

Facing West

Book review

Alice Detroit

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a review of

Facing West, The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire Building, Richard Drinnon, New York, New American Library, 1980.

Richard Drinnon offers documentation of the attitudes and history of people with whom we are sickeningly familiar. He eloquently debunks the heroic myths of frontier life in the U.S. and also exposes the arrogance with which Europeans devastated this continent and beyond, once they reached the Pacific Ocean. Enlightenment ideology furnished the prop for the racism, greed and self-repression which have been part of U.S. history over the centuries. In the twentieth century, imperialist rhetoric has been polished by public relations experts who often obfuscate the real motives of the contemporary politician. This book makes clear the unbroken link with their predecessors who moreover shock us by their open expression of frenzied hatred and moral self-righteousness.

John Endicott, who settled in Massachusetts in 1628, is an early prototype of mainstream America. As head of the Commonwealth he had the opportunity to wreak vengeful punishments on individuals who dared to dissent, however minutely, from his church government.

A nearby community had been founded by another Englishman, Thomas Morton. The practices here were clearly not to the liking of Puritans: Morton and his followers adopted many of the traits of the indigenous people among whom they lived peacefully and with whom they unhesitatingly collaborated. Festivals, feasts, celebrations, dancing were cultural elements they brought from Europe and they adapted them to their new surroundings. A Maypole stood prominently at the center of their village. Wearing long hair was among the heathenish practices detested by the somber Saints.

The existence of Morton's community was intolerable to Endicott, and the Puritans' fury led to a raid during which the Maypole was cut down personally by Endicott. The Sainly army dispersed the people of Morton's fun-loving community, sent him back to England in irons and burned his settlement.

For the Pequots was reserved a crueller fate—extermination. Defined as “non-people,” the most sophisticated technology and military techniques were unleashed on these nearby enticing settlements. Crops were destroyed, whole villages of non-combatants were wiped out in order to demoralize the warriors. Had the Massachusetts Bay army been equipped with napalm and “anti-personnel bullets,” it would have used them.

Enlightenment rationalizations served to justify the brutalities required to subdue the humans, animals and terrain encountered as the frontier moved westward. Thomas Jefferson served as a model for future generations. Drinnon characterizes his attitude as follows:

“In his formative statements of white American liberalism, Jefferson had committed himself to the proposition that all men had a natural right to adult independence. Yet he obviously relished being the

omnipotent and omniscient father of red children, and his paternalism had the objective...of bringing those not already removed 'entirely in our power.' Like fatherly Prospero in "The Tempest" (1611) he pretended to have no selfish-interests of his own and acted towards his wards only out of his upwelling benevolence. But also like Shakespeare's prefiguration of all the paternal colonizers to come, he in fact indulged hidden psychological cravings—for power by keeping Indians in a state of childish dependence. 'Good' children were like the Shawnee Blackhoof, who had resigned himself to the wishes of the white officials and in turn lived off their largess. 'Bad' children were Calibans like Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa, who refused to be bribed into perpetual submissiveness They were the ones who repaid their white father's unflinching kindness with an obstinate defiance that threatened to unmask his possessive domination." (p. 95)

Drinnon points out the ambivalent feelings of some of these intellectual administrators when they glimpsed the uninhibited responses and joyous experiences of the Indians they were sent to "educate." He quotes a revealing passage written by Col. Thomas McKenny who worked for the U.S. Department of War under the notorious Lewis Cass and who was sent to Lake Superior to negotiate a treaty with the Ojibwas in 1826. McKenny was disturbed by a ceremonial dance presented as greeting to the commissioners.

"Such a sight presents a wide field for moral reflections; and furnishes a dark foreground to the picture I have just sketched, of the repose, of the peace of the Sabbath! No one can witness such a scene, and look upon bodies of the finest mould, for they are all such, and one especially the most perfect I have ever beheld, and would in Italy be worth its thousands for a model, without feeling anxious for the arrival of the time (but how slow have been its advances!) when all these unmeaning and barbarous customs shall give place to the refinements of civilized life, and the sensual object which led to this, be changed to the nobler one of which their faculties are so manifestly capable."

Drinnon comments, "All those naked, 'mahogany colored,' beautifully moving bodies, and that most perfect one especially, shook his rigidity and spurred his anxiety to wrench them out of 'all these unmeaning and barbarous customs.'" And elsewhere: "McKenny must still have felt the stirrings of some faint memory of the lost child in himself as he stood or sat, held stiffly in place by his uniform and a lifetime of repressions, and outwardly disapproved of these physical excesses—and on Sunday, no less!" (pp. 167–168)

Many of the individuals discussed here would be appalled to learn they were chosen as prototypes of Euro-American racism. Jefferson saw himself as an enlightened liberal thinker with generous views toward non-Europeans. He carried out archaeological digs on his plantation, confident that he was recording for posterity facts about a culture soon to be replaced by an obviously superior one. McKenny considered himself "a friend of the Indian" and even adopted a Choctaw ward whom he encouraged to study law. He was later dismayed at his ward's expectation that he should be permitted to practice law—only U.S. citizens were allowed access to this profession and Indians were clearly unfit to be citizens in the American commonwealth.

John Hay was one of the most influential spokesmen for U.S. expansionism. Born in Illinois from "the generations of assault and replacement troops" (among whom A. Lincoln first came to prominence) which had cleared the region of Indians, Drinnon cites excerpts from all periods of Hay's life: as a young man he travelled to Europe. In Vienna, he was appalled by the "endless tide of Polish Jews" in the ghetto:

"These squalid veins and arteries of impoverished and degenerate blood are very fascinating to me. I have never seen a decent person in these alleys or on those slippery stairs. But everywhere stooping, dirty figures in long patched and oily black gabardines...A battered soft felt hat crowns the oblique, indolent crafty face, and, what is most offensive of all, a 'lair of greasy curls dangle in front of the pendulous ears.' This coquetry of hideousness is most nauseous. The old Puritan who wrote in Barebones' time on the 'unloveliness of love locks' could here have either found full confirmation of his criticism or turned with disgust from his theme." (p. 2571)

After marrying the daughter of a millionaire, Hay became a prominent member of the ruling class and participated in his father-in-law's business empire. The railroad strikes of 1877 distressed him: "The very devil seems to

have entered into the lower classes of working men, and there are plenty of scoundrels to encourage them to all lengths.” (p. 262)

Some years later he wrote a novel with familiar stereotypes. The civilized protagonist is depicted with a “wholesome” face and with hands “of one delicately bred.” The heroine, naturally, was blond, refined and usually dressed in white. The villain was a dark “apostle of labor.” What is more, he closely resembled Hay’s description of a resident of the Viennese Jewish ghetto, “dark-skinned and unwholesome looking,” with an “oleaginous” expression, a mustache “dyed black and profusely oiled,” and a face “surmounted by a low and shining forehead covered by reeking black hair, worn rather long,” and wearing a black hat and “threadbare clothes, shiny and unctuous.” (p. 265)

Hay’s subsequent achievement was to effect an alliance between England and the U.S. “To the Royal Society he exulted over the ‘bonds of union among the two great branches of our race’ and affirmed ‘the object of my mission here is to do what I can to draw close the bonds that bind together the two Anglo-Saxon peoples.’” (p. 267)

Immediately following the Spanish-American War, Hay became Secretary of State and had the pleasure of incorporating new “overseas” possessions into U.S. territory. As a famous statesman he articulated the “Open Door” policy which asserted the right of the “civilized” races to extend their domain throughout the world. Drinnon notes that this position was set forth by John Quincy Adams more than fifty years earlier: “directly anticipating John Hay’s Open Door, Adams held in 1842,...that China’s exclusion policy was immoral because it violated the Christian command to ‘love thy neighbor,’ blocked trade, and was therefore, ‘an enormous outrage upon the rights of nations.’” (p. 271)

Alienation from the land and nature is a characteristic shared by nearly all the Saints in this book. The early settlers found nothing “but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men” in the words of Puritan historian William Bradford. (p. 14) Early settlers were exhorted by their chaplain to destroy Thomas Morton’s settlement. “There are three thousand miles of wilderness behind these Indians, enough solid land to drown the sea from here to England. We must free our land of strangers, even if each mile is a marsh of blood!” (p. 4)

More than 200 years later the celebrated centennial historian John Fiske penned his description of the landscape outside his Pullman car while travelling through Wyoming. It was a “frightful desert. Not a tree, not a blade of grass; mountains rearing their heads on every side, wild and savage mountains parched with thirst.” (p. 232)

Drinnon occasionally lets their contemporaries respond. In *Land of the Spotted Eagle*, Chief Standing Bear asserts:

“The white man does not understand the Indian for the reason that he does not understand America. He is too far removed from its formative processes. The roots of the tree of his life have not yet grasped the rock and soil. The white man is still troubled with primitive fears; he still has in his consciousness the perils of this frontier continent, some of its fastnesses not yet having yielded to his questioning footsteps and inquiring eyes...”

But in the Indian the spirit of the land is still vested; it will be until other men are able to divine and meet its rhythm. Men must be born and reborn to belong.

Their bodies must be formed of the dust of their forefathers’ bones.” (p. 230)

Author Mary Austin (1868–1934) comes off considerably better than most of the characters in this book. Born and raised in the midwest, she grew up accepting the views of her pioneer ancestors: Indians are “varmints,” Lincoln and the Civil War represent a heroic epoch in human history, blacks are childlike but threatening in their lack of inhibitions.

But even without rejecting these prejudices, she arrived at a humble and profound understanding of the Indians’ link with the earth on which they lived.

“When a Paiute medicine man explained to her that prayer was an inner act, she seemed to have known always that it was just that, an inner reaching out to something that was ‘outwardly expressed in bodily acts, in words, in music, rhythm, color.’...Mary Austin made her great discovery. Indian dances were prayers in motion. She even brought herself to accept the bronze bodies of the dancers as instruments of their rhythmic reverence and attacked the ludicrous prudery of ‘a people who would undertake to

insist that the Corn Dance should be danced in pajamas, lest Deity, to whom the dance is made, should not be able to endure the sight of the bronzed thighs and shoulders he has given to the least of his Americans.” (pp. 227–228)

She articulated her insights in several novels and in a long essay, *The American Rhythm*.

By the 20th century, “facing west” had brought the Saints to the Philippines and beyond. The history of the “taming” of the Philippines is largely unknown to North Americans and the official version reads much as one would expect the history of Vietnam to read if the U.S. had been successful in its counter-insurgency efforts.

Intellectual terrorism had been added to the usual military arsenal to effect the subjugation of the Philippines. Drinnon offers an account of University of Michigan Professor Dean Conant Worcester’s sojourn in this exotic land and his subsequent drafting of “appropriate” guidelines to guarantee the subservient status of its inhabitants.

By the 1950s, intellectuals were employed directly by the military. An account of Edward G. Lansdale concludes the book. Lansdale started his career—very successfully—by defeating Filipino efforts to throw off the burden of American civilization. He was less successful in Vietnam. Ellsberg’s *Pentagon Papers* make it possible to see clearly how all the assumptions—arrogance, racism, consciousness of moral superiority—tried and true after four centuries, were implemented in our generation. The “pacification” of southeast Asia was based on “might makes right” although candid statements to this effect are usually kept confidential and the perpetrators try to hide their gruesome tactics under titles like “Operation Brotherhood.”

“The Metaphysics of Indian-hating and Empire Building” is a subtitle of Drinnon’s book. This is a reference to a major chapter in Herman Melville’s *The Confidence Man* entitled “The Metaphysics of Indian Hating.” Melville is one of the few literary figures whose humanity and insight are held up for admiration. (Others are Thomas Morton, Thoreau and, to a lesser degree, James Fenimore Cooper.) Melville offers an analysis of the coherent ideology which made and makes possible the empire-building. One requirement is to relegate indigenous people to a lower level of humanity from the builders—colonizers, to “savages,” “heathens,” “uncivilized.” Another fundamental requirement is “having confidence.” In what? In progress, in the beneficent effects of commercial relationships, in the purity of people’s motives, in the genius of people with white skins. *The Confidence Man* enriches our understanding of how it has been possible for humans to pursue with undying fervor consistent policies of devastation of nature on this continent—resulting in the extermination of humans and animals, and the raping of the earth itself.

In this context, J. F. Kennedy’s call for “a new frontier” is more than rhetoric and re-asserts the right of the Saints to proceed westward. Kennedy’s predecessor, Theodore Roosevelt, though less subtle conveys an identical message:

“Of course our whole national history has been one of expansion...That the barbarians recede or are conquered, with the attendant fact that peace follows their retrogression or conquest, is due solely to the power of the mighty civilized races which have not lost the fighting instinct, and which by their expansion are gradually bringing peace into the red wastes where the barbarian peoples of the world hold sway.” (p. 232)

Roosevelt’s peace, however, is that of the graveyard. It is the great merit of Drinnon’s book to highlight the spiritual death of the “civilized races” which has underlain their ceaseless suppression of the “barbarian peoples of the world.”

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