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BOOKS

What Is an American?

What makes an American different from anyone else? What, indeed, *is* an American? There have been many answers.

The American, wrote Hector St. John Crèvécoeur in the late eighteenth century, was the New Man, a political animal never before seen on earth. To Charles Dickens, the American was a lout, a braggart, a liar, and a cheat. To Mrs. Trollope, he was naïve and gauche. To H. G. Wells, the American is the most childish and the most intelligent man in the world. To some contemporary Europeans, the American is the hope of the world; to others, he is a hopelessly degenerate plutodemocrat. (These latter aren't doing so well just at present.)

In a significant hour for soul-searching, the American historian James Truslow Adams has set out to examine for himself the clockworks of *homo americanus* in order to find out what makes him tick. "The American"* is a curious book. Although it starts at the earliest beginnings of the country and comes down to the twentieth century, it is hardly a history of the nation.

The chapters file by in orderly procession—the early settlers, the Revolution, the farewell to Europe, the Civil War, the winning of the West—but they do not deal so much with events as with what those events did to the men who took part in them. Great issues are treated here, such as the ideological cleavage between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, the struggle between North and South, and the isolation from European and world problems, but only insofar as they molded the American character. The whole intent is to find a common denominator, generously allowing for the impossibility of finding a common denominator for 135,000,000 members of more racial and language groups living under a single government than in any nation except possibly India. Here, then, is Adams's conclusion:

Mr. American: He is a mass of contradictions. He likes luxury, comfort, and labor-saving devices, but he will sacrifice his time and labor to make the money to pay for them and thus gets lost in a vicious circle of making more to get more. He has canonized woman—raising her, remarks the author a little sourly, "to an almost impossible eminence"; yet, though he gives his wife her head, he is content to follow her at a respectful distance and, as soon as is decently possible, repairs to his poolroom, his lodge, or his club.

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The American is cocky, no respecter of persons or traditions. Yet he is extremely sensitive to criticism from outside and spends good money and time on the Emily Posts of the country in an effort to find out how to behave "properly," what kind of hors d'oeuvres one serves at parties, what fork one picks up first at dinner. He is an intense individualist; he wants to get ahead of his neighbor and to make more money than anyone else. Yet he is a solid believer in economic equality and he doesn't bother to reconcile the two irreconcilables.

Paradox: Historically and temperamentally, the American has always been an isolationist, with a deep-rooted fear of entanglements. Yet he is the world's most internationally minded man. He gives vast sums for explorations to any corner of the globe. He is always ready to help flood and earthquake victims, endow hospitals, and finance schools and colleges anywhere —Tokyo, Paris, Pekin, Istanbul.

He travels all over, usually in a hurry, to see the great monuments of the world —which he is likely to compare, unfavorably, with the modern splendors of his own country. The classic example, which Adams quotes, was General Grant's remark on his world tour: "Venice would be a fine city if it was drained."

American Scene: Adams found us cocky, touchy, and individualistic