and said in his resounding baritone, 'These proceedings are closed,' I took him at his word and, like most other people, yearned to get back to the important things in life. Even the prospect of early annihilation should not keep us from making the most of our days on this unhappy planet. In the best of times, our days are numbered, anyway. And it would be a crime against Nature for any generation to take the world crisis so solemnly that it put off enjoying those things for which we were presumably designed in the first place, and which the gravest statesmen and the hoarsest

politicians hope to make available to all men in the end: I mean the opportunity to do good work, to fall in love, to enjoy friends, to sit under trees, to read, to hit a ball and bounce the baby.

The suspicion that these things are what most men and women everywhere want led me to suggest, in London in 1946, that Britons might be more honestly enticed into an interest in America and Americans by hearing about their way of life and their tastes in these fundamental things than by suffering instruction in the procedures of the American Senate and the subtleties of the corn-hog ratio. Mr Lindsay Wellington, then director of the Home Service, responded so promptly to this that he suggested I forget politics altogether and accept an assignment to talk about anything and everything in America that interested me. To do this for a large and very mixed audience, ranging from shrewd bishops to honest carpenters, was a challenge to explain in the simplest and most vivid terms the passions, the manners, the flavour of another nation's way of life. It was a formidable assignment, for though a man might make sense of his travels in his own way for his own friends, broadcasting demands of him, if he respects the medium at all, that, as the old Greek had it, he 'think like a wise man and talk in the language of the people'. I don't know whether this has ever been done, except at various times by minstrels, the greatest religious teachers and comedians of genius.

But out of this bold ambition grew a series of weekly talks to Britain which I called Letter from America. They were commissioned in March 1946 for a tentative run of thirteen weeks; and by the grace of the BBC, the receptiveness of the British listener, and the stubborn endurance of the pound sterling, they still at this writing go on. After a year or two the number of listeners asking for copies of scripts began to strain the mimeographing resources of the BBC's New York office. Some people took so kindly to them that they urged me to put them out as a book. This has the same effect on a broadcaster as a nomination for the Presidency of the United States on a first-class cement manufacturer. The thing is patently absurd except to his cronies, but the idea first flatters, then haunts him, and he ends by feeling he must accept a sacred duty to save the Republic.

Most of these pieces were written at the end of a week's work without my knowing, as I faced the typewriter, what I was going to talk about. But they were all written in freedom and in pleasure.

Alistair Cooke's *Letter from America* was an astonishing and unique achievement that reached a listening audience of some twenty-two million worldwide. It would have been his hope that these letters will be read, as he wrote them, 'in freedom and in pleasure' throughout the world.

Colin Webb
July 2004

The 1940s

The Immigrant Strain

6 May 1946

An item came over the news-tape the other day about somebody who wanted to organize a National Hobby Club. There is nothing earthshaking in this, but it opens up a field of speculation about Britons and Americans that I should like to graze around in. I saw this item and thought at once about an Englishman I know here, an old, old friend who — to be cold-blooded about it — has a value in this country over and above his value as a character and a good friend. I am, after all, a professional student of a rare species of goldfish — the goldfish being, you will guess, the American people. If you are a goldfish, or if you swim with them long enough, it is impossible to say what are the characteristics of goldfish. But if somebody drops a mackerel into the goldfish bowl, you can see at once all sorts of things that goldfish have and the other things they lack. That is why I am grateful to this English friend, just for being himself and for being around. He forms a stimulating point of comparison. He is a British government official in New York, and though I knew him for many years before he was sent here, I have lately learned many things about him I never knew and about Americans — the race he is at present moving among. For instance, when he comes into a room, one thought always strikes me, and I can say it two ways. I can say, 'Goodness, how short his coat is' or 'Goodness, how long everybody else's is'.

Now, in character — never mind his politics — he is conservative. He is an able and conscientious government official. He likes people and he likes to get through the day and attack in the evening his beloved hobbies, of which he has several. This characteristic alone would make him, in England, a typical civil servant. Here it makes him an oddity. He is a lepidopterist, an expert on moths. And when he was stationed in the Middle East he threw off what I believe to be an authoritative paper on the moths of Iran. Americans meeting him see his black Homburg and his tight coat and his rumply collar, and hear his voice; and they know his type at once. They think they do. But they don't know it at all. If you feel baffled and alarmed at the prospect of differentiating one American type from another, you can take heart. You have more hope of success than Americans, who shuffle through every stereotype of every foreign culture as confidently as they handle

the family's pack of cards. Americans are not particularly good at sensing the real elements of another people's culture. It helps them to approach foreigners with carefree warmth and an animated lack of misgiving. It also makes them, on the whole, poor administrators on foreign soil. They find it almost impossible to believe that poorer peoples, far from the Statue of Liberty, should not want in their heart of hearts to become Americans. If it should happen that America, in its new period of world power, comes to do what every other world power has done: if Americans should have to govern large numbers of foreigners, you must expect that Americans will be well hated before they are admired for themselves.

So Americans when they meet this Englishman for the first time at once file away the reflection that though he seems amiable enough, he is rigid, unimaginative, a little pompous, a regular Somerset Maugham colonial type. Then the telephone rings — as it did one night — and it turns out that someone wants to know who sang the vocal in that early Red Nichols record of 'Lazy River'. The Americans present were appalled and relieved to hear my friend give out reams of information on these matters. 'No,' he said to another query, 'I think you'll find that record is a blue label, and it's backed by "Beale Street Blues", with Goodman and Teagarden . . . What? no, no, the cornet is Jack's brother, Charlie — that's right, Charlie Teagarden. Not at all, so long.'

He is also, you gather, a jazz fan. And according to the late great Otis Ferguson he knew more about the history of recorded American jazz than most Americans alive, and wrote knowingly about it when he was in college, years before American intellectuals began to write jazz reviews in the mid-1930s. I doubt if the Foreign Office know about this. I doubt if they care, because he is an Englishman, and eccentricity is therefore the most normal thing about him. By merely being around he makes you notice how comparatively rare with Americans is an orderly set of hobbies; and how even rarer is the quality from which hobbies spring — namely, eccentricity. Active Americans do many things. And in different parts of the country they do routinely things that other parts of the country have never heard about. But by and large they do what other people, what their neighbours, do. There is a good reason for this, and you will be glad to hear we don't have to go back to the Indians for it.

Hobbies, I suggest, are essentially a tribal habit and appear most in a homogeneous nation. English boys in school sit beside other boys who are called

Adams and Smith and Rendall and Barnes and Gibbs. They do not have to use up much of their competitive energy showing who is more English than another. A nation which says, 'It isn't done', is much more settled as a community than one which says, 'It's un-American'. Only thirty years ago Theodore Roosevelt made a campaign of urging immigrant Americans to forget their roots, to cease being 'hyphenated Americans'. But there are still in America two generations, the sons and grandsons of immigrants, who are trying to outlive the oddity of their family's ways. For it is a stigma for an American to talk with a foreign accent rather than with an American accent. This is snobbery, of course, but the people who instantly recognize it as such are enviably free from the problem. If it is snobbery, even in this land, it is a real humiliation: it is not the urge of insecure people to be different from others; it is the more pressing urge to be the same, and it is acutely felt among people who are insecure just because they *are* different. In very many American cities where there are large populations of immigrants, this is what happens. The son is, let us say, an Italian. As a boy he is brought up with a mixture of American and Italian habits. He plays baseball, but the big meal of the week is ravioli, and he is allowed little gulps of red wine. (If he is a Pole, he is dolled up once a year and marched in the parade on Pulaski Day.) Then he goes to school. There he mixes with boys called Taylor and Smith and also with other boys called Schenck and Costello and O'Dwyer and Koshuski. He begins to find in time that ravioli is a mild joke at school.

Of course, there are millions of Americans who eat ravioli who are not Italian-Americans, but they are untouched by the kind of problem I am discussing. Ravioli is an American dish by now. And that is another thing. The boy notices that just so much as his own habits and speech were instilled by his parents, by so much does he tend not to fit in. By so much he runs the risk of being a joke; which is no joke to a child. And then, at about the age of 12, an awful thing happens. It is happening all over America all the time, and produces recrimination and heartbreak to the folks still left who came originally from the old country — from Poland or Italy or Czechoslovakia or Russia or Germany or wherever — and who will never master the American language. The boy notices that they speak with an accent. He never knew this before. But now it crowds in on him. Now he starts his own rebellion. And that is serious enough to many fine parents so that in scores, perhaps hundreds, of American cities the schools run night classes for parents, in the English language, to help them keep the affection and respect of their sons and daughters, or grandsons and granddaughters. It is a great theme in American

life, and it cannot be dismissed by superficial horror or irritated appeals to decent feeling. In time, of course, masses of such sons and daughters outlive the threat of seeming different. And then, but only then, can they begin to cherish some of their oddity, especially in the way of food and festivals. Their strangeness becomes a grace note to the solid tune of their Americanism. But by that time they are sure of themselves and so able to look on their parents again — God help them — with affection.

So you see how sure of your standing with your companions you have to be to start, in boyhood, cooking up interests that will set you apart from your fellows. It will be no surprise now, I think, to hear from my Englishman that nearly all the members of his natural history club in New York were older men with Anglo-Saxon names — families that have been here for a hundred years or more, that have never felt anything but American. They start with the great advantage of being already something that the Poles and the Germans and the Czechs and the Italians have to get to be the hard way.

You may wonder how an Englishman, and an English accent, fit into all this. Well, Englishmen who live here, no matter how long — first-generation Englishmen — are a special case. They may hope to be mistaken for Bostonians (but not by Bostonians). Yet if they affect any more Americanism than that which has grown into their characters, they do themselves much hurt, and both the country they came from and the country they adopted. There are Irish-Americans and Czech-Americans and Polish-Americans and German-Americans and Swedish-Americans and Italian-Americans and Greek-Americans. But there are only 'Englishmen in America'. They are always apart and always at once more foreign and more familiar.

And an English accent is by now just another foreign sound. There was a time when an English accent would take an Englishman into homes on the East Coast socially more elevated than the home he left behind him. Such Englishmen were secretly delighted to discover this while believing they were only being taken at their true worth. But the hosts knew better. This social observation was a favourite theme of American writers, New Englanders especially, in the early nineteenth century. Washington Irving once boiled over about a certain kind of British traveller: 'While Englishmen of philosophical spirit and cultivated minds have been sent from England to penetrate the deserts and to study the manners

and customs of barbarous nations, it has been left to the broken-down tradesman, the scheming adventurer, the wandering mechanic, the Manchester and Birmingham agent, to be her oracles respecting America.' You can still run into the type. Or you could say more accurately that this attitude is one part of most Englishmen's character that is aroused by a visit to America. But the day is long past when Americans imitated English habits in order to be fashionable. There is, however, one peculiar hangover from that period. It is the convention of speaking English on the American stage. Unlike the British and the Germans, the Americans seem never to have worked out a type of stage speech true to the reality of the life around them. Except in comedies. In most historical American plays, and plays of polite life, the characters talk a form of British English. If you chide Americans about this and say, correctly, that these people in real life would not talk at all like that, they say: 'Well, of course not; they're actors, aren't they?' I always feel in London that no matter how trivial the play, the characters being played would talk more or less that way in life. In this country it is understood as a convention, having nothing to do with social honesty, that actors should adopt an unreal mid-Atlantic lingo known, with a straight face, as Stage Standard. You may have noticed that even in American movies most American historical characters and members of Congress talk a form of British, while what are called 'character parts' talk American.

Englishmen can hardly be blamed if they assume that Americans share their sneaking belief that no American can be distinguished and yet sound American at the same time. It has given some otherwise shrewd English dramatic critics the idea that really educated Americans talk like Englishmen. The fact is that educated Southerners, New Yorkers, Chicagoans or New Englanders could never be mistaken for Britons. And there is something wrong if they could be mistaken for each other. It is a fairly safe rule that if in life you meet an American who sounds English, he is either a transplanted Englishman, or one of those homeless Americans forlornly bearing up under the 'advantages' of an education in Europe. Or he is a phoney. The American dramatic critic, Mr George Jean Nathan, was not intending to be facetious, but merely expressing a perennial American puzzle, when he wrote: 'After thirty years of theatregoing, I still can't make up my mind whether actors talk and behave like Englishmen or whether Englishmen talk and behave like actors.'

Damon Runyon's America

27 December 1946

When Damon Runyon died the papers were black with columns of sentimental farewell from all the New York sports-writers who possess an expanding waistline and a yearning to break with the daily grind of football and the horses and begin to write some profitable short stories on the Runyon model. He is already becoming sweetened into a legend, and it sometimes does take the death of a man who summed up an era or a fashion to make you feel how dead and done with that era is. But Runyon has a peculiar transatlantic interest, because the people who read him in London were not the people who read and admired him here. His English reputation, among highbrows especially, was one of those puzzles that are politely accepted as insoluble by the Americans who run into them. It produced the same sort of shock to cross the Channel and hear intense French intellectuals sneering at the talents of Jean Gabin and Louis Jouvet and wishing the serious French *cinéma* could achieve the *vitalisme* of Jimmy Cagney or 'this tenderness, cynical yet profound' of Humphrey Bogart.

Maybe you are both right. But let us for once go beyond politeness and look into the life and style of a man who, by some trick of understanding or misunderstanding, seemed to a whole generation of Britons to be the most typical American writer of his day: tricky, racy, pungent, slick, amoral. I'd better say at once that I never met an American, unless he was a Broadway nightclub owner, or a racing tout, who took that view of Runyon. And the only intriguing thing about him to many literate Americans was his great reputation in Britain.

Like so many other people who later become identified with the spirit of the place they write about, Runyon was not born there. In fact he was 27 before he ever hit New York. He was born, by a funny coincidence, in Manhattan, but Manhattan, Kansas, which in 1884 must have had a population of several hundreds. Runyon's father was an itinerant printer in the Midwest and West. Runyon followed his father, and it took him through a pioneer's trail of Kansas towns, from Manhattan to Clay Center to Wellington, and finally to Pueblo, Colorado, a small town, not much more than a rundown Indian village, just near what is now the Mesa Verde National Park, where you can see the towns built in

the sides of cliffs by Indians whose high civilization crumbled about nine centuries ago. It seems to this day a very unlikely place to set the imagination agog with the 'dolls' and 'characters' of Runyon's imagination.

Young Runyon at 14 ran away to enlist in the Spanish—American war. He was in and out of guerrilla warfare for two years in the Philippines, and came back to Colorado full of tall stories, a tobacco breath, and a trick or two with a poker deck that qualified him at once for the profession of newspaperman. By now his interests were settling into the groove that was to pay off very profitably in later life. He started baseball clubs, ran boxing matches on the side, and rode horses on small tracks in southern Colorado. It would be tempting to add that here he obviously picked up the authentic lingo of baseball and stables, and of the petty gangster and shill and the like. Maybe he did, but again like other writers who have been acclaimed outside their own country for their accurate ways with the spoken language, Runyon was not then or ever later a particularly good writer of American idiom as she is spoke and writ. I would say, and it's not an eccentric opinion, that he could not begin to hold a candle to Westbrook Pegler, or John O'Hara, or the late Otis Ferguson, or the living Red Smith, Jimmy Cannon, John Crosby or Robert Ruark. Some of you may be waiting for the name of Ernest Hemingway. But he would come into this discussion only because he too writes an American idiom that no American has ever spoken. It is the American vernacular heard through a very personal ear-trumpet. The Americans in Hemingway talk more like Hemingway than Americans, but somehow they couldn't be anything else but Americans and Hemingway characters. He tightens their speech and their emotions, like a man over-tuning a six-string guitar, so that the low notes have a sharper twang than they ought and the high notes sound as if they were struck on an icicle.

Damon Runyon, even back in Colorado, must have had some trick of mind and hearing much as a man with terrific astigmatism sees distant objects, in a queer way that makes the vertical lines jarring, but also more exciting than they are when he puts his glasses on. I speak with feeling about this because I am a four-star veteran of the battle with astigmatism. I remember how, at my first dances as a boy, when I didn't know there was anything wrong with my eyes, I'd look across the ballroom floor and see a whole crop of misty, tender wallflowers swooning on the vine. I would slink madly round the edge of the dancers to grab one of these houris for my very own. However, when I came within three feet of the charmer I

had singled out to tread on, I saw at once why she was a wallflower, instead of being, say, Ava Gardner, out there on the floor moving like a snowflake, or — to be frank — doing the charleston. When I got close she was rarely a beauty, though she looked human enough and surely had character; but that is unfortunately not what a 15-year-old is looking for in girls. I used to take a quick, mild dislike to these girls, however, because they seemed to have pulled a Jekyll-and-Hyde trick. I discovered from some patient clinical testing later that this is the characteristic deceit of astigmatism. Almost any attractive woman at thirty yards looks to me like a beauty, because the astigmatic gaze softens the hard vertical lines, irons out all the wrinkles, and turns any deep-set pair of eyes into pits of tenderness. In general, the great gift of astigmatism is to rob a face of its peculiar lapses from the ideal and leave you with the Platonic copy of the girl that is laid up in heaven.

That's the way I think it was with Damon Runyon. He first saw New York from afar, and heard about it from the lips of gamblers and soldiers and racetrack touts who had made a haul there, or gone on an immortal bust, or captured some fabulous 'doll'. He swam into New York through the romantic haze of his astigmatism, put his glasses on, liked the Colorado myth a good deal better, and kept his glasses off. He didn't care to put them on again, because he did very nicely selling America and Europe a romantic commodity easy to recognize at a distance. He didn't need, either, to listen for Broadway's slang. The private circus in his mind's eye had a lingo all its own, and he made it up as he went along.

A character in a movie Runyon once wrote called somebody a 'mooley'. The censors wouldn't pass the movie till they'd checked with Runyon. 'What's a mooley?' they asked him nervously. 'A mooley?' he said. 'Why, I don't know, I made it up.' That's the way with nearly all his slang. Most American slang was never made up by writers. It derives from a long American experience of work or play — from the collision of Dutch and French and German with English, or from the Spanish days of the Southwest, or from pioneering, mule-driving, railroading, baseball, poker, the cattle kingdom, mining. A newspaperman famous for his exposures of corruption in labour politics said to me the other night that he thought he might soon turn his attention to the rackets that go on in the insurance business. Reflectively he said, 'I think I'll sink a pick in it. Might be some pay-dirt there.' That is authentic and natural. There is no such slang phrase current as 'to sink a pick'. But I guess it was a common working expression seventy years ago. It recalls at once the Western miners, who looked at a likely

mountain range, spat on their hands and sank their picks in, and came up, some of them, with a fortune in silver.

On the contrary, Damon Runyon's slang is as contrived and romantic as Dickens, as synthetic as Broadway. Perhaps that's why it fits, even though Broadway doesn't talk it. If Broadway characters had a vein of crazy property, they might talk that way.

Runyon as a writer never goes as deep as Ring Lardner, and his irony was superficial enough not to sadden him with the knowledge of human meanness and vulgarity, as it did Lardner. Runyon accepted it and was fond of it, which might make him a healthier man and not so good a writer as Lardner. He saw, as a stranger, one very small and flashy section of New York life. He made it over into a puppet world of his own, where gangsters are lovable bums, and greed and vulgarity are fun and hurt nobody — for long. He was able to do this because he preserved and exploited his original innocence, like a certain kind of confidence-man. The British view of Runyon is as confident and odd as Runyon's view of New York, not so much because distance, like astigmatism, lends enchantment, but because Runyon distils and sterilizes for a foreigner the swarming colour and frightening behaviour of the animals known as New Yorkers. All the most popular comic writers deal with some recognizable place, and then flatter your foreignness by letting you in on the secret, the confidential, the positively gen-u-ine low life of the place. So Damon Runyon saves you the expense of the voyage, the very real puzzles of the real thing. He puts you in the know, and the knowledge is a cure in itself because it gets you away from the daily grind and the recognizable life of Leeds or Glasgow or London — or, I ought to add, New York.

You do not have to be a stranger to describe or enjoy this pleasurable and simplified view of the country or a town. I know a wealthy tycoon who now lives in New York. But he started life out West, as a timekeeper with a railroad gang. He has acquired without pain, in later life, a romantic Eastern view of the West, thus throwing into reverse the imaginative mechanism of Damon Runyon. This man is always asking me to come and visit him at his winter home in Arizona. Great country, he says, great people, great life. I mumble something about having work to do. At my age, he too had work to do. But now he goes off before the January snows and comes back in April, when the trees are blossoming. He has taken on a stranger's view of the West that is large, enraptured and sentimental. I thought of

his father, who had no view of the West, but just broke it and made it liveable.

I have meant not to answer but only to ask the big question: can anybody ever know what is typical of another country? Is Lawrence's Arabia really Arabia, or only what Lawrence's gallant and secret imagination wanted it to be? Would Byron's poems on Greece have made a Greek laugh, as the English editions of Runyon make Americans laugh, with their glossaries of what the English editor thinks is American slang? We are up against a great and humbling question. And the only consolation I can offer is that the answer is open to anybody, the field is free. I have noticed that insight into American ways has nothing much to do with intellect or education. Most people find in a foreign country what they want to find. And when it comes to handing out the laurels to another nation's writers, the native critics are only the muscle-bound trainers of the day. They have been wrong before. If you go back into the last two centuries and look over their selections of the living immortals, you will be given faith in your own fumbling hunches. And even though we on this side may shudder at the notion that you think we go around talking like Damon Runyon's characters, maybe you are right about his permanent fame. After all, you have been right before, notably about Mark Twain, when all the best people in America, and the most respected critics, considered him something as low and fleeting as a comic strip. Maybe Damon Runyon *has* created a legend more enduring and endurable than the reality, because it is neater and funnier and more exotic and sympathetic — that is to say, more artistic — than crummy, sluttish old Broadway could ever be.

Roughing It

15 October 1948

A hundred years ago the first ship sailed out of New York bound for San Francisco and the American River, where, according to the reports that had drifted East, you lowered a pan into a sluggish stream, shook it several times and sifted out a fortune in gold. By ship round the Horn was only one way, the most tedious and the safest. You could go by way of Panama and Nicaragua and run the risk of malaria or yellow fever. You could sail down to Mexico and face a shorter journey across its width through almost trackless desert and the chance of epidemics and slaughter by bandits.

Most people in the East who for one reason or another felt the urge to Go West decided to go the overland way. Today it is impossible to experience the human ordeal of that great migration, one of the last epics of purely human function before the Industrial Revolution transformed our lives. These people, in New England, and New York and Maryland and Ohio, sat down and planned to walk nearly two thousand miles from St Joseph, Missouri, or Independence, where the locomotive and the steamboat ended and the Middle Ages began. Independence was a more thriving place a century ago than it is today, because it was the outfitting centre for the Forty-Niners. From there you were on your own. You went by mule and drove your wagons and cattle along with you for the remaining eighteen hundred miles. You used a route map drawn by somebody who had once made it and survived. You depended very much, too much, on the hearsay of these people to know where the water-holes were and where you could take a short cut through the mountains.

There was no archetype of the Forty-Niner. They were of every human kind. But early on they learned that they had better travel in packs and most of them elected what they called a captain and two lieutenants. A quartermaster was chosen to look after the provisions. They may sound very martial in a noticeably non-military nation. But they knew, the later companies at any rate, that there were certain unavoidable hazards: flash floods, the rotting of their food, Indians, disease, and the constant challenge to their discipline and courage of reducing the weight of their pack — their implements, even their food supply — when the route

was too much for their animals, who set the pace. They figured correctly that no group of human beings, however individually noble, would be likely to stay noble in the desperation of thirst, or spontaneously organize themselves in the event of attack. By the time they started the long journey from Missouri, most of them had formed themselves into companies and agreed on written or unwritten laws. Many of them spent weeks in the East before they left, drawing up written constitutions. Some of these were abided by all the way to California. Others were torn up in anger, stuffed down the captain's throat, or buried with a dead cow.

Most of them through the late spring of 1849 took far too many provisions. It was said that the summer companies had the routes laid out for them by trails of abandoned stoves, pillows, beds, pots and kettles, crowbars, drills, ploughs, harness, trunks, bellows and dish-pans. These, they found, were luxuries to a pioneer. And the word got across the continent that what you needed was one wagon to carry the supplies for every five persons, a mule apiece, rifles and shotguns, a rubber knapsack, an oilcloth cap, two pairs of boots, eight shirts, an overcoat, one pair of drawers, three blankets, a hundred and fifty pounds of flour, twenty-five pounds of bacon, fifteen pounds of coffee, twenty-five of sugar, some baking powder, salt and pepper.

That's as far as I want to go in describing the famous journeys across the plains. But I suspect that any American who started out today, fitted out just this way, and got to California, even if he stuck to the countless concrete highways that slam across hundreds of thousands of miles north and south and east and west — such a man would become some sort of national hero or crank. He would be paced by the newsreel boys, met at intervals by the advertising salesmen of whoever's flour and bacon he was carrying, he would be greeted by the Mayor of San Francisco, he would in the end be flown to Washington and shown in all the papers shaking the President's hand in the White House.

Nothing persists more in the fancy of Europeans, and in the superstitious pride of Americans themselves, than the conviction that Americans are tough and rough and ready, scornful of the European niceties and primmer ways of travel. The last thirty years have turned this belief into unmitigated legend.

One of the most precious books to American book collectors is a copy of Baedeker's *United States* for, I believe, 1906. In the conscientious Baedeker way, it warns the comparatively domesticated European of the coarse pleasures and

inconveniences he will have to settle for if he decides to take a holiday in the United States. It is always Baedeker's consolation, however, to the intending tourist that no matter how constant the public spitting, how hard the beds, how ankle-deep the roads and primitive the hotels away from the big cities, the traveller who has any pioneering spirit in him will never regret his courageous visit to the United States because nowhere else will he see the singing colour of the New England fall, the blossom of the South in spring, the grandeur of the Yosemite, the Yellowstone, etc., etc. This guidebook is greatly sought after precisely because today it reads like such a gorgeous joke. If you changed the place-names and made them European, an American could read it with a straight face, since it would record most of his grouches about travelling in Europe today. The application of American technical genius to the mechanics of living has not merely turned the tables on Baedeker, it has turned the American, however reckless or self-reliant his individual character, into the world's most urbanized, most petted traveller.

Mr Richard Neuberger, who lives in the Far West, in Portland, Oregon, has taken up this theme in a magazine piece. He was in Alaska during the war having, as he puts it, 'the sort of experience we had read about eagerly as boys, in the tales of James Fenimore Cooper, Jack London, and Zane Grey'. And, he adds, 'we hated it . . . we talked nostalgically of percale sheets and fluffy towels, or breakfast in bed and tiled bathrooms'. They complained — in Alaska, this is — about 'draughty privies and the lack of dry-cleaning facilities'. Mr Neuberger concludes that 'with a few bold exceptions, we Americans have come to regard the steam-heated hotel and the internal combustion engine as indispensable to any foray in the open'. Nowadays, more millions than ever before (the latest published count was 29,608,318) visit the American National Parks. But according to the Department of the Interior fewer and fewer people each year attempt the two-day hikes, or even drive up the highest peaks, or, having looked at the Grand Canyon, will undertake the day-long mule journey down to the overnight camp at the bottom. It is very hard to say how Americans would compare with other peoples in this newfound lassitude. Driving around most of the National Parks is pretty strenuous in itself. If you could put Yosemite and Yellowstone together, you would have something about the area of Wales whose geography is a combination of Switzerland, Persia and the Day of Judgement. But even so, these parks were lovingly created two generations ago by men who chopped through thousands of feet of lumber, who rode into them on a horse, who discovered the sublime with an axe, a botanist's

kit, a piece of bacon, a tent and a stout heart. Now through all of them, even over the hair-raising pass into Tuolumne Meadows on top of the Yosemite, American engineers have built incomparable cement highways, blasted through prehistoric rock, encircling mountains where no other race would dream of cutting out a dirt road.

This suggests a cheerful contradiction. That even if the traveller is a sissy sitting over an internal combustion engine, the heroes who on his behalf comb cement to the smoothness of toothpaste under the desert sun, and build his highways through the Rockies and Sierras: they are Americans too. And this leads us into a famous cliché. I hope I can then lead us out of it. (I have nothing against clichés. Most of them are true, though you have to live through the denial of them to know it.) It is the assumption that the Americans have grown soft and unable to fend for themselves, that their enslaving gadgets, through which they flip their way so expertly, are crutches or props to living, essential to a people sinking contentedly into a decadence that out-Romans the Romans.

I'm sorry to report that the Americans' devotion to urban comfort, their ingenuity with gadgets, even their reliance on them, proves no such thing. In my own experience, the Americans who are most devoted to convertible automobiles and glass-enclosed showers made no complaint on this score when they ripped up Japanese jungles for airfields or waded ashore at Okinawa. The women I know who can whip up a delicious meal in ten minutes with the skilled aid of pressure cookers, bean slicers, electric beaters and deep-frozen vegetables are also the ones who can make the best meal the slow way with none of these things. And the most skilful fisherman I know is a man who can charm a trout with his fingernail, but prefers to have a compact tackle-box along, which contains exquisite scales the size of your thumb and a leader cutter which is a little circle of plastic moulds that exudes fine wire and cuts it in one motion.

Most Americans, even rich ones, were brought up in a culture that never expected somebody else to do the rough work. Most boys in college who can afford good cars can also take them apart and put them together again. This may all be changing. Still, I doubt that a devotion to gadgets is a reflection in the American character of a terrified dependence on them. They are loved for themselves, for the humorous felicity with which they dispose of elementary labour. A Texan I know, whom I would never like to meet in anger whether the choice of weapons

was a jet-propelled torpedo or the back of the raw hand, put it neatly once when he said to me, 'I'll ride fifty miles on a horse for the fun of it, but out of necessity I drive.' One of the irritating troubles about Americans, in violation of the best advice of the best English divines, is that they just don't believe that whatever is uncomfortable is good for the character.

Joe Louis

18 March 1949

The day Joe Louis retired must have brought a moment's pause and a sigh from many people who don't care for sport, the sense of a promised date that would never be kept such as non-musical people felt when Caruso or Paderewski died. On 1 March 1949 it came home to some of us that we should very likely never again see him shuffle with great grace up to some wheezing hulk of a man, bait him with a long left before he brought up the shattering, awful thunderbolt of his right, and then toddle considerately away and wait for the referee to call the roll on yet another ruined reputation.

There are some idols you acquire too early, who later turn into walking parodies of themselves, like a favourite uncle who gets to be a vaudeville bore. There are others — the artists of popularity — who stay just far enough away from the hungry crowd and never glut the appetite they tease. Joe Louis was one of these. I doubt I should ever have seen him, or cared to, if he had not at one time connected with a private occasion. I went down to Baltimore the first day of summer in 1937 to stay with an old friend, a doctor at the Johns Hopkins hospital, who promised himself next day an afternoon off from his messy labours with stomach-aches and corpses. We drove out into the blossoming Worthington and Green Spring valleys. The purple twilight fell. It had been a perfect day, of the kind that makes you grateful for your friendships and stirs the memory of how they first started. I had met this man years before on such an evening when he stopped by my room in college to admire a battered record I had carried across the Atlantic. It was Fats Waller singing the 'Dallas Blues'. Driving back into Baltimore he remembered that Fats was on tap in person just then. 'How about,' he said, 'we go down to darktown and catch him?' There was a little vaudeville house deep in the coloured section of town, and that's where we went. We packed ourselves in with several hundred Negroes too many. They clapped and stomped in time and sweated like the plebs at a Roman circus. It was possibly 95 degrees outdoors and 110 inside. Nobody seemed to care. In the middle of one number, though, something happened outside that rode above the rhythm of the band and the hallelujahs of the audience. Far off from somewhere came a high roar like a

tidal wave. The band looked uneasy but played on. It came on nearer, a great sighing and cheering. Suddenly there was a noise of doors splintering and cops barking and women screaming and men going down grabbing their toes and snarling obscenities. The band stopped and the lights went up. The black faces all around us bobbed and flashed. Women threw their heads back and shrieked at the roof. Some people embraced each other and a little girl in pigtails cried. Other people cuffed and swung at each other. We managed to get out whole. Outside, in the villainously lit streets — they still have gaslight in darktown Baltimore — it was like Christmas Eve in darkest Africa. This, it turned out, was the night that Joe Louis won the heavyweight championship, and for one night, in all the lurid darktowns of America, the black man was king.

The memory of that night has terrified and exhilarated me ever since. The phrase, 'Arise, you have nothing to lose but your chains', must have a terrible appeal to the Negro. Most Southerners know it, and it is why in some places they watch fearfully for every Negro flexing his muscles and wonder if he is somehow connected with the Communists. That immediate fear was not besetting America then as it is now. But the lesson was plain: one Negro had outboxed all the living contenders, no matter how white (and Braddock was whiter when he came out of the ring than when he went in), and he was a racial god.

It took several years, and a run of inevitable victories, and wide familiarity with Joe in the ring and on the newsreels, for Americans to learn a special respect for this quiet, beautiful, mannerly youth, who never thought of himself as anybody's god, who never played his colour up or down, kept his mind on his work, stepped scrupulously aside when an opponent stumbled; and who, when it was all over, said such embarrassing things over the radio that they had to whisk the mike away from him to the loser, who could usually be depended on to say the clichés that were expected of him. They pushed the microphone up to Joe in December 1947, when he had been fought into a dazed parody of his younger self by another old Joe — Jersey Joe Walcott. A sharp little announcer chattered, 'Did he ever have you worried, Joe — at any time?' This is a question expecting the answer, 'No, I felt fine all the time, never better.' Joe said, 'I was worried all the way through. Yes, sir, I ain't 23 any more.'

I know it is hard, perhaps impossible, for any white man to appraise the character of any Negro. If you have lived all your life around Negroes, you inherit

certain attitudes towards them. If you are a stranger to them, there is the danger of making them out to be quite the nicest people in America. In a way, nice Negroes have to be; for though Negroes are as good and bad as anybody else, they have one thing in common: they have had, most of them, a worse deal than the white man. A variation of this condescension is to think so poorly of the Negro in general that when he does anything as well as a white man, you have to make him out to be unique. You hear a coloured band and shout that nobody can play a trumpet like a black man (it depends, of course, which black man is being compared with which white). Then you run into Louis Armstrong, who tells you of the first time he heard a white boy — a very pasty-faced boy from Davenport, Iowa — play the cornet. And Armstrong broke into tears. 'Man!' he said, 'might as well lay you down and die, nigger.'

When you come to look at the life and career of Joe Louis, there is the special dilemma that he is a black man, and that even when you have done your best to judge him as other men, there's no way of denying that if he is not the best boxer that ever lived, he is as near to it as we are ever likely to know. He was born in 1914 on a sharecropper's cotton patch in Alabama and was as country-poor as it is possible to be. In theory the farm was — it had been rented as — a cotton and vegetable farm. But the vegetables did not feed the family, not by the time Joe, the seventh child, came along. His father broke, as sharecroppers do, from the daily strain of not making enough in crops either to feed his children or put shoes on them. They had no money to send him to a hospital. So he was carried off to a state institution where he died. A widower came to help out and soon married Joe's mother. And his five children moved in with the eight Louises. Joe got a little more food and went to a one-room school. Then the family moved to Detroit, where the stepfather worked in an automobile factory. Joe went on to trade school and worked in the evenings doing the rounds with an ice-wagon. Then came the Depression, and the family went on relief. This, said Joe, made his mother feel very bad. Years later Joe wrote out a careful cheque for $269, which was the amount of the relief cheques they had had from the government. That, said Joe, made Mrs Brooks, as she now was, feel better.

Whatever a big city means to the poor, Detroit meant to Joe. But it means something else to a hefty Negro lad short of cash. It means gymnasiums and the prospect of a quick take of two or three dollars in improvised fights. When Joe was 18 he came home very late one night and found his stepfather blocking the door.

'Where you been, Joe?' he asked.

'Over to the gym,' said Joe, 'working out.'

'I thought so,' said Mr Brooks, and lectured him about the fate of no-goods getting punch-drunk in gymnasiums. 'You go on foolin' around with boxing, you're never gonna amount to nothin'.'

He says this had him really worried. He asked his mother about it. She said it was all right to be a boxer if that's what you wanted to do most. And that was, in a way, the end of Joe's wayward life. The rest was practice, and workouts, and learning, learning, being knocked to pulp, and learning some more and coming again with a new trick or two.

There is a biography of Joe Louis, there may be several, that makes him talk the way sentimental writers always think simple men talk. It is a fairly nauseating work. But just before Joe retired two first-rate newspapermen, Meyer Berger and Barney Negler, got hold of him for many long sessions and, presumably with one hand in their pockets, transcribed exactly how he talked and what he said, without paying any more attention than Joe Louis does to grammar, simplicity or morals. From a few sentences of this report, I think you can get closer to the sort of man Louis is than from reams of official biographies. Take the bit about his being born with a catlike tread. 'When I got up in fighting,' he says, 'newspaper writers put a lot of words in my mouth. They wrote I was born with movements like a panther, and how I was a born killer. I never said it was wrong before, but the real truth is I was born kind of clumsy-footed. My mother says I liked to stumble a lot when I was a baby . . . That footwork the writers say was cat-sense was something Chappie Blackburn drilled into me. That was learned, it wasn't a born thing. He saw I couldn't follow my left hook with a right cross without gettin' my right foot off the floor. It takes a lot of learnin' before you can do it without thinkin'.' Or his explanation of why he never says much. 'When I got to be champion, the writers made a lot of noise about how hard it was to get me to talk. My mother said I was no different when I was a kid. When I went to school the teacher made me say words over and over and by-and-by I got stubborn, I guess, and wouldn't say them at all.'

After he lost a fight in early 1934, before his professional career was technically on the books, his manager told him to stop staying out late with the gang. 'He

treated me real good,' says Joe. 'I got to wear some of his clothes made over.' The night he became champion, the night it seemed the whole population of darktown Baltimore poured into that vaudeville theatre, Joe summed up his feelings in an immortal sentence or two:

'He fell in a face-down dive. That made me heavy-weight champion. People figure that was my biggest thrill. But I don't remember no special feelin', I just felt good . . . maybe it was because I figured I wouldn't feel a real champ until I got that Schmeling. That's what I fixed on.' (Schmeling it was who rang the only jarring note on Joe's professional record. At the end, it read: 61 bouts, 15 knockouts, 9 decisions, knocked out once. That was in 1936. And exactly one year to the night after he became champion, Joe had his revenge. He did what he 'fixed on'.)

Maybe you will get from this the idea that Joe Louis is a simple soul with quiet manners, a good boy who never had a crafty thought. Of course, he doesn't talk about his respect for his opponents, or his decency and casualness with the crowd, because these are fundamental, the characteristics that a man hardly knows about, or, if he does, keeps quiet about. But there is one remark he makes about his pride in money that should round out the picture. 'People ask me,' he says, ' "Joe, what will you do when the big money from fightin' stops comin' in? Won't you have to cut down?" I tell 'em, I'm gonna live good, retired or not retired. I got investments and I got ideas. I'll keep on livin' good. It's them who lived off me who won't be livin' so good.'

Well, there he is, the Brown Bomber no more, a memory of incredible speed, a slow shuffle, a solemn face, a gentleness, a shy acceptance of his greatness. All things considered, a credit to his race. So long as you add Jimmy Cannon's necessary afterthought — the human race, that is.

Washington, DC

9 September 1949

In the Library of Congress in Washington, in the catacombs devoted to the Fine Arts, there is a wonderful piece of nonsense — a painting done by a British artist with the forthright title, *The Burning of Washington by the British in 1814*. It is a boy's re-creation of what was certainly a lurid but also a workmanlike and almost casual piece of destruction. The Americans, who were then in the downy youth of their nationalism, being only twenty-seven years old, had an itch to flex their muscles and get into a fight with the Champ — Great Britain, need I say. They had neither the army, the navy nor the money to fight anybody, and the British regulars landing in Maryland joined up with the British Marines stationed in Chesapeake Bay, who broke their snooze, yawned slightly and walked forty miles to Washington. There they calmly burned down the Capitol, the White House — then known as the President's Palace — and the rest of the new public buildings that in those days were all that distinguished Washington from a fishing town on a marsh. It must have been a very humiliating event, for the President and his wife had to lodge in a boarding-house, and Congress was forced to meet in the Post Office, which had (in the general boredom of the undertaking) been overlooked.

Anyway, the British artist who painted this picture made of it the sort of three-colour advertisement that nations conscious of their strength insist on in their official art, the sort of thing which is now reproduced on breakfast-food containers, under some such title as American Victories, First Series. The picture shows the banks of the Potomac River ringed with cannon. Across the river come the British marines, either standing astride small sailboats, or pointing swords with one knee crooked in the approved position of my Lord Nelson, or sitting placidly rowing and admiring the view. And what a view! Nothing seems to be actually burning, because this would rob the spectator of the careful drawing of proud little buildings that are *about* to be burned. But from every bridge and tower and roof to the horizon puffs what looks like a swarm of barrage balloons, or those wavy circles that enclose the dialogue in comic strips. It is fire and flame. And even the harmless American ships on the opposite shore are writhing in great bags of smoke as impressive as medical illustrations of ulcerated intestines.

The contrast must be obvious between these valiant redcoats waving swords, and the British Treasury experts periodically sitting down in that same city showing their account books to the Americans who can have little fear that the White House will shortly go up in flames. But the contrast I want to go into is not so much about our sadly reversed status as between Washington then and now. Washington exists in everybody's eye as a newsreel image of a dome, a huge statue of Lincoln, a parade of some sort, and Mr Truman on the White House lawn, receiving a model fire-hydrant from the fire chief of Oskawassa, Arkansas. Washington is so much a source and factory of the daily news that we rarely pause in our sleuthing to see what sort of a town it is and who are the people who live there.

Well, it is a town made in the triangular join of two rivers. When I say a town 'made', I mean made. For it is the legitimate boast of Americans that theirs is, like Canberra, one of the few national capitals which was chosen as a plot of naked land and designed as a centre of government and built up brick by brick, instead of — like most other world capitals — having the honour of 'capital' imposed at some late date on a city already mushrooming into importance.

In 1787 the Continental Congress made a nation, made its constitution, and looked around for a place to call its capital. The Southern states almost seceded in a row over the location, and for a time there never seemed to be a possible chance of the choice falling on what its enemies called 'that Indian place in the wilderness'. However, there was a certain dinner-party given by Jefferson, and a few bottles of smooth Madeira persuaded Alexander Hamilton (in exchange for the support of a bill he was sponsoring) to promise to deliver enough Northern votes to clinch the choice of this area on the Potomac, which was cut out of Maryland and Virginia; which General Washington personally inspected and approved of; and which was chosen and called 'the city of Washington in the district of Columbia'. Washington hired a man called L'Enfant to design a federal city. Now L'Enfant was a Frenchman and an eighteenth-century man. He was hipped on the subject of 'vistas' and the idea, which he lovingly copied from Versailles, of having great diagonal avenues cross a gridiron or rectangular network of long streets. The idea was that everywhere the diagonals crossed a vertical and a horizontal street you would have a three-way vista. You could see poachers in all directions. You could put cannon there as a point of tactics. What's more, you'd be able to see the great buildings, when they got built, for miles. It all

sounded very elegant and modern. But the real-estate men liked it because it offered an endless series of money-making intersections. This obsessed Frenchman shocked them greatly when he showed up with his plans. For of the six thousand acres set aside for the city, over three thousand were for highways, preposterously wide avenues, anything from a hundred and sixty feet to four hundred feet wide. President Washington stuck by him, and he got his great diagonal avenues. Which is a blessed thing, because it's about all that's recognizable of L'Enfant's plan and still gives to Washington whatever it has of splendour and spaciousness.

The Congress, then, after wandering from Philadelphia to Princeton, to Annapolis, to Trenton and New York, set up shop in Washington in 1800. But the city had a hard time getting itself built, getting lighting and paving and sewers and water. Nobody wanted to finance it. The Congress showed a healthy instinct in the early days, which it has since unhappily suppressed, of wondering why it should put up money to prolong anybody's stay in a mess of shacks on a plain that rises only forty feet above the noxious Potomac. For I should tell you that, from that day to this, Washington lies securely in what the guidebooks call an amphitheatre and what you and I call a swamp. And it has a damp, wheezy, Dickensian sort of winter hardly equalled by London, and a steaming tropical summer not surpassed by the basin of the Nile, or those outposts on the Persian gulf where bad vice-consuls are sent to rot.

For half the nineteenth century, L'Enfant's immense avenues were the joke of all visiting Europeans. To get on to them, you left somebody's house and then, like poor Miss Martineau, had to hoist your skirts, climb a stile or two, slush through a bog on to the highway, and cross a field and a sliver of street to get to another human habitation. Along these Versailles avenues that fell like ornamental swords across a rubbish-heap went big-bellied Congressmen in cutaway coats, hunters in coonskin caps, judges lugging their law books with them, acid New England ladies, Indian chiefs (there were the remnants of thirty tribes there when the so-called Father of His Country moved in to take possession). Dickens said in the 1840s that Washington was a place 'of spacious avenues that begin in nothing and lead nowhere; streets a mile long that only want houses, roads, and inhabitants; public buildings that need but a public to be complete'.

The 1840s were a bustling time, what with railways getting to be taken for

granted, and the telegraph, and canals being dug everywhere. To the good businessmen who roamed around Washington hoping for industry and finding none, the capital city was a flop. The towns south of the Potomac managed to get all their land given back to Virginia. Georgetown, to the north, wanted to go back to Maryland but never succeeded. But during the Civil War, Washington was the base of the Northern armies, and into it swarmed everybody who had a favour to sell, a bridge to mend, a new kind of gun, any sort of influence which might help or threaten the Union. It was in those years, and in the lush and corrupt days of the Reconstruction, that Washington became what it has ever since remained — the headquarters not only of the government but also of pressure groups and lobbyists, of manufacturers and pimps and fixers who conceived of a capital as a city dedicated to the manufacture of wealth by intimidating the government. The District itself was in wretched need of money. Its citizens were Americans without a vote (they still are) or a city government to call their own. It had a debt of about $4 million, which in 1874 was increased to $22 million. The federal government had to guarantee this debt and it wasn't paid off until 1922.

In the late 1870s it was decided that somebody would have to try and govern the city, and a municipal corporation was formed with three commissioners chosen by the President.

In this period there was a man called Shepherd, a builder, who gave to Washington its second blessing: a wealth of fine trees. He also got the city clean water and workable sewers, but most of all he started planting trees at a furious rate against a howl of protest from people who thought it was a shameless way to waste public money. He lined L'Enfant's great avenues with English elms, thus for ever defeating the original idea of long, uninterrupted vistas. But he made of a marsh the most shady and leafy town in the United States. Today the streets and squares tower with American elms, with sycamores, with all the glorious variety of American oaks, with lindens and willows, with trees from all over the Union and from many foreign places. The little square right opposite the White House, for instance, has a hundred varieties, with spruce, redwood, magnolia, cherry, holly, basswood, and I don't know what else. And springing up in the unlikeliest places is the Oriental gingko, the Chinese pagoda, and ringing the tidal basin those embarrassing Japanese cherry trees, which when we were at war with Japan had to be called something else, but are always the same, and always perfect.

The best guidebooks seem to be incapable of describing the physical look of Washington from any place but the air. That may be because the commanding avenues seen from the earth look like deserted parade-grounds. From the air, of course, they look like landing-strips, a misconception that several pilots from the hinterland acted on, until the city built a few years ago a big modern airport well outside the town. The man from Mars might well assume that Washington was, indeed, another name for Athens taken over by the American Air Force. For arising at majestic intervals from great avenues are what to the pilot look like more Greek wedding cakes than you'd see at a French chef's golden wedding. When you get nearer to those sleek forbidding piles of white stone, cement and plaster of Paris, you might think them more Roman than Greek, and some more vaguely Italian. I doubt, however, whether you could see in Athens or in Rome such an imposing stack of porticoes and rows of Ionic columns and saucer-domes and inset-arches. They are, you would be right in guessing, government buildings — the Capitol, the Supreme Court building, the Treasury — which is almost an Acropolis in itself. Washington started to build in the 1790s in the inrushing fashion of the Greek Revival (a style in which Americans did delicate and beautiful things when they domesticated it in wood, in the South and New England, as the proper frame for houses and little churches). But whatever was good about the earliest Washington buildings is now to be seen only in the White House and the noble federal houses of Georgetown. For the Greek Revival style was soon succeeded by others, by red-brick Georgian of a humble kind, then by Romanesque, then by all the monstrous colonnades and curlicues of the mid-nineteenth century. At the end of that century there was a World's Fair in Chicago, showing the grandiose plaster-of-Paris façades of the Beaux-Arts exhibition in Paris. Ever since then Washington has lusted after these Roman monsters like a Girl Guide after Mark Antony. Washington would be about as intimate as Nuremberg used to be, if this was all. But happily it has a magnificent park, the finest scenery inside a city's environs, said Lord Bryce, of any city he knew. And it crawls through this graveyard like Virginia creeper over a tombstone. The city is also nibbled at on all sides by suburbs — which city isn't? Some of them are old red-brick Georgian and some we'd better just say are suburban. Indeed, if you went to live in Washington and by some strength of character managed not to be a government employee, you might live in many parts of town and say that rows of nineteenth-century boarding-houses were more typical of Washington than rows of Greek columns. It's true; the two shapes most characteristic of Washington are the Italian palace, where the wage-slaves

work, and the bow-windows, where they live.

You'll see that it's impossible to talk about Washington without getting preoccupied with the government and its buildings. But that's because there's practically nothing else. Washington is not a capital like London, which is a government capital but also a capital of banking, of music, of theatre, of eating, of writing and reading, of public sports, of shipping. All those things other than government are centred in New York, which Washingtonians contemptuously think of as Babylon-on-the-Hudson. Washington has no permanent theatres — it is wary of opening them to Negroes, and Washington is embarrassed by Negroes for exactly the same reason that Alabama is: nearly a third of its population is coloured.

Washington has little music that can begin to compare with the great orchestras of New York, Boston, Minneapolis, San Francisco or even Philadelphia. It has indifferent public food. It is as close as Baltimore to the huge Chesapeake Bay, but whereas the tables of Baltimore swill with terrapin stew and snapper-turtle soup and groan with expiring lobsters of a fatness that has to be seen to be believed, Washington for some reason makes no decent use of the gorgeous fish that come gasping up at the end of its streets. The answer may be that Washington stays home. It is not a night-owl town. The Congressmen don't like to be seen in their cups in public. And I doubt if either Sodom or Gomorrah was ever kept going by a population of respectable clerks.

This is another — in fact, the major — by-product of Washington's being nothing but a government city. It is the only town I know which has bred its own species of employee — the 126 clerks who came here in 1800 were neat and sober and have neatly and soberly reproduced their kind, to the tune of 300,000 government clerks. You do not see here the clashing variety of human shape and style and colouring that makes American cities such a challenge to the pleasant senses and some others. In other national capitals it is on the streets that you see mankind's variety. It is indoors — inside the courts and the parliament — that you see a mass of officials, who look as if they'd been run off on an assembly line. Not so in Washington. Here all the types in America, and all the accents, are drawn from the plains and mountains and deserts into the House and Senate Chambers. And on the streets — a population of quiet, slim, self-effacing people in glasses. Indoors, the human jungle, outdoors — the clerks. For it is the Congress and its

hangers-on that ride the roost and set the tone of high life. You do not walk down the Strand side-stepping MPs at every turn or cluster around a church to catch Mr Aneurin Bevan at his devotions. In London the Members of Parliament enjoy their true glory only when they are inside the House of Commons. Once outside, they dissolve into the formidable and dominant race known as the Cockneys. But in Washington the politicians, the puffing gauleiters from the provinces, are the rulers. It is this status which gives to the natives of Washington a meek, subterranean life, like that of Parisians during the occupation. They are resigned to it, as a Blackpool landlady is resigned to the profitable uproar of August Bank Holiday.

So, to continue what Mr Churchill would call 'this true account', we have a government capital obsessed and absorbed with governing, and all the feuds and deals and crises that go with it. We have a city with poor food, a nightmare of a climate, dignified by great avenues and by the cascading foliage of magnificent trees. But how, you must be saying, how about the high life, the air of great events, the intrigue?

It is usual to say that Washington is a nest of intrigue. And so it is. And undoubtedly there are more luxurious and louder parties held there than most of the ancient capitals can any longer afford. In this country you would expect the social arbiter to be a woman. And so she is. But ever since Mrs Perle Mesta got made the Minister to Luxembourg there has been a fine rivalry going on, and much well-bred miaowing in well-kept gardens, about who is to succeed Mrs Mesta as the town's leading hostess. I should add here that though not many Washington wives can aspire to toss a battalion of pressed duck at a thousand guests, Washington wives are another breed all to themselves. I never yet met a wife of a man anywhere near the government who didn't bear up splendidly under the intimate knowledge that her husband really swung the election and gave the word for the date of the invasion of Europe. This all, surely, implies a very harem of intrigue.

But intrigue in a capital city suggests the splended briberies of a Talleyrand, the sort of masked ball at which the Secretary of State forgets to dance with the wife of the Turkish ambassador and boom! — another crusade is on the march. Washington is indeed choking with intrigue and gossip. But its intrigue is less like that of the court of Louis XIV and more like that of a vast church bazaar, in which

hot-eyed matrons wink and whisper in the hope that Mrs X's pickles will be rejected as too tart and Farmer Y's Poland Farceurs will come in a poor third.

You have heard the word 'pork-barrel' — the President's pork-barrel — and must have wondered what a pork-barrel was doing in so elegant a place as the White House. It is, alas, a permanent though invisible fixture. To be more accurate, it is two fixtures. For there's one pork-barrel for the President and one for the Congress. Like many another American institution, they were created by self-denial and ended by giving a licence to self-indulgence.

Jefferson and his excellent Secretary of the Treasury followed the English custom of using the national income as they thought fit, disbursing lump sums to each department and accounting for the money when the money was spent. But at the first complaint from Congress they decided to adopt the more chivalrous method of asking the Congress to specify its wants and name a price for each of them. The result is the Congressional pork-barrel, which persuades some Congressmen to postpone for ever their interest in what is best for the nation and sends them circulating through back-rooms, offices and parties, ogling an old friend here and charming a stranger there, in the hope of swiping for their constituency an army camp, or getting a new post office built or an old river drained.

The President's private pork-barrel was left him by the Constitution as a consolation prize for having to get the Senate's consent to his appointment of all the big federal jobs, like Cabinet officers and ambassadors. He was allowed to keep certain 'inferior offices', which his party has ever since been eager to help him fill. He it is who appoints a postmaster in Santa Claus, Arizona, a food inspector in New Orleans, a tax collector in Red Cent, Utah. If this seems a harmless vanity, it should be remembered that there are many thousands of these 'inferior offices' scattered across the land and that every one of them represents a Congressman appeased or a Congressman flouted. They tot up to a nice balance of favours and insults that registers with painful accuracy when some bill the President is dying to have passed comes to the vote in the Congress. On a dark day of the Civil War, Lincoln confessed he looked more ashen than usual not from any concern about his armies but because he was worried over a postmastership in Brownsville, Ohio.

Washington was accordingly long ago described as 'a huge hog-wallow where every man's snout is at the pork-barrel'. It is an uncouth image, no doubt, but it is

a truer symbol of Washington intrigue than any boudoir gallivanting ever recorded in the White House. Washington tries to perfume this reality with a lot of scented legend about George Washington's eye for a pretty ankle, and how Martha Washington was a fragrant thing in her day. But even this myth doesn't hold up. In our day she has given her name to a wholesome candy. Imagine 'Josephine Buonaparte Cough Drops'!

You have seen that I have done my best to give you a vivid and unprejudiced account of this great capital city where now the ancient empires bow to the dollar. I should like to take you around some more of its glories, but, like Mr Fitzpatrick in the travelogues, we must say a reluctant farewell to the federal city on the Potomac. And so as the sun sinks into the Tidal Basin . . . excuse me, I have just time to make the fast train up to Babylon-on-the-Hudson.

The Fall of New England

21 October 1949

There are times of the year when anybody with an itch for travel must think of those parts of the earth that God favoured above all others when He handed out the seasons. There are two of these that I have enjoyed many times but I still find myself goggling and marvelling every time they come around. One is the English spring and the other is New England in the fall.

The best of English poets have celebrated the rich, sombre English autumn, but an American fall bears little resemblance to that 'season of mists and mellow fruitfulness'. Many famous Britons have put on record their astonishment at the youthful, trumpeting quality of the fall, at the hot days and the Mediterranean blue skies encircling a landscape of blinding scarlet and gold. Lord Bryce, not a reticent man about American vices, couldn't trust his English reserve to speak properly about its virtues. Lloyd George confessed after his only trip to America that no matter how inconclusive his political mission had been he would at least go home remembering the overwhelming experience of the fall. A hundred years ago, Mrs Trollope, who liked very little about these United States, broke down and wrote that at this season of the year 'the whole country goes to glory'.

The fall ranges throughout the whole hardwood or deciduous region of the country, from the north woods of Maine clear across the Midwest as far as the Dakotas and way down South to the foothills of the Rockies in Texas. Since no American can bear to believe that he or his parents chose a second-rate place to be born in, there is no agreement about where the fall is at its best. The residents of the Great Lakes say that no sumacs flame like their sumacs. And the pride of a man from Arkansas in his blazing hawthorn trees is a wild grab at plucking a virtue out of necessity. A native of another land can simply report that the fall of New England is as a four-alarm fire to a lighted match. There is no way to describe it or talk about it, except in the language of Milton and Shakespeare, who never saw it.

But it is possible to say why it's so. Everybody enthuses about the fall but nobody explains it. It is due to a happy accident of climate, a steady brilliance of October sun going to work on the great variety of American hardwoods and the

fairly arid soil they stand in. The superiority of New England's fall — of that in Vermont, New Hampshire and Massachusetts especially — is due to their latitude. These states are far enough north to get an early cold spell to quicken the sap before the prolonged sunshine of October brings it out as colour in the leaves. They are far enough south to escape a continuous and withering frost, which is what nips the Canadian fall before it can come to its prime. Farther south — in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia and the Carolinas — they get no cold, except at high altitudes, and by the time the sap is forced up and ready for showing off, the leaves are crumbling and falling.

In most temperate countries the strong pigments that have been hidden from view in the greens of summer never do come out, because the autumn brings in rain and mists and threatening grey skies. The whole trick of the New England fall is nothing more complicated than that of a photographic negative handled by a superior developer. In the autumn, the countrymen tell us, the sap is blocked from the leaf by a new growth of hard cells at the base of the twig. So the greens fade. Now all you need is an October of brilliant light and warmth to develop out the yellows and the reds. The only other qualification is a lack of rain. On rich and rainy soils like those of England the leaves stay green too late till the frost kills them. New England, on the contrary, has many causes to lament its rather poor soils. But it never regrets them in the fall, for their very lack of nitrogen stimulates a great range of yellows and golds. And the acid in the leaves is what burns them scarlet. The fall, then, is nothing more than the thorough burning out of what is poor in the soil and what is bitter in the leaf. 'It is,' says Donald Culcross Peattie, 'essentially death that causes all the brave show.' But it is a fierce and productive death.

I once went north from New York City at the very beginning of the fall to meet the peak of it wherever it might be between Maine and southern Connecticut. The first signal of the glory to come is a bare tree, which is never bare until the fall is ready to ripen. It is the butternut tree, and it sheds everything just as the bushes and berries are beginning to trickle out their purple. By the green edge of the parkway on which I was driving, little piles of brown leaves, already dead, lay at the foot of hickory trees. The ferns were dry. The bracken and blueberry bushes were wine-dark, the sumac a throbbing vermilion. Everywhere there was the smell of burning wood, letting off violet wisps of smoke to smear the cloudless sky — like trickles of milk on window panes.

At this point I wanted to take off my glasses, which a notation on my driving licence forbids. This is another thing about the fall. The sparkling clarity of the light gives to short-sighted people the constant sense that their eyesight has marvellously improved and that they are seeing fences, barns, steeples and billboards in the sharp outline they probably have for other people all the time.

I drove up and over the hills across from New York State into Connecticut, past roadside stands piled high with jugs of cider and pyramids of pumpkins. And then I started to follow a river whose banks were black with stands of evergreen. By now a green field was just another daub on the crowded palette of the landscape. We were still far from the fall's peak. It was still the small, treeless things that were trying to be splendid. The briar and bushes and vines were sparkling. I do not know them well enough to single out their separate charms, but it is an annual joy to see brush which most of the time is a mesh of old wire suddenly disclose a jewel of a flower. Pokeweed, and pitchpine cone, and unpretentious things like partridge berry and jack-in-the-pulpit. All of them have a special shining berry, a bursting husk, a momentary bloom.

I got out of the car and wallowed in the silence and the singing colour and the balmy heat. At the rim of my tyre I noticed that the smooth white cement of the highway had cracked under the tension of a cranberry vine. And through this crack, and edging into the highway, wild cranberries grew. I looked ahead at the engineered boulevard of the highway, pouring like two ribbons of toothpaste to the horizon, quite heedless of its defeat by the concentrated violence of a tiny and delicate vine. That just about put industrial know-how in its proper place. And I climbed back and went on, warming to the excitement of what was to come.

And now the trees took over. After another twenty miles, the evergreens came in thick and fast. Even a pine looked like a new invention seen in its inkiness against a flaming maple. Now I was surrounded by two other properties that make the New England fall unique. First and above all the maple, with its bursting sugar which blazes into scarlet. And then the oaks. An Englishman is surprised to wonder about many slender trees and hear them called oaks. The fat old oak tree of England, with his legs planted solidly on lush damp ground, is a rare sight. But New England has a teeming variety of oaks, and their value as a spectacle is that in the fall they entirely revise your ideas about the infinite fine range of colour between gold and lemon. And beside this perpetual shower of scarlet and lemon

thankful for that. For in the interval Americans conceived a passion for everything Greek. Believing that they had just successfully established the first genuine democracy since the Greeks and the grandest Republic since Rome, they took to naming their towns with classical names. Hence Philadelphia, Annapolis, Laconia, Athens, Sparta, Seneca, Cicero, Troy. Thomas Jefferson built a home with a columned portico. And soon country courts, and inns, and farmhouses were doing the same. It may sound like a dubious fad, but Americans stuck to their preference for wooden houses, and today New England is glorified with hundreds of churches, houses, court-houses, the wood painted white, with pillared porticoes and graceful spires. In this small village in Vermont, the county courthouse is an exquisite symbol of what Americans did in wood with Greek forms.

Opposite the courthouse is the inn, which is also the jail. Newfane has kept up its habit of feeding its prisoners from the inn, and since the inn serves the best food around here, it's sometimes hard to get the inmates out of jail. Theodore Roosevelt said he would like to retire here, commit some 'mild crime' and eat his way through a cheerful old age.

If you went along the valley you would be walking without knowing it through another town called Brookline, for Brookline is simply the scattered houses of the valley. It has less than a hundred people, mostly farmers, and they are their own rulers. Its first town meeting was held in 1795 and the last one was held last week. The names at the first meeting are still there: Moore and Waters, and Ebenezer Wellman and Cyrus Whitecomb, and Christopher Osgood (there has always been a Christopher on the Osgood farm). Walking along the road you might run into the tractor of a Mr Hoyt. He is to all intents a farmer. And so he is. He is also the road commissioner of the valley. His wife, Minnie Hoyt, is the town clerk, a justice of the peace, and when she isn't doing the farming chores she's busy signing fishing licences, or marrying a visiting couple, or telling the comfortable city-people who have made a summer home here that by a decision made at the last town meeting their taxes will be twice as much next year. What is striking to an Englishman here is that the few fairly well-to-do people are all what they call 'summer folks', people who made a farm over as a summer retreat from New York or Boston. But the summer folks are strangers and underlings. The valley has heard many delicate sounds through the years. But it has never heard the advice of a squire or the accent of *noblesse oblige*. The farmers are ruled and rulers. The wealthy stranger goes cap in hand and pays his rates according to Minnie Hoyt and does

what Mr Hoyt says to keep his part of the highway safe and sound.

Our pilgrimage ends with an odd little building, a round schoolhouse. It was put up in the 1820s and is shaped like a silo, just one room with five windows equally spaced in a circle around it. It was so built, they say, because at that time the valley lived in fear of a highwayman called 'Thunderbolt', whom no one had ever seen. The schoolmaster, a Scot from Muirkirk, one Dr Wilson, had his desk facing the door and could see through all the windows the first approach of any robber, or of the dreaded Thunderbolt. Thunderbolt's presence seemed to have haunted the valley for a couple of decades, but one gets a reassuring picture of Yankee vigilance in the dour figure of Dr Wilson, spelling out his lessons to the valley children and in the twilight letting his fingers play on the barrel of his shotgun as his protective eye rolled around the five windows.

I leave you with this comforting image of the rude forefathers of today's New Englanders. Having led you so far into a mystery, though, it occurs to me you may wonder if they ever caught Thunderbolt. Yes, they did.

When the good Dr Wilson died they took off the high scarf he always wore and on his neck they saw scars and the marks of chains. Sure enough, *he* was Thunderbolt.

Letter to an Intending Immigrant

16 December 1949

I was going downtown in the subway and was flattened up against the door reading the morning paper of a man breathing into my ear. If anybody in this train had had room to ram his elbow into my lungs, chances are I wouldn't have noticed it. That would have been just an occupational hazard of travelling in New York during the Christmas shopping season. But what I became aware of after a mile or so was a gentle nudge somewhere down there in the direction of my floating rib. This was such a friendly gesture that I tried to swivel my eyeballs in the direction it was coming from. I saw the upturned face of a man who might have been about five feet three or, then again, might have been a six-footer simply frozen at that altitude. He grinned and asked me if my name was Cooke. I said it was and he said his name was Schofield and he'd been in school with me in England twenty . . . well, several years ago. Before we lurched to a stop, his stop, he had time to tell me that he was working in a big department store downtown and had been over here for just about two years. I asked him if he was here for good. He gave a little laugh and said he certainly was. 'I just upped and left,' he said, and the train stopped and he vanished into the gasping school of New Yorkers peering at us through the aquarium windows.

This whole episode didn't last longer than thirty seconds, but it made me glad for him and set me contrasting his obvious good spirits with the fate and the faces of other English people I've run into in the past few years who also 'upped and left'. There was, for instance, an English girl who decided when the war was over that instead of having her children come back home to her from Canada, she would join them over here and start a new life in a new land. Her boy, it turned out, developed one of those boy soprano voices of remarkable purity. She began to fret — in the little Canadian town she'd settled in — and think back longingly to the church schools in England where this voice might be trained. Of course, she was homesick for more things than an English boys' choir. It was a useful and sensible excuse to give to friends on this side. She is back in London now, very contented in austerity, and her boy is proudly singing his head off.

I think also of a young man in his middle twenties who came here, hit on a good

job and quickly acquired the usual admirations: the bright tension of New York, the vigour and irony of its people, the autumn weather, the food, the women, the motor parkways, the theatre. For a time he didn't seem to notice that this was costing him twice or more what these good things would have cost him at home if he'd been able to get them. He didn't need to notice, because he was a bachelor and such things as insurance and social security seemed like an old man's babble. This young and strapping Englishman was undoubtedly by now uprooted. His enthusiasm for many American customs was really a surprised contempt for his own previous ignorance of them. This is not a good basis for permanent admiration and he began to lose some of them, as he came to take them for granted. His job didn't pan out, and he found in the short and ruthless space of one month that New York is a bad town, and America a bad country maybe, to be poor in. With what he had left he went to Jamaica. Restlessness of course is a personal thing, but there was a conflict in it that I've noticed in other Britons who've sailed in here with shining eyes and left after a time in a mixed mood that is not pleasant to admit, for it is a mixture of disappointment and defeat. There is surely nothing to be ashamed of in disappointment. But many of these intending settlers can hardly fail to feel that American life is a far more severe challenge than they had figured on, and it has beaten them.

A century ago the whole adventure was, I think, materially harder on the people who made it, but psychologically not so tough. They knew before they ever left home that they were coming to a land with many less material comforts than Europe had to offer. They knew that the essential qualifications were physical hardihood, self-reliance, cheerfulness in the face of the adversity that was bound to come sometime, an indifference to social niceties, and a shrugging acceptance of dirt, bad luck, violence and bankruptcy. The visitors who didn't prepare themselves for these hazards had nowhere to turn for sympathy. Their criticisms sounded niggling and effeminate. Thus in 1820, Washington Irving described such Englishmen: 'They miss some of the snug conveniences and petty comforts which belong to an old, highly-finished and over-populous state of society; where the ranks of useful labour are crowded, and many earn a painful and servile subsistence by studying the very caprices of appetite and self-indulgence. These minor comforts, however, are all-important in the estimation of narrow minds.'

It sounds just like a British criticism of the travelling American today. Only the other day a young American film star (who was born on a small farm) caused a

commotion in an 'old, highly-finished' hotel in Paris by demanding an air-conditioned room.

Nowadays an Englishman's complaints would not be likely to turn on such things. Now the material scales are weighted in America's favour. Today you can cross the three thousand miles of the American continent and never want for a private bathroom, a cement highway, a night baseball game, an airplane connection, a pair of nylon stockings or a gallon of ice cream in six different flavours.

But the catch is that America is no more willing than it has ever been to give these things away for free. They are not in this country the luxuries that a secure upper class once exacted from a swarming and servile lower class. They are the minimum demands of comfort made by a population as fertile as its resources, in a country where comfort has accordingly turned into big business. A share of that comfort, a bigger share of satisfying and ingenious comfort than any nation has ever known, can be bought by any worker with a steady wage. But the measure of that steady wage is the energy he can maintain. Visiting teams of British factory managers have remarked on the tenacity with which American workers compete through incentive schemes. You have only to lean out of any midtown window in New York, or in a score of other cities, to notice the furious concentration and energy of construction workers while they are on the job. At 5 o'clock they will quit like an exploding light bulb, but up to that moment they haul and hammer and drill and bulldoze with fearful zest.

A little time ago I left my office, as I usually do, about seven in the evening (not having the instinctive zest of the natives) and saw that the whole lobby of the skyscraper office building — which spans something like the floor-space of Piccadilly Circus — was covered with tarpaulin from which arose a network of ladders and scaffolding, a whole series of wooden platforms running about seven or eight feet from the ceiling. This scaffolding alone looked as if it might take a day or two to put up. But none of it was there at 5 o'clock when the offices of this building disgorged their three or four thousand employees. However, this was only the preparation for the job in hand. The job in hand was the painting of the whole of this great ceiling, which is about thirty feet from the ground. Sixteen men at various intervals were already up on the platforms and beginning to wave a kind of big flat brush, which from my angle looked about as wide as the tail of a

The 1950s

The Summer Bachelor

16 June 1950

An American telephoned me the other day to ask me what was meant by 'flannelled fools'. I had to explain to him that in Britain the summer game is played in flannels. He jumped, wrongly, to the conclusion that boxing was the British summer pastime and that everybody got fitted out for it in long skiing underwear. I introduced him gently to some of the mysteries of cricket, not the least of which is why grown men stand around for most of the day doing nothing at all in temperatures of 50 degrees. I tried to keep my exposition to simple words, but when you are talking about transatlantic weather the simplest words are the most deceiving. I remember once picking up the Paris edition of the New York *Herald Tribune* and looking up to the left-hand corner of the front page to see how the people were faring in the Manhattan midsummer. It prints the weather report of London, Paris and New York, and the newspaper naturally has to take on trust the language of the weather bureau of origin. It said, 'London, fair, 71 degrees, continued hot; Paris, 78, warm; New York, clear, high 83, seasonably cool.'

This could serve as a text for the British export drive, which falters always on the presumption that an American means the same thing as an Englishman when he talks of a 'light suit'. In Britain, it appears to mean light in colour. Here it means light-weight. If this is understood, the golden rule for the textile exporter will then be clear: it is to coax the American buyer into purchasing large quantities of the raw material in Britain — as sheep, if you like — and then let him use it and cut it according to his habits and his needs. For British clothes in America will make a man feel uncomfortable outdoors in summer and indoors in winter. It is possible for a North European to feel at home here any time up to Christmas. He could keep his old habits and his regular suits and feel he was still in a temperate climate. The New Year transports him to the pole, and in a temperature of one above (above zero, that is) the word 'cold' will take on a sharper meaning for a Londoner, say, who has never in his or his forebears' lifetime known anything colder than 9 degrees. Summer here is, however, the bigger problem for the Briton. He is rightly aware that New York is named after old York but he goes on to the fatal assumption that the trip from one to the other

involves a direct east-to-west passage of three thousand miles. What he rarely knows is that he has also gone eight hundred miles south, that old York is located on a level with the tundra of Labrador, whereas New York is at the precise latitude of Corfu.

This clash between the romantic legend of our sameness and the facts of life is what sparks the Englishman's shock. He discovers that the changeover from winter to summer life is brutally abrupt, and that to adjust to the violent swing of the thermometer he has to acquire habits more suited to a fieldhand in a banana republic than to the gentle vagaries of a London heatwave. (I recall another London headline: '75 Again Today! No Relief in Sight.') He will discover that New York is more of a summer furnace than a summer festival. He will learn that it has created unfamiliar local institutions. He will soon hear about the summer bachelor, the forgotten man of American folklore.

To appreciate the pathos and charm of the summer bachelor, you have to learn the stages by which a normally jogging and contented husband becomes one. Last week, then, the family took off for our summer house at the end of Long Island. (This is a custom not restricted to what used to be called the upper-middle class. The continental mainland of the United States sweats abominably from May to October and any humane husband who is not fettered to the marriage bed will rent a shack anywhere in the mountains, by a lake or a seashore, as far as possible from Chicago, St Louis, Pittsburgh or a score of other infernos.) The induction into summer bachelorhood is almost as violent as the season that causes it. One day you are living in a normal house or apartment, with carpets, grocery deliveries, timed meals, friends and everything; and the next you'd think the Russians were coming. Your wife is out of bed like a rocket. She beats around the house like a beaver. 'Excuse me,' she says, as I am in the middle of a shrewd sentence on the typewriter, and up comes the carpet. Up come all the carpets. At 10 a.m. the kitchen doorbell buzzes and a huge man in an apron clomps in and, with the aid of three helpers, lugs the carpets away to be stored.

There is a clatter of china in the kitchen. All the civilized eating utensils are going into boxes and cocoons of tissue paper. My wife breaks in again and lifts a warning finger. She indicates one shelf and one drawer. 'There you are,' she says. For the next three months or more I am to use two cracked kitchen plates, a chipped saucer, drink my coffee out of a premature Coronation mug (Edward VIII)

and stir it with a spoon bought fifty years ago by her mother, a relentless Southerner. It looks like a petrified alligator, and that is what it's meant to look like. It says on it, 'A present from Jacksonville, Florida'.

Now there is a noise not unlike the furious exhaust that sets in at the tenser moments of science-horror movies ('The radio-isotope, Fleming, throw the safety rod, man!'). It is a team of vacuum cleaners. I stumble into the living room, for it is in darkness. The curtains have come down and four shades have gone up, two white ones on the outside, two green ones inside. The nifty satin upholstery on the sofa is obscured by a dingy slipcover. So are all the upholstered chairs. The lamps are swathed in bedsheets, giving them the appearance of Arab sentinels. A screen is being pulled across the open entrance to the living room, and my wife gives the annual order: 'Stay out of here, remember!' (I have no theories about American wives. They are, so far as I'm concerned, wives.) A mountain of laundry is piling up in the hall. There is a tearing sound coming from the clothes closets — the winter clothes are being entombed in plastic hangers and all the clothes give off a characteristic smell. It used to be mothballs. You used to hear them rattle around in the night. Now they tinkle, for they roll up and down small perforated tins with hooks on them that hang on the racks. The closets are squirted with some noxious chemical, and the ones that contain the winter suits are dynamited with bombs of DDT. This may all sound very drastic. Alas, our insidious summer enemy is a beast unknown to a true temperate climate — the buffalo moth — and if you ignore him, you are apt to confront an interesting wardrobe in the fall, of garments that might have served as targets on a rifle range.

So now, the blankets are entombed, the sheets changed, rooms closed off, refrigerator defrosted and denuded of food (it looks neater that way, to my wife at least, when she returns in October). I am permitted to run the refrigerator sometime later and it will soon contain tins of beer, a mouldy tomato, a box of crackers, and some limes and lemons. Just before the family leaves, she issues the battle orders for the summer campaign: 'Always put the garbage out before you go to bed, never start on a new bottle of milk before you've finished the old one. Never go out and leave the windows open. Keep the shades drawn in the living room. Right?' Very good, General, and goodbye.

The winter cycle is completed the summers that the children go to camp. There is a special fuss to be made with duffel bags and blankets and swimming shorts

and two blankets and name tapes. And you all go off to Grand Central Station and align your brood with one of the many regiments of children lined up and waiting for the call to their track and their train. And again you hear one of the most powerful folk songs of America. A stationmaster stands by a large board and he looks at a card in his hand that lists all the names of the camps and the platforms of their outgoing trains. Nine-thirty strikes. And he warms up his baritone and chants: 'Indian Summer — track nineteen. Shining Mountain — seventeen. Pine Grove — twenty-one. Camp Wawokeewe — nine. High Wind — fifteen. Meadow Lark — eighteen. Thunderbolt — twenty-nine.'

It is over. They are gone. You leap to a telephone and locate another displaced person. You bathe and shave and hear yourself singing forgotten songs of liberation. This first evening is unusually high-spirited. The drinks flow free and so does the coarse interchange of remarks about family life. You decide that your companion is a fine man you have tended to underestimate. Then you go home and recall with a start that you are on your own again. You hear your shoes crackle on the dust of the desert that is the long, dark hall. You peek into the living room and switch on a light. The standing lamp by the switch is a dim figure indeed. Its shade has been wrapped around with a fez of crinkly white paper, and it stands there like Lawrence of Arabia in ambush. You duck out and into the bedroom. The silence is chilling. You get a beer and read a little, or stay up and watch the late show, and then the late late show. At three you turn in, and at eight you feel terrible. Each weekend, you suffer the troop trains of the New Haven or Long Island Railroad and limp raggedly into the bosom of your family. On Monday it starts again.

At this point a suspicion will have crossed your mind that has certainly crossed the mind of the summer bachelor. Indeed, George Axelrod made a play about it and called it *The Seven Year Itch*. The title itself suggests a clinical thesis and we will leave it with its author. For most men it does not take seven years to recall that New York contains, among its martyred and lonely millions, an old girlfriend, or some agreeable but impeccable social worker, or some other honest female whose devotion to her work denies her the blissful exile your wife is now embarked on. Peter Arno captured and immortalized this suspicion — of yours — in a cartoon that showed a portly gent, one of those waggish Blimps with the spotted bow tie, marching smartly down Park Avenue with a very trim young woman on his arm. Coming up the avenue, and just level with him, is a majestic

This little picture is meant to produce a shudder in you. If it doesn't, then Britons are not what they used to be, and their passion for privacy, and what's more for respecting the next man's privacy, is dead and gone. Don't misunderstand me. I approve myself very strongly of this feeling. I share it. But it makes me all the less of an American. Only a week ago, I heard a plonking sound, allied to music, quite faint, coming up through the living room floor. It was a neighbour in our apartment house who is either 6 years of age and a promising pianist or 40 years of age and a dope . . . because she — why do I say 'she', I wonder? — has been stuck on that same piece for a month or two now. I grumbled about the sameness of her repertory, and my 12-year-old daughter, idling over a book, said, 'Relax, Pop, you don't have to hear it if you don't want to.'

By this simple remark my daughter didn't mean that I could get up and go downstairs and start a riot, or that I could call the police or take out an injunction. She simply meant I should shut my mind to the sound. I made sure this is what she meant, because when I played aloud with the idea of strangling our tinkling neighbour, she said, 'I don't think that's very nice. She paid *her* rent too, you know.'

Now, I should like to say that I am proud of my daughter and usually turn to her for a response that is commonsensical and unshocked (by, so far as I can make out, anything in life). But I wasn't aware she had acquired so young a fundamental mood or attitude of what Americans call democracy. In Britain, one of the minor duties of good citizenship is not to disturb the private life of other citizens. In this country, it's the other way around — not to disturb other citizens who are enjoying their private life in public. That, as you see, is a heavily loaded interpretation of an attitude that is universal among Americans. And there are limits. Just the same, the decision of a Washington court of appeal not to let advertisers broadcast in public buses only shows how far you can go in America without being stopped.

Americans regard most of us born in Britain as dull, decent, amiable people but given to being rather testy about our rights. So 'Relax, Pop,' says my daughter and goes back to reading her book with one third of her mind, listening to the pianist downstairs with another lobe, and at the same time dreaming on all cylinders about some absent male of the species. Quite aside from the principle involved, this attitude entails a considerable physical feat. It is the ability not to hear what

you don't want to hear, what the most famous radio critic in America calls 'selective deafness'. He says it is a faculty essential to an enjoyment of American radio, and it is a faculty that most visiting Britons would rather not develop. Because they soon learn, as Mr Crosby — John, not Bing — remarks, that the advertising people are aware of this conditioned reflex and so from year to year, like drug addicts, they increase the dose of the sales talk they cut into the programmes. Still, nobody hearing his favourite comedian or forum discussion or symphony concert bothers to turn off the 'plug'. He lets it chatter on about some soap that 'atomizes dirt' or a toothpaste that is 'kind to gums but murder on film'. And then, the ecstatic announcer stops, and so back to Bob Hope or 'Whither Europe?' or the Second Symphony of Beethoven.

To watch an American on a beach, or crowding into a subway, or buying a theatre ticket, or sitting at home with his radio on, tells you something about one aspect of the American character: the capacity to withstand a great deal of outside interference, so to speak; a willing acceptance of frenzy which, though it's never self-conscious, amounts to a willingness to let other people have and assert their own lively, and even offensive, character. They are a tough race in this. You are expected—far beyond what other peoples would say were the restraints of manners — to assume that one man's opinion is as good as another's. The expert is an American idol, but only in certain understood fields. He is safe from contradiction if his expertness is in a science — in medicine, technology, industrial research, or in making something with his hands (better, if he uses somebody else's hands, because that shows he has mastered a process which can be left to drones): such things as an automobile, a waterproof watch or a non-riding girdle. But when it comes to ideas about life and love and religion and education and architecture and painting and music, indeed all forms of pleasure, there is a national conviction that an expert is a phoney, or 'wants to be different', and that what matters is you should know what you like and — this is a democracy, isn't it? — speak up and say your piece. It may well be born from generations of living close to many races and many prejudices and temperaments and having to strike a liveable compromise that may not be as smooth as some other societies; but at least it is a society, a going concern, which had to be built not out of a theory but out of the urgent practical need to get along at all.

At any rate, if you want to live here in any spiritual comfort you have to allow for a wide variety of temperament in your friends and neighbours and approve a

sharp clash of tastes. An insistence on privacy in such a society looks, as it would not look in Britain, like a form of conceit or neurosis, a refusal to admit the status quo by which you all live. So if the issue ever came up in argument, I think most Americans would say that it is merely elementary good manners and good citizenship to look on yourself as only one member of the community, whether that community is a town, a party, or a family.

It may be what makes Americans so easygoing about their children. I don't know if anyone has ever taken a statistical count, and there may be just as many nagging parents here as anywhere else, but my impression is that if you are what they used to call a severe disciplinarian with children, you get known to the neighbours as a crank. There is a sort of cheerful, unstated assumption that children will grow up and be polite soon enough and that there's no sense for the first fifteen years or so in pretending they are anything but inhabitants of the jungle. (There is a certain family pride in seeing your child become king or queen of the jungle.) The children themselves are of course not aware of being particularly bad or violent or ill-mannered. They have no other system to compare themselves with, and like all children don't even know that any other system exists. Remembering this, you can appreciate that if a 6- or a 10- or a 15-year-old passes you on the street, looks up and says, 'Hi!' he is paying you far more the respect of genuine liking than if he said, 'Good morning, sir' — which would be a very alien, not to say sarcastic, sound in these parts.

The same sort of tolerance explains too, I think, such a seemingly irrelevant thing as the variety of men's clothes in a big city. There is not among Americans anything remotely resembling the uniform of the English city businessman. They dress for themselves, with their own tastes in ties, shirts, shoes; and this gives to an American street a colour, often a garishness, and it makes it pretty impossible for a foreigner to guess at the occupation of the other men around. With women, it is even more difficult. A flock of girls comes into a restaurant and you can't tell the debutante from the shop girl. I remember a Swedish girl on a skiing party watching the swirl of people in the snow and saying, 'Which are the nice people? Who are my kind? Give me a sign.' There are signs. But they are small and subtle and would take her years to learn. And if she stayed here long, she would insensibly shed the signs she sought.

I was taking an Englishman the other night up to my apartment, and as we

approached the entrance of the apartment house, I saw a man who lives in the building polishing the radiator of his car. I hissed to call my friend's attention to him as we came close. 'Tell me quick,' I said, 'what sort of an American is this — I mean is he a banker, a real-estate agent, a baseball player or what? — look him over.' My friend leered politely at him sideways. He was a middle-aged dark man, with a black moustache and big eyes. He was hatless. He had on a blue sports coat, slacks of a different colour, a button-down collar and a bright tie. He was polishing away and coughing smoke all over the radiator. Then he bent down to start on the wheels. Standing genially over him was the janitor, saying the utterly meaningless sentence, as we came on it: 'No, sir, not for my money . . . but some guys are that crazy, I reckon.' When we got inside I looked at my friend.

'Oh, I don't know,' he said, 'I should say an advertising man or perhaps the owner of a chain of drugstores.'

'That,' I said, as we went into the lift, 'is a dethroned Archduke.'

He was dethroned by the bullet that shot his great-uncle and started the First World War.

The European's America

23 October 1952

It is the fall. The fall of the year, an American institution now so well known, and even respected, in Europe that you no doubt expect me to take off, as I annually do, about the scarlet maples pouring like a fire through New England, the brilliant light everywhere, the thin milky trails of woodsmoke that rise into a bottomless blue sky. Well, once you've created a stereotype it is time to demolish it. The fall has refinements, even perils, that the autumn in other countries does not share. Once you've learned the big clichés of a country, which are true and which are not, it is the off-beat clichés that really fix the place in your mind, and make it like no other, and may even endear it to you, years later in another country far away. Let me illustrate.

The other morning, just after breakfast, a lady by the name of Miss Frieda Sims was going her rounds on the twenty-seventh floor of a New York hotel. Miss Sims is a floor supervisor and she was looking to see which rooms were vacant, which ones the maids could get into to clean up, which rooms needed to have the breakfast tables removed. She unlocked room number 2752, peeked in and saw the happy disorder of breakfast dishes. She went in to wheel the table out, but she came out in a hurry with no table, and she was screaming.

This sounds like the beginning of one of those classic American crimes, like Miss Lizzie Borden going into the kitchen on a very hot morning to get a cup of coffee. And it goes on promisingly enough, because the next incident involves the hotel's security force, which came running and verified Miss Sims's report. She had stopped screaming by now and she was able to stammer out that there was somebody in there. It wasn't a guest, not like any guest she had ever seen. It was an owl, just a common or garden American barn owl (*Strix flammea* to the initiated), which looks rather like an African wood carving or the top of a totem pole. It seems the owl was just cruising by the hotel at a twenty-seven-storey altitude (there's the New York touch), saw the open window, glanced in at the breakfast dishes and decided to make a landing on the remains of a melon and a couple of shirred eggs. The commissars of the security force (what, before the iron curtain, we just used to call house dicks) evidently made the bird secure. They

much virgin forest there appears to be on the edge of town. Theoretically, there are only two big stands of the forest primeval in this country, one in the Cascade Mountains and the other in the Bitterroots, both far out on the northwest Pacific Coast. But I'm thinking of long-settled country. I have taken Englishmen in a car fifteen minutes from where I am talking to you and once beyond the George Washington Bridge they are weaving around great rocks and little woods as dense as the New Forest. A half-hour from Times Square (all right, then, two hours in the rush hour) they can be in something that looks like Fenimore Cooper country, and it is not hard to imagine on dark nights an Indian slipping through the trees, slinking across the six-lane divided highway and standing as aghast at the lights of Manhattan as I am when I see what the 'developers' have done to Regency Mayfair.

For nearly two centuries now, there has been a continuous argument, sometimes amiable sometimes bloodthirsty, about which country was influencing the other the most. Until about fifty years ago, the example was all one way, and the way was east to west. But it has been changing very fast. Every world power leaves indelible imprints even on countries that pretend to hate it. And as Europe comes to admit, which it soon will have to, that the United States is now the ranking world power, its customs and gadgets and manners and literature and ways of doing business will powerfully influence the young. They may reject it later on, as Europe pulls itself around and asserts again, as I don't doubt it will want to, its own pride and independence.

But in the meantime, Britain still retains an advantage which will not pass over to America, I think, for a long time to come. It is this: Americans who have not been in Europe tend to imagine what is best about her, Europeans who have not been in America tend to imagine what is worst. Ask a few simple Americans what Britain means — ask a schoolgirl, a farmer, a shopkeeper, an elevator man (I have just tried it) what comes to mind when you say 'Britain' — and they will say something like: 'Oh, old buildings, more easygoing than us, I guess, beautiful countryside, tea in the afternoon, Shakespeare'; and, as my elevator man added, 'And I understand they are very dignified, very strict, they tell me, in their law courts.'

This may sound very naive to you. But it picks up a flattering myth and not, like the other way around, a libellous one. My own daughter, 14 years old, swings

violently between wanting to go to England and being afraid to. Why does she want to go? Because she imagines the place peopled with Mr Pickwick and Romeo and Juliet and Robin Hood, not to mention Laurence Olivier; and because she is crazy about the tables that Sheraton designed and the chairs and desks of Hepplewhite and imagines that every little house in England would throw out anything less graceful. She has, indeed, heard rude things about the cooking. But I tell her that this is steadily improving. I tell her also that it is true about the parklike countryside and the fat cattle, and the sheep as big as buffaloes in Scotland, and it is due as much as anything to the fact that the grass pack of English dairyland is five times as dense as the proud grass pack of Iowa. She thinks the English countryside must be heaven. (By the way, she takes entirely for granted the stupendous beauty of the Tetons and the desert and Yosemite, which leave Englishmen feeling that they have come face to face with their Maker.)

And why *doesn't* she want to go to England? Well, she explains, wriggling nervously, 'Everyone would expect me to be on my best behaviour, they are so polite and — everything.'

This is quite a reputation the British have built up. And the other tourist countries of Europe are not far behind. We read here about the exquisite care the French take over their food, and the dedicated way they tread on their grapes, and the devotion they bring to their public buildings. We do not hear about the really garish modern housing that begins to sprout in the Parisian suburbs, or about the alarming incapacity of the French for self-government. We read about the ruthlessness of the Mafia as it goes about its business in New York or New Orleans but not about its stranglehold on the enslaved slum of Sicily. From Italy we read rather about the preciousness of a new Roman 'find' in Tuscany or about the charm of the Appian Way, not about the clutter of billboards that disfigures it.

It will surely be a great day when you ask an Englishman what comes to mind at the mention of the word 'America' and he replies: 'The white villages of New England and the eighteenth-century houses, the neighbourly warmth of the Midwesterners, the contributions of American scholarship, the buffet meals that young American housewives whip up, the style and colour of so many American homes, the outdoor life of California, the god-given glory of Bryce Canyon and the man-made marvel of Hoover Dam.'

Getting Away from It All

11 September 1953

The real end of the American year is not 31 December, but the old festival of Labor Day. It is the day when the summer is put away, the swimming trunks squeezed for the last time, the ashtrays in country cottages filled with mouse-seed and rat-paste, the storm-doors hammered into place, the lock turned for the last time on your private world of sun and sand and picnics and the pride of growing children. Labor Day brings you back to the world of schools and offices, to sniffling colds and insurance policies, to taxes and radio commentators, to dark nights and the dark horizon of politics.

We sat around for the last time in our cottage at the end of Long Island. We had brought in the furniture from off the porch and the rusty barbecue grill we haven't used in four years but always put out in the sun at the beginning of summer as a symbol of our pioneer instincts. We had phoned the electric company to turn off the current. Called the phone company to disconnect same. Left a note for the garbage-man, same for the milkman. What else has to be done? Defrost and clean the refrigerator. Draw the curtains across the windows on the east and west sides. Sprinkle moth-flakes on the rugs. Try to hide a smelly fishing rod in a dark closet, and fail — your wife coming at you saying, 'Could this be bait?' It is. It is a poor, dried-up piece of squid that was chewed on by a whole school of porgies and sucked dry.

We sit around finishing a last bite. The baby is snoring placidly in a house reeking of camphor and good old mouse-paste. We bury and burn the last load of garbage. We pack the car while we wait for the baby to wake. Some of the grasses on the dunes have started to turn the fall colours. So children who normally treat them as considerately as bulldozers now develop a collector's passion for bayberry and pine branches and feather-grass. Somebody sees a gramophone record worn so grey you'd think it had been played with a poker. It is 'Good Night, Irene', and it too is suddenly an object of tenderness. We finally leave, with the rear end of the borrowed station wagon looking like an army camouflage squad, bushes and plants and a bedstead growing out of each side of 'Good Night, Irene'. We are on our way.

We stop and say goodbye to Mrs Horton, who sells eggs and collects antiques and whose family has farmed the same plot since 1649 — not so hot, perhaps, to a European, but impressive to us. We wish a good winter to the Ryskos, who sell groceries; to Grathwohl, the builder and sometime carpenter; to the Doroski brothers, who run a gas and service station; to Josie Wanowski, the little bent old toothless Polish woman who has taken in washing these many years and for many of them kept a crippled husband, and who raised four astonishingly handsome children, two straight beautiful girls with shining teeth, who might be movie starlets but are in fact a nurse and a schoolteacher; two boys, one in college, one ex-army air forces.

It is much the same as any other leave-taking in the fall. But there is an ominous note or two. The bank manager is off to Riverhead: there is a meeting of the new civil defence evacuation committee — a committee, that is, to plan the evacuation of doomed New Yorkers to the potato-fields of Long Island. A young man who came out of the Navy four years ago, who chose to be a potato-farmer the year of the big drought and went into debt for $2,000, is not around any more. His troubles were all scattered by a letter one morning from the President of the United States, beginning — 'Greetings!' — a cordial invitation to come back into the service, or else. Eddie, the boy who drives the grocer's delivery truck, says 'Well, I'd better say goodbye', in a strange, shy way. He too has had his call.

These little things give you a shock, and you wonder about them on the way up to the city. Everything looks like the familiar fall, the maples turning, a milky stream of smoke from burning leaves curling up into a blue, bottomless sky. But as the swift twilight comes on we are at the end of the parkway, past La Guardia Field, over the Triboro Bridge, and there are the vertical city and the plunging spires: New York again, splendid as ever in the autumn light. Not quite the same, though. We curve round and down off the bridge and pass a billboard advertising a new de luxe apartment building somewhere. The big sign has stars against the features it is specially proud of: thermostat heat control in each flat; all-electric kitchen, with deep freeze, laundry and dish-washing machines, and garbage-disposal unit; air-conditioned units available in summer; two bathrooms for every four rooms. The last item, the last star, says: 'Adequate sub-basement atomic bomb-shelter'. One of the children reads it aloud, and it makes a pompous sound, so that the baby claps her hands and chortles like a wise old man. And we all

laugh.

Back in the city, people with copper tans who ought to be congratulating themselves on being able in the first place to get away from the New York summer, began in recent years to find themselves fingering the real-estate sections of the Sunday papers and peering through advertisements for 'desirable country houses'. Why should lucky and comfortable people be so fretful and restless for more idleness? It was not idleness such people sought but a more dreadful thing: safety. Lately the phrase 'getting away from it all' has taken on a sadder and more furtive meaning in the minds of parents who live in industrial cities. It needs no winks or meaningful glances to arouse a fear that everybody feels and a few talk openly about. It is the padding fear of the atom bomb.

I heard of a man who lives in Washington who had quit his job, fallen back on his savings, bought a little place deep in the hills of Arkansas and gone off there to farm with his wife and five children. Far off in the Black Hills of South Dakota, some pessimist as thoughtful as Noah has bought a mountain cave and invited prudent couples — one male, one female — to abandon their regular lives and batten down underground at an annual cost of $2,500 per person, all found. This may appear to be the furthest pole of lunacy. But during the San Francisco organizing conference of the United Nations, the citizens of the Black Hills, bidding for a lasting fame as the chosen headquarters of the United Nations, challenged the delegations with maps (Dakotas projection) to find a spot anywhere in the United States more swiftly accessible by air to Moscow, Cairo, Tokyo or London. Maybe this pessimist was acting from the same melancholy discovery.

Then in the late 1940s businessmen caught the epidemic. Businessmen, I should say, who have factories in the East, in the ring of cities round the southern rim of the Great Lakes, or out on the Coast. An aircraft company in Bridgeport, Connecticut, announced it had decided to move bag and baggage to Dallas, Texas. Now, this is quite an undertaking. The company worked on 1.5 million square feet. Its factory cost $10 million. It employed about ten thousand people. The company invited its skilled workers to go with it. As an American migration, this one would not be without its epic and humorous side. Bridgeport is a typical New England industrial city, except for the untypical fact that it has a socialist government. Its workers are mostly of Italian and Czech, Hungarian and Polish stock. They are


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not
available

The Court and the Negro

20 August 1954

When I first went South, I was in the South but didn't know it. I was on my first visit to the home, and the home country, of my first American college friend, who is now a doctor in Maryland and was brought up on the edge of a beautiful valley outside Baltimore. (Today only a couple of golf courses hold the landscape against the encircling post-war suburbia and a maze of freeways.)

This man holds a special place in the history of my friendships because in the early 1930s he was a tolerant and amiable teacher about all things American. He instructed me in the wry, and often barefaced, realities of city and state government. We had a common interest in jazz and maintained it against the prevailing conviction of ninety-nine college boys in a hundred that Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and other combinations were 'dinge stuff', that is to say a minority fad indulged in by Negroes. He had an affectionate knowledge of the local trees and flowers and first showed me something of the variety of American oaks, and introduced me to the pink and white dogwood and the Maryland golden aster. He was also responsible for my first taste of crab cakes and terrapin stew and for easing me into the pleasing custom, on hot summer nights, of spreading a newspaper on a table on the back porch at midnight, slicing a watermelon into quarters, and lolling back and burying your face in a quadrant till you came up for air with a drooling sound and paused to spit seeds at the moths.

Many of these pleasures came our way through the stealthy solicitude of Miss Minn. Miss Minn was the cook, first maid, second maid, laundress, nurse, cleaning woman, mother confessor and hub of the household. She was the first Negro I ever knew and to this day is a great mystery. Even twenty years ago she admitted to no age. She was rumoured to be a grandmother, though she never seemed to know how many times. She was not so much an employee in the house as a presence, like a clock that never tells you it's there until it strikes the hour. And hours would go by without any thought of Miss Minn, for she made no noise at all until you began to search for a newspaper or felt hungry or thought aloud that a glass of beer would be just the thing. At such times she would amble through the room or the garden like a forgotten ghost, accidentally bearing the newspaper or a tray