

THE TYPICAL AMERICAN MIND

By Morris Fishbein

QUITE logically the diagnosticians of the American mind begin with a listing of its characteristics, for they must first demonstrate to us that a typical American mind exists. Mentioned seriatim these characteristics include shrewd practicality, sentimental idealism, lack of gaiety, Puritanism, sex repression, industry, soul fear and worry. Thus separated from the general discussion they constitute a mean list. And yet they in no way describe that most typical of Americans, George F. Babbitt, or for that matter the typical Englishman, Frenchman, or other man-on-the-street of any nationality. After all that typical man is the same in all nations: a somewhat stupid person, well content if he can have most of the minor luxuries of life and be limited to its minor inconveniences.

Mr. O'Higgins and Dr. Reede arrive at their typical American mind largely by an appeal to the methods of Sigmund Freud. It needs, however, no intricate system of psychic analysis to catalogue the main features. American industry, love of lucre, sex repression, and practicality have been the sport of our own novelists and those of our foreign enemies for many years. American disregard for music, letters, and art is perhaps a result of the youth of our civilization rather than proof of some variation in the type of mind. These things are no doubt the results

of culture rather than of some variation in the germ cell.

From an analysis of the American mind in general, the authors proceed to analyze specimens — conspicuous Americans who are concededly typical — to find the origin of those particular qualities in them that are accepted as characteristically American. The list includes Mark Twain, Abraham Lincoln, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Andrew Carnegie, Anthony Comstock, P. T. Barnum, Benjamin Franklin, Henry W. Longfellow, Walt Whitman, Mark Hanna, Julia Ward Howe, Anna Howard Shaw, and Margaret Fuller. It would be interesting to know who conceded that this group were typical Americans.

Mark Twain, we are told, "drained off his repressed hatreds and revolts in humor" and "his humor was the expression of subconscious revolt and anger and hatred and self contempt". It is pointed out that he was not industrious and that he was always possessed with visions of sudden wealth because his father had such visions. What a pity that these serious psychoanalysts, lay and medical, could not themselves have a little of that sense of humor, so that they might perceive the ridiculous character of their analyses. Poor old non-industrious, subconsciously revolting Mark Twain! He wrote only some twenty eight or thirty books, any two or three of which would be the satisfactory output of a decade for a highly industrious author.

Space does not permit us, and it would not be desirable, to consider separately each of the analyses presented in this collection. The reader is told that the incongruities of Lincoln's character might be traced to a conflict between those qualities of his temperament that were controlled by conscious intelligence and those that

were more directly inspired by a sub-conscious feeling. From this premise it is developed that Lincoln's ambition was a conscious effort to overcome a subconscious sense of inferiority, that he began life with a conviction of sin from which he never escaped, and that he was a depressed Puritan. His sympathetic emotion and soft heartedness are accredited to suppressed self pity, by virtue of which he identified himself with the victim of misfortune. It was Lincoln's unconscious defense of his own oppressed self, we are told, that projected into his defense of racial liberty. It was his oppressed ego that caused him to love liberty. There is much more of the same interpretation of Lincoln's actions in the lingo of the Freudian school, and it all seems very plausible. However, there comes to hand at the same time a similar interpretation of Lincoln, this time by L. Pierce Clark, M. D. in "The Psycho-analytic Review". Here is the same Lincoln, developed from the same biographical material, the same anecdotes, the same memories. If psycho-analysis is a true science we ought to get the same result, but we do not. Says Dr. Clark: "It seems that the benignant attitude Lincoln took toward the weak and downtrodden, shown, for instance, in his making the abolition of slavery the slogan for continuing the struggle of the Civil War, was prompted not a little by the more than filial devotion he must have felt for his mother." Again: "It would seem that no small part of Lincoln's depressions was due to certain deep, unconscious fixations or soul attachment to

the mother hindering the normal emotional life which in turn made it impossible in early life for him to assume the usual attitude of religious feeling and thought." The nearest that the O'Higgins-Reede consultation on the case comes to this is the statement that Lincoln loved his country because he identified it with the mother image. Isn't one's country always spoken of as "she"?

In many places this volume breaks down in its scientific fact. On page 82 we find that Emerson had soul fear which tied up his endocrine secretions. It appears that soul fear weakens the body's power to resist disease, causes insanity, and "may be the explanation of the appalling amount of physical and mental breakdown among the Puritans of New England". This I would suggest is pure hokum.

When some of these sketches by Mr. O'Higgins and Dr. Reede first began to appear, they fell on a rising market. Alas! the bound collection meets, at least so far as the scientifically informed are concerned, a cold and unsympathetic scrutiny. The vogue of the Freudians is passing. Psycho-analysis, the universal solvent for all of humanity's mental and many of its physical problems, turns out to be merely a mild cathartic for use in certain obstructive conditions. But Freudianism is passing, not, as the authors intimate, because Puritanism dominates, but because Freudianism does not satisfactorily explain.

The American Mind in Action. By Harvey O'Higgins and Edward H. Reede, M. D. Harper and Bros.