reviews

california & the frontier

AMERICANS AND THE CALIFORNIA DREAM, 1850-1915. By Kevin Starr. New York. Oxford University Press. 1973. $12.50.

It is difficult to capture the atmosphere of a region with printed words, but Starr has succeeded. This alone would have been a major accomplishment, but there is more. *Americans and the California Dream* goes beyond the confines of state history and culture to become significant for all of American Studies. Starr not only captures the flavor of California's early years, including its heroes, villains, climate, terrain, social life and almost everything possible in a one-volume work, but he skillfully places it all in relation to the larger American themes of the period.

The book brings together literary, historical and artistic fact, interpretation and speculation; it draws upon a rich variety of sources, including *belles-lettres,* sermons, political commentary, periodicals, personal journals, architectural plans, secondary materials and much else that illuminates the lives of Californians in the state's early generations. The result documents the thriving culture that the mixture of an extraordinary variety of peoples and backgrounds produced in the wide-ranging California landscape. It also illuminates the intellectual and emotional ferment generated by differing interpretations of what the state was and what it should become, as well as the grasp that the idea of California had upon the minds and imaginations of Americans.

California in many ways was a microcosm of America, and at the same time it was the seeming embodiment of the "American Dream." The themes are all there: The Garden, the Promised Land, the frontier, the American Desert, gold and instant riches, elements of The Old South and even the New England Puritan. Overshadowing much of California's history, however, is the clash of cultures that was as cruel as it has been elsewhere in the United States. Although the theme threads consistently through the American experience, it is more difficult to ignore in California. Starr amply documents the tragic effects of the California Dream on the Latin culture and the Indians. Unfortunately, he discusses too briefly and almost in an off-handed way some of the contributions of Blacks and their role in the society.

The significance of American Studies is that it encourages the kind of works and the attitudes of synthesis that the disciplines produce only

at their best. American Studies remains an approach, despite those who would convert it into a discipline; this provides the flexibility that is its greatest virtue. Rather than centering its attention upon methodology, American Studies has continued to devote its primary concern to subject matter. Those who adopt the approach can therefore use any appropriate method of search, interpretation or analysis and avoid the intense preoccupation with method that has drawn the attention of many traditional scholars from their subjects and toward minutiae and irrelevance.

American Studies should produce works that resist narrow categorization, and that reflect a rich and innovative variety of tones, moods, methods and conclusions. It would no more be appropriate to suggest that all good works in American Studies should be similar to this one than it would be to impose rigid restrictions as to technique or method upon its scholars; it is, however, appropriate to say that Starr has produced a book that is American Studies at its best. He makes the significance of his work clear, and he speaks as fully to modern American concerns as to historical or other interests. "California 1850-1915," he writes, "mocks the blunders of the present and is partially responsible for them."

As the dream lives on, it threatens to become an anti-dream, a nightmare. He calls for us to bring memory to our aid, for though it can traumatize—and in California's case it certainly does—it can also heal. Perhaps he is correct and an awareness of past evils may help to avert those of the future.

Starr is an excellent scholar, he has much to say, and (how delightful and unusual in these days) he writes well; the book is a pleasure to read and our colleagues who read it should find it rewarding.

MJS

REGENERATION THROUGH VIOLENCE: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860. By Richard Slotkin. Middletown, Conn. Wesleyan University Press, 1973. $25.00.

Richard Slotkin traces the influence of the myth of regeneration through the violent confrontation between man and the wilderness on American popular literature to 1860. The Puritans, according to the author, "saw the wilderness as a threat to their ability to hold in check the atomistic individual wills of their people," and the Indian as the personification of evil in man. Their captivity narratives, which the author says constitute the first coherent myth literature for Americans, portrayed the Indian as the instrument of God for the "chastisement of his guilty people." But between 1720 and 1790 the wilderness became not a fearful place, but a place for spiritual renewal, as in the hunter-hero narratives of Filson's Boone and Cooper's Leatherstocking, coinciding with the physical disappearance of Indians. He concludes with Melville's *Moby Dick,* described as a "colossal hunt."

For Slotkin the reconstruction of mythology is an invaluable instrument for explaining why Americans who had not experienced the frontier nevertheless accepted frontier values. He is not content to trace the myths of regeneration in early American literature but goes beyond the scope of his work by attributing many problems and circumstances of the post-1860 era to the hold which myths continued to have on American society. He thus gives the unfortunate impression that he is attempting to explain modern problems such as industrialization, urban-

ization and Viet Nam as consequences of the myths he delineates. Such explanations demand, among other things, both a monolithic view of American character and of its motivation. Even more damaging is that he says nothing about the myth in operational and social terms—how myths are transmitted and diffused, and how they shape specific actions. Of course such a task is a large one, and we cannot expect it in a scholar's first book, which is essentially a study of mythological themes in early American literature. These assertions describing the role played by these myths in shaping our actions, however, make the book provocative and provide it with unity.

The opening discussion of mythology and literature in the new world is useful and well done. Those interested in how the Indian and the wilderness are reflected in American literature to 1860 will find this work important.

Iowa State University Clair W. Keller

colonies & the revolution

THE SOVEREIGN STATES, 1775-1783. By Jackson Turner Main. New York. New Viewpoints, 1973. $10.00.

Professor Main intended this book to be a "brief, readable summary of existing knowledge" about the American people and state governments during the American Revolution. It may largely replace Allan Nevins' *The American States During and After the American Revolution, 1775-1789.* But if Nevins' work suffered from serious defects, so does Main's, notwithstanding its inclusion of more recently discovered knowledge. The book is not as brief (454 pages) as it is claimed to be, although it is readable; but let the reader beware. Main claims to be "absolved of the necessity for precise language," the right to "sacrifice exactitude," and the liberty to "hazard interesting generalizations far in advance of the evidence." Yet it is doubtful whether any historian should claim such absolution or so easily sacrifice exactitude. Imprecision leads to inaccuracy, blatant errors and inconsistency. Interesting generalizations may be hazarded, provided they are not grossly exaggerated or contrary to the evidence. Main is guilty of cavalierly violating the canons of historical scholarship and must indeed pay what he admits is the price of the freedom he exercises: "any claim to be taken seriously by scholars." Well, at least much of that claim.

In general the book is well organized and does offer a useful survey of the colonies during the Revolutionary war, their societies, economies, politics and governments. Much of it hinges upon the allegation that "Both the structure of power and political theory [in America] changed, sometimes radically, to fit the new circumstances"—i.e. the disappearance of the old structure of a colonial elite poised against the British government. Indeed, Main is more impressed by the changes in society, government, politics and the economies of the new states than by evidence of continuity.

Although Main is obliged to admit that the appearance of new state constitutions brought many institutional checks against popular sovereignty, democratic practices and ideology, he insists that the Revolution remains most noteworthy for the shift toward "popular participation

and influence in government." Thus, he describes the emergence of the states from the colonies, but does not much explain how the new systems were constructed—or why—beyond noting which features represented democratic, liberal, whig or conservative influences.

A similar ambivalence is evident in his discussion of frontier communities. On the one hand we are told that democratic challenges to aristocratic elites were exceptional, and on the other that most frontier communities, characterized by mobility and equality, were basically democratic anyway.

Like many good books, this one raises perhaps as many questions as it answers. Chapter 2, for example, offers a pretty good picture of how Americans made a living in the country, but there are gaps in the division of occupations, and not enough suggestion of the combinations of these: Were storekeepers only storekeepers or sometimes also landowners? Did not landowners also engage in commerce?

Like many bad books this one is shot full of errors, inconsistencies and grossly exaggerated generalities or oversimplifications. Is it true that "two and a half million people [the total population] . . . risked their lives, fortunes and sacred honors in 1776 . . ." ? What about the neutrals and the Loyalists? Is it true that "The rural community of Revolutionary America had little need of the outside world"? Did "most American men in 1776" own a farm, or was it the freemen exclusive of tenants, indentured servants and slaves?

The book cannot be trusted because of numerous inconsistencies. A typical example: on page 148, Main says that in South Carolina any resident who could vote (i.e. who owned 50 acres or paid an equivalent tax) could serve in the house of representatives; on page 149 he states that colonial office-holding qualifications "remained the same at £1,000." On page 174 he says that New York's governor was elected "every third year," but on 189 he says, biennially. We are told that the New York Council of Appointment was chosen by the legislature, whereas in fact it was chosen by the assembly alone. Pages 215-217 offer a confusing description of the proposed New Hampshire constitution of 1783 without ever clarifying which provisions were finally approved.

Although Main professes to see a theme of unification of the states during the Revolution, in both substance and the manner of presenting material he stresses their differences and separateness. Can one effectively argue a thesis (unification) by concentrating discussion upon evidence to the contrary (parochialism)? Main's description of New Hampshire, for example, does not include the relationship between localism (especially in economic matters) and nationalism, or how a reaction against the former ultimately promoted the latter.

In sum, the value of this book has been considerably compromised because of its author's mistaken notion that he might abandon the legitimate standards of careful workmanship, precise language, exactitude and cautious generalization to the interests of a readable style. His "bold language" certainly will not mislead his "historian colleagues into thinking" that he intended "finality," but less discriminating readers will not, alas, be as well served as they might reasonably expect to be by Jackson Turner Main.

The University of Akron Don R. Gerlach

ANGLO-AMERICAN POLITICS, 1660-1775: The Relationship Between Parties in England and Colonial America. By Alison Gilbert Olson. New York. Oxford University Press. 1973. $7.50.

Historians accustomed to viewing provincial politics simply as a matter of shifting groups, temporarily merging and then dissolving to form equally transitory factions, may, the author realizes, challenge her use of the term "party." Many historians, this reviewer suspects, still view provincial politics in terms of an institutional block, the assembly. Olson finds colonial parties did have many of the characteristics of later political organizations: grass roots support, differences presented to the electorate as programs, concern for patronage, and continuity beyond one generation.

Olson's thesis often depends on assumptions she has not verified. How often did American affairs become a party issue in Westminster? Recent work has established a qualified degree of voting consistency only for the parties during the reign of Anne. Olson often relies on conjecture in determining the commitment of English factions to colonial politicians. At times she does not seem quite sure whether she is dealing with shifting, transitory factions or rudimentary parties. Whether American politics were based on factions or parties, was the American scene so bland, so devoid of conflict that it needed any stimulus from English leaders? It might be rewarding to examine the great collections of Shaftesbury, Harley, Newcastle and Rockingham papers. Perhaps one should not fault the author for using printed materials almost exclusively, for "this book is meant as a suggestive essay, not a definitive study"; it is meant "to suggest further studies in the history of early American politics . . ." (p. xi).

University of Nebraska Jack Sosin

wars

MR. POLK'S WAR: Opposition and Dissent, 1846-1848. By John H. Schroeder. Madison. University of Wisconsin Press. 1973. $12.50.

Schroeder examines the opposition to the war with Mexico as a case study in "the continuity of American antiwar dissent." He argues in his introduction that, on the whole, "the motivations, composition, arguments, and ultimate failure of the opposition between 1846 and 1848 are characteristic of other antiwar movements." But his text fails to document or justify this conclusion.

Despite its broader claims, this monograph focuses rather narrowly upon the controversy over the Mexican conflict within which limits Schroeder does make a significant contribution. He shows that while the dissenters represented a broad spectrum of political views and allegiances, the lead in the opposition was taken by the Whigs and Calhoun Democrats. The opposition's dominant theme was that the war was "unnecessary, impolitic, illegal, and immoral"—a conflict provoked by "a secretive, evasive, and high-handed president . . . to obtain territory by invasion, conquest, and plunder." And the opposition could not overcome the "obstacles which all opponents of war must confront": the inability to resist in a crisis situation engineered by the chief executive, the pressure to support American troops in the field once the fighting has begun, the lack of a workable alternative policy and the difficulty of mobilizing popular support, given military success and the lack of adverse effects upon the average citizen. But while the dissenters of that day largely failed in their immediate objectives, the controversy over the Mexican war did play a major role in elevating "the crucial and related issues of slavery and expansionism" into the dominant political question of the years that followed.

JB

THE WAR OF 1812. By John K. Mahon. Gainesville. University of Florida Press. 1972. $12.50.

Although the military strategy and tactics of the war are emphasized and analysed in some detail, domestic factors, including the political, economic and social context of the struggle are well integrated. Archival materials in the United States, Canada and Great Britain are utilized extensively to provide an authoritative account of the war from the perspective of each antagonist, while brief incisive descriptions of key personalities and pertinent illustrations contribute to the reader's interest and understanding. This is military history in its broadest dimensions, and, as the author puts it, one can learn "how a war ought not to be conducted."

University of Miami — Raymond G. O'Connor

women

CATHERINE BEECHER: A Study in American Domesticity. By Kathryn Kish Sklar. New Haven. Yale University Press. 1973. $12.50.

This excellent biography presents a fascinating analysis of why and how Catherine tried to subvert the traditional female roles of self-sacrifice and submission by converting them "into signs of moral authority and leadership" during a time of "widespread change in American society." Sklar also has some important things to say about the destructive effects of the new urban culture on traditional sex roles in the 1850's, the desire of public leaders to view divisions in American democracy as the result of sex roles rather than class lines and the psychological as well as biological therapy administered to Victorian women in the "water cure establishments." Besides contributing a great deal to the history of women in America, this biography will provide important background material for a much needed re-assessment of the nineteenth-century sentimental novel.

University of Northern Iowa — Theodore R. Hovet

MOVERS AND SHAKERS: American Women Thinkers and Activists, 1900-1970. By June Sochen. New York. Quadrangle Books. 1973. $8.95.

This survey of twentieth-century feminists and their ideas is useful in showing the continuity of the feminist movement, presenting the lives and ideas of some lesser-known figures and attempting an ordering set of criteria. Although it sets up some classifications and categories, it is stronger in description and synthesis than in analysis and fails to develop a larger conceptual framework. Based largely on secondary but infrequently-used sources, it provides some valuable information, but its failure to deal with feminism in the larger framework of American reform and radical history limits its significance. Still, it should serve as a useful introduction to the topic for the general reader, the college student and the period specialist.

Sarah Lawrence College — Gerda Lerner

briefly

IN HITLER'S SHADOW: The Anatomy of American Nazism. By Leland V. Bell. Port Washington, N.Y. Kennikat Press. 1973. $7.95.

Though it has a background chapter and another dealing with post-World War II neo-Nazi organizations, this volume focuses upon the activities of the German-American Bund during the 1930's. Although his book lacks the broader scope and perspective of John P. Diggins' *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (1972), Bell's thorough research in the Bund records now in the National Archives makes this probably the definitive study of that organization. He finds that the Bund was "an urban lower-middle-class movement" comprising at its high point approximately 8,500 members and 5,000-6,000 sympathizers, most of whom were naturalized citizens who had fought for Germany in World War I and then migrated to America, and German aliens; he depicts its ideology as a crude amalgam of "German racism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Communism"; and ascribes its relative lack of success and ultimate collapse partly (and perhaps too optimistically) to its lack of relevance "to the realities of American life," and, more importantly, to the growing animosity engendered by its identification with Hitler as American attitudes generally hardened against Nazi Germany.

JB

BOURBON STREET BLACK: The New Orleans Black Jazzman. By Jack V. Buerkle and Danny Barker. New York. Oxford University Press. 1973. $7.95.

This sociological study focuses attention on one subculture of New Orleans, the Black musicians of Local 496 of the American Federation of Musicians. Care is taken to distinguish their attitudes and life styles from those of other jazz musicians of the Crescent City, Creoles as well as Whites, and the result is a sympathetic yet objective presentation. The authors demonstrate an intimate knowledge of the city's history. the music their subjects performed and the relevant literature, but music, as such, is not their subject. They demonstrate that Bourbon Street Black was a complete semi-community, a subculture founded on skin color and playing ability which endeavored not only to preserve its identity but also to function as a "good" part of conventional society. The amalgamation took place during the first two decades of the century, was formalized when Local 496 was created in the late twenties and is evidencing signs of disintegration today both in the changing cultural role of the music and in the changing attitudes of the younger musician-members.

The authors wisely append an explanation of their method of investigation and footnote their sources. The merit of this particular book over others which deal with generally the same subject matter is the balanced overview which results from drawing conclusions from a relatively large sample and using modern technology and methodology to collect and handle large amounts of data.

Duke University — Frank Tirro

SILHOUETTES ON THE SHADE: Images from the 50s Reexamined. A Symposium at the Carmichael Project. Muncie, Indiana. Ball State University Press. 1973. No price.

Each of the four essays in this pamphlet carries out the spirit of the title—each questions the prevailing tendency to characterize the decade as "Placid." Anthony Edwards sees the 1950's as the root of the 1960's discontent; Neil R. McMillen reviews Black unrest in the decade; Lynne Waldeland argues that Wright Morris is a particularly useful author to read for an understanding of the 1950's culture; and Joseph Trimmer examines James Dean as the decade's Cult Hero.

El Camino College — Joseph M. Collier

PARTY AND OPPOSITION: Congressional Challengers in American Politics. By Jeff Fishel. New York. David McKay Company. 1973.

This study is an example of the proper use of mail questionnaires, personal interviews and statistical analysis to probe into the nature of political phenomena. Professor Fishel explores the incentives that the major parties employ in providing a loyal opposition and examines the effects that political challenges of congressional incumbents have both on popular representation in Congress and on public policy. He is insufficiently critical in selecting some of his sources in the literature of American political parties and it would have been desirable to have a shorter lag between the date of his research (1964-66) and the publication date (1973). His examination of the incentives motivating congressional challenges, however, is excellent, as is his analysis of campaigning, campaign financing and policy differences between candidates of the two parties.

Southwest Missouri State University — D. E. Pilant

THE TERRORS OF IDEOLOGICAL POLITICS: Liberal Historians in a Conservative Mood. By Marian J. Morton. Cleveland. The Press of Case Western Reserve University. 1972. $5.95.

Here is another analysis of the writings of the consensus school of American historians. The only novelty in Professor Morton's treatment is the ill-advised substitution of Edmund S. Morgan for (say) Oscar Handlin into the ranks of those four horsemen, Hofstadter, Schlesinger, Boorstin and Hartz. Otherwise, we have the familiar though faulty story of the liberal intellectuals' odyssey since the Depression, illustrated with brief quotations from the proverbial texts. Like the interpretation, the moral is predictable: these wayward liberals' renunciation of ideology left them at the mercy of their own chaotic times while their consensus view of the American past blinded them to the genius of true liberalism, which, of course, is ideological conflict.

University of Maryland, Munich — Alfred Haworth Jones

TEN MEN OF MINNESOTA AND AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY. By Barbara Stuhler. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society. 1973. $8.50.

Stuhler tries to organize her sketches of ten Minnesotans who played important roles in shaping American foreign policy from the late nineteenth century to the present—Cushman K. Davis, Charles A. Lindbergh, Sr., Harold Knutson, Henrik Shipstead, Frank B. Kellogg, Joseph H. Ball, Harold Stassen, Walter Judd, Hubert Humphrey, and Eugene McCarthy—around the four "concepts" of "imperialism," "isolationism," "internationalism" and "interventionism."

The individual sketches are interesting and informative. The attempt to define four basic foreign policy attitudes is a useful analytical tool—although the different categories are not always as distinguishable in practice as in theory. But the work simply fails to hold together as a book. And even if we assume that the ten were "representative Minnesotans," the only conclusion that Stuhler can draw is that while isolationism "has been the most pervasive, both in time and temper," of the four attitudes in Minnesota, "There is no single, simplistic Minnesota view of the world." The same conclusion can be safely made about the country as a whole, but that is hardly new or illuminating.

JB

TYCOONS AND LOCUSTS: A Regional Look at Hollywood Fiction of the 1930's. By Walter Wells. Carbondale and Edwardsville. Southern Illinois University Press. 1973. $6.95.

Before the energy crisis it was possible to speed for hours on Southern California freeways without getting anywhere or seeing anything. Walter Wells seems, just as his model was fading, to have inaugurated "freeway scholarship"—a rigidly programmatic analysis of a handful of books about the "Hollywood Southland" in the 1930's that he relentlessly demonstrates all display motifs of dissolution, violence, the juxtaposition of illusion and reality, corruption, façade, deception and the playing of roles. Trip ended, the driver provides his own review, "In either respect, the aesthetic or the societal, the regional hypothesis here applied to the fiction of California's Southland, and I think found of value, most surely awaits further application." Even Wells observes that the motifs he stresses occur in nearly all American literature of the 1930s; but he does not go on to observe that they can be found in almost all literature written anywhere at any time, so that his book is a much better example of what "Southland" regionalism has to offer than those it examines.

Reading, Vermont — Warren French