

THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

"AMERICAN SOCIAL HISTORY AS RECORDED BY BRITISH TRAVELLERS"

Reviewed by Frank Swinnerton

THIS is one of the most interesting books I have read for a long time. It is interesting not only because of its theme and the quality of the extracts, but on account of the editor's perspicacity and his literary gift. For many years English travelers have been visiting the United States, and, when the visit was concluded, writing their impressions of America and the Americans. Now much of the criticism of any country is vitiated by the fact that no visitor to that country really knows anything about it; and if he persists in writing a sort of Count Smorltork volume of travel pictures it must considerably distress the inhabitants of the country. That has happened with the United States. Books and books have been written by English travelers; and books and books have been rejected by American readers. Mr. Nevins, however, has come to the aid both of Americans and of English travelers. With admirably concise and temperate introductions and connecting links, he has chosen the salient passages from various really entertaining books, and the whole gives a recognizable picture of phases of American life during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The book is of great merit. Not only does it present this picture. In addition it does, I think, clear the English visitor of a disagreeable charge — that he has always come to America to quiz and to find fault.

This charge was made to me several times during my own recent visit to the United States. I was assured that, unlike myself, other Englishmen had come with the purpose of finding fault. I thought not, and still think not. But of course any traveler used to one way of life at home notices differences abroad. In general it is characteristic of the human being to prefer what he is used to. I very much disliked, for example, American railway traveling; but I was checked very early in my journeys by overhearing (accidentally) an American man describing English railway traveling. What I preferred, he despised. That was a contrast that made me hesitate. Not all English travelers have so hesitated. They have come to the United States, and have failed to adjust themselves to the kind of life they found awaiting them. They have not liked the food, for example. I have heard Americans say they cannot eat English food. Well, I still shudder at the thought of a club sandwich. It is not a question of abstract quality, but one of taste alone. I like English, French, and Italian cooking, because I am used to it. Similarly, there are some dishes common in America to which I did not get used during my stay.

This has happened to previous travelers. They speak of their feelings in Mr. Nevins's book. They speak candidly. It is not with superciliousness (as some Americans suppose),

but with candor. Mrs. Trollope, with one or two minor persons, is almost the only contributor to the volume who is rather outrageous; yet Mrs. Trollope is not so much English as Trollopian. I do not mean that there are not English people like her: there are. But they are as personally offensive to the English as they are to other nations. This is the great trouble with travelers, that they are judged not only as themselves, but as types of national character. Many times during my own journeys I was asked if I was *really* English, because I was not like the idea that had been formed of the English character. Pressed by myself to disclose the characteristics of the English, my informers always indicated superciliousness and indistinct, affected speech as prime English traits. How impossible to combat such a conviction! One man wittily remarked, "Mr. Swinnerton, like all the other Englishmen I've met, you're *not a bit like an Englishman!*"

Having read Mr. Nevins's book, I have altered my idea of the way English people have written of America. They have in general written in a very friendly spirit. They have expressed horror for certain things (such as slavery) to which no responsible American would nowadays give his support; and they have expressed distaste for other things which gradually have disappeared from the land. But for the most part they have been genuinely and excellently prepared to admire. Unfortunately a term of admiration never has, and never has had, the strength of a term of distaste; and the expressions of lack of sympathy have been remembered, and many good words forgotten.

There are some things which cannot be praised. Such things appear and reappear in the course of the recent

volume. Of these the spitting of Americans is the most remarked; and it is to be noticed that expectoration is still far more prevalent in America than it is in England. I have heard men and women in America clear their throats as no men and women clear their throats in England. There must be a cause for it, and I do not "criticize", but I record the fact. Most of these English travelers have "recorded the facts". Some of them have gone further. The later ones have analyzed and generalized—sometimes very ably, but always with the reservation that they are speaking daringly of a great nation. For whatever the English traveler's impressions may be of the United States, that feeling is always present. The greatness of the United States is like the greatness of Britain. It is least realized by those at home. Moreover, I think no English traveler nowadays would deny that many American institutions are such as to move him to deep admiration. It would be too much to say that he is moved to envy, because Englishmen do very much love England, and they do not want to see England changed, although they are not so complacent about themselves or about England as many Americans imagine.

Read this book, and the truth will be apparent. Here is a book, full of amusing pictures, of interest, of quality; describing a civilization which is full of interest, quality, and pictorial value. It would be an exaggeration to say that Englishmen find themselves at home in America; but nowhere else in the world are they so much surrounded by those of their own kind. Not brothers, but cousins. As like and unlike as cousins. And as like and unlike as they have always been. One of the most amusing features of this book is that it shows how English visitors have always

come up against a language that is their own and not their own, and how at first they have been slightly irritated and then have become tolerant of what Mr. Mencken calls the American Language. Equally, that they have come up against a people that is their own and not their own, so that they write of this people as they might write home about the ways and lives of blood relations. And I commend this book for another reason also. It may teach the Americans something about their own country. Not all Americans have seen as much of the United States

as their visitors; and the book contains pictures which, written many years ago, are still recognizable by the traveler of today. It is altogether to be commended because it is in a high degree readable, and is thus a work of entertainment; while it also is a book of a kind to do more toward cementing the friendship of Britain and the United States than most books more obviously aimed at that target.

American Social History as Recorded by
British Travellers. Compiled by Allan
Nevins. Henry Holt and Co.