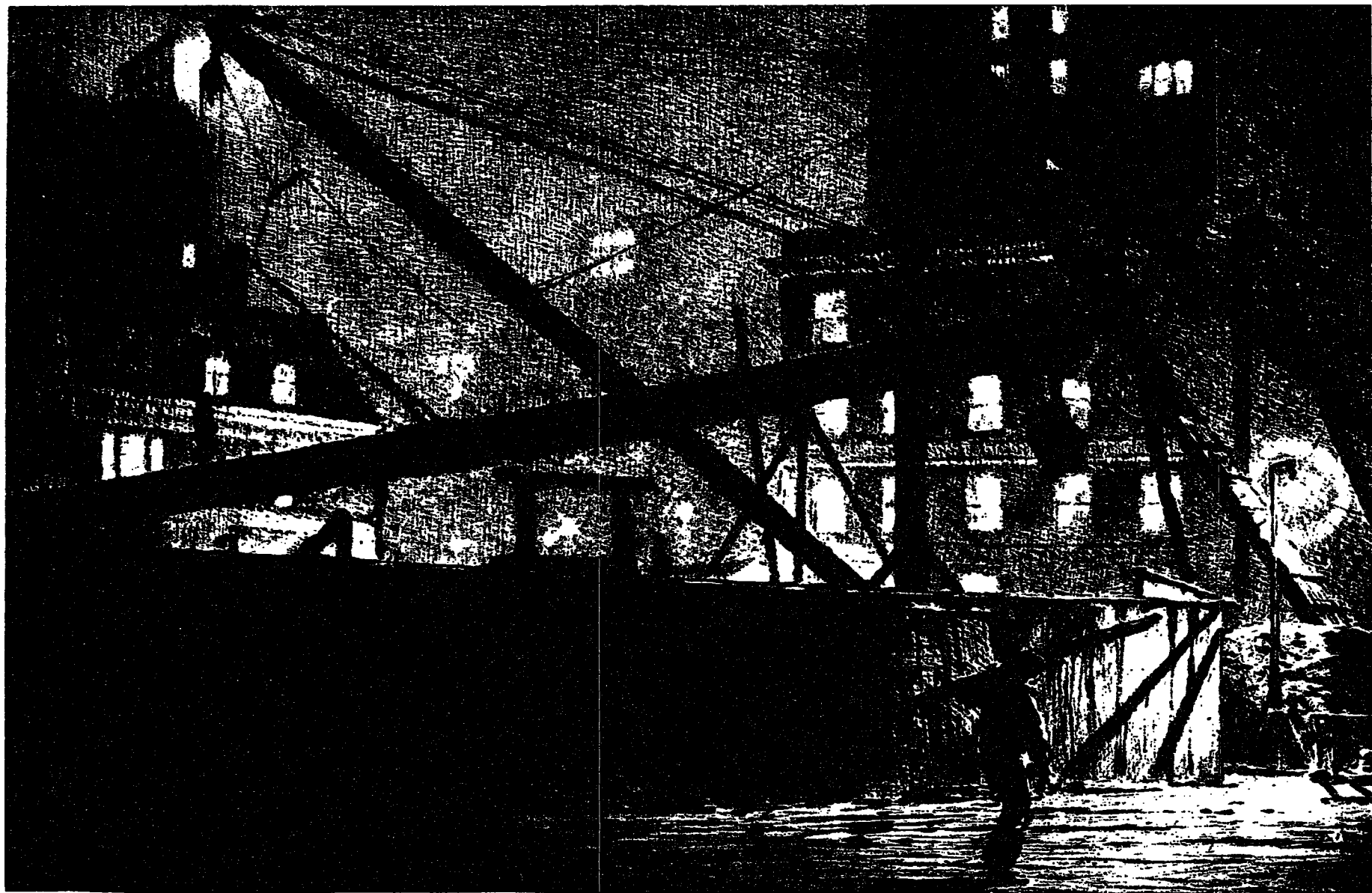


TWO CRITICS OF AMERICAN LIFE

J. A. Spender and Bernard Fay Analyze Our National Tendencies



Derricks at Night. From an Etching by Martin Lewis.

(Courtesy of Kennedy & Co.)

THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT. By Bernard Fay, in Collaboration with Avery Claffin. 284 pp. New York: Harcourt, Bruce & Co. \$2.75.

THROUGH ENGLISH EYES. By J. A. Spender. 324 pp. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company. \$2.50.

WHAT M. Fay calls "the American experiment" is the subject of an ever-increasing number of books by British and European writers. From the presses of England and France, and of Germany in particular, there issues a flood of publications in which American institutions, characteristics and tendencies are subjected to analysis. Especially is the scrutiny of our critics fixed on the phenomenon of American prosperity and the development of our industrial system, but they also give much attention to the problem of racial unity in the United States, and to the nature of our relations with the rest of the world. Very few of the Continental books about us ever reach an American audience; M. Fay's is the first to appear here in translation since André Siegfried's "America Comes of Age" was published nearly two years ago. That was one of the best books of its kind since Bryce's "American Commonwealth." If neither of the volumes here reviewed is as thorough as M. Siegfried's, they are nonetheless good books, worth reading by Europeans and Americans alike. And each has

something of its own to contribute which is not to be had from "America Comes of Age."

Bernard Fay is primarily a historian—his previous volume, "The Revolutionary Spirit in France and America," was a scholarly study of the influence upon the French Revolution of our own—and perhaps the best part of his new book is its concise and clear presentation of the historical background out of which the United States of today has emerged. Mr. Spender, as editor and publicist, is already well-known to us, and two other books of his, "The Public Life" and "Life, Journalism and Politics," have commended him to American readers. He is a trained observer and a man of lively understanding; he writes engagingly and with an open mind. Naturally, his book has particular interest in what he has to say on that tender topic, the relations between Great Britain and the United States.

M. Fay begins by warning us that "a hateful fear of the United States is spreading and may eventually submerge all other feelings." His book, as addressed to its original audience, is an attempt to substitute sympathy and understanding for prejudice and ignorance. He would have Europeans remember that

the Western Republic is their offspring, that they are responsible for it; that its

successes and its failures (whether they wish it or no) are the successes and failures of Europe; that the defects and qualities of America are those of the Old World, carried further and more freely expended; that the forms of American life are the dreams of Europeans, realized in the face of improbability or expectation.

In spite of his insistence on the reality of this relationship, M. Fay would also have Europeans realize that a new and distinct civilization is developing in the United States. It is difficult to reduce to definite terms, because to a degree unparalleled in the world's history, Americans are a people that cannot be fitted to a formula.

The doctrinaires of three centuries [says M. Fay] have eagerly examined this young race for subjects of dissertations and argument. They found some at first, but generally ended in hopeless entanglement; because further study demonstrates that principles and doctrines have been used as supports or stimuli, but never as limitations to activity, desires or aspirations. There is no dominant or constant method; no fixed goal except to live and become greater; no unvaried formula except never to stop, whether times are good or bad, but to keep on, to be aggressive, to forge ahead.

It would be hard to find a more succinct or a better balanced account of the historical factors which have joined

to produce the United States of the twentieth century than that given by M. Fay. In the space of 100 pages he has shown an ability for distillation which puts our own outliners to shame. His estimates of outstanding American statesmen are uniformly excellent, and he has made clear the exact contribution of each to our history, from Franklin to Wilson. He is, too, a discerning critic of our government as it functions today, finding its chief weaknesses in the lack of minority representation and the absence of a sufficient check upon Congress by the Constitution.

The second half of his book, which is devoted to discussion of our institutions, of the characteristics of the American masses and the part played by the United States in world affairs, suffers more by its sketchiness than the first. Sometimes his conclusions appear to be based on insufficient data, but they are in the main illuminating and sound. Speaking of that American preoccupation with figures which is so often deplored in us, he penetrates to its real significance. We have "a taste for the gigantic," which achieves beauty in our architecture.

But sizes which have never been calculated and which are not amenable to the criterion and precision of science leave him little (Continued on Page 16)

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American tourist] cold. Modern Russia, for instance, in spite of its magnitude finds little favor or prestige in America. It may be great but men don't know it or feel it. Feeling not aroused by figures remains inert and calm. That is why so many evaluations are made in money. Money is a measure, the common denominator of diverse fields of activity which it finds together in an American unity. This is not the fetishism of money; but a passion to count and to calculate size exactly by means of figures.

Nothing in this section of the book is more penetrating than M. Fay's observations on American literature. In a few paragraphs he has placed his finger on the impediments to its development. First remarking that "the United States as a people has no adequate perception of its own distinctive literary tradition," he notes the division of our writers into two groups—the orthodox, Anglo-Saxon school and the younger radical group under Continental influences. Both labor under the same handicap—too close a relation to the reactions of the mass. Radical and orthodox alike "are always speaking to the multitude and of the multitude."

Both classes [says M. Fay] unite in stressing social development and the collective life. Neither has ever taken the detached and abstract position which characterizes the great European writers, particularly the French—Maurras, Valéry, Gide; men who flourish in a world of ideas and perennial forms, whose work is built upon a solid intellectual framework and attracts the individual and solitary being.

In spite of occasional inaccuracies Americans will read with interest also M. Fay's comments on our press, our educational system, the status of the churches and the arts. His remarks on the industrial system contribute nothing new, and are not nearly as suggestive as those of M. Siegfried.

Finally, M. Fay is one of those who see in America's growth through federation an object lesson to be applied to the difficulties of Europe. With us, he thinks, Federal principles have become an outworn instrument; for Europe, they offer the only real hope for her future.

Mr. Spender modestly says of his book that it "can claim to be nothing more than a record of impressions at a particular moment and from a particular angle." It is based largely on observations made during two visits to this country, and is more casual in its approach than M. Fay's volume.

The freshness of Mr. Spender's reactions are at once apparent when he refuses to accept the universal axiom which holds that New York is not typically American.

As a whole [he says] it is the most American thing that there is on the American Continent, and the function which it performs for the foreign-born newcomers, who form nearly half its population, is precisely that of plunging them at once into the full roaring American tide. The leading industry of New York is the mass production of Americans.

He also declines to join in the chorus of sneers at the Middle West, which he left with a high regard for the intelligence and wide interests of its people.

Like most British observers, he never misses an opportunity to draw a comparison between our ways and those of Englishmen. He is especially struck by the lack of privacy in America and the tendency towards a social collectivism in all pursuits, cultural or otherwise. We have, he finds, very little separate and individual life.

He is amazed at the incongruity offered by an industrial system which practices economy in production to the utmost limit, and a population which spends its earnings to the utmost limit, but he is satisfied that these opposing ten-

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dencies combine to a harmonious end.

There is no other way [he says] if the country is to be made safe for mass production—with its postulate of unlimited demand. The simple life of few wants, quiet, thrift and placid leisure would be ruinous to the mass-factory.

But Mr. Spender finds a more real contradiction in the spectacle of a people who can be at the same time restless experimenters and innovators in business and yet apply a standard of orthodoxy to both religion and politics which other nations "discarded fifty years ago." The phenomenon of the Fundamentalist position leads him to remark our obedience in accepting beliefs and opinions from authority.

That pessimistic view of Anglo-American relations so frequently encountered today is not shared by Mr. Spender. The difference in the perspective through which the two

nations view the history of their relations, war debts, commercial rivalry, the question of sea-power—all these make for friction, but no one of them, in his opinion, offers an insuperable difficulty.

To face difficult questions candidly and fairly, to nurse no grievances which cannot be avowed and explored, and at all times to keep in touch, is all the advice that can be tendered to British and American governments in their dealings with one another. There is no British-American policy which can be pursued against the rest of the world and none is to be desired. But Great Britain still stands on the bridge between the New World and the Old and she may still help in interpreting the one to the other.

In addition to the record of his impressions in various parts of the country and his study of our foreign relations, Mr. Spender considers business and politics, law and disorder, religion, the racial question, prohibition, the press and the colleges.