
Written in the style of a Frederick Lewis Allen, this massive work is a social description of the United States since the emergence of Franklin Roosevelt. Like Allen, Manchester teaches writing and is obviously well qualified to do so. And also like Allen, Manchester was a participant of the times he wrote about and has been controversial himself, as witness his The Death of a President. These volumes are not controversial; but they are filled with brilliant and lengthy chapters describing almost every conceivable thing we have been talking about in the last forty or so years.

There is something different here, too. For instance, every so often a montage appears, a la John Dos Passos, to remind us of the headlines, the best sellers, the fads, and sometimes the heartaches of an earlier time. These bits of the past include one from World War II: “This is the hardest letter I’ve ever had to write . . . . I don’t want to hurt you but . . . .” From television comes, “What do you want: good grammar or good taste?” The buttons reappear, too, pointing out that “God is Dead,” “Black Power” is now, and “POWs never have a nice day.” All of these remind us of the forgettable sixties, while “Nattering Nabobs” shatters us back to the realization that Spiro Agnew once held high elective office in our land.

Included in Manchester’s The Glory and the Dream are short sketches (“Portrait of an American”) in which the author highlights those who have contributed something to the American experience. These range from Eleanor Roosevelt to Ralph Nader and reveal Manchester’s liberal sympathies. The portraits are all of people, with one exception: the Edsel. Its failure was so great that people “wouldn’t even steal one,” and when the automobile’s advertising agency ran a contest for viewers of its TV saga, “Wagon Train,” the prizes were not Edsels, but ponies, instead.

Perhaps one could chuckle at this failure of American know-how, but many of Manchester’s pages are really not very happy to read. Like the evening news, the news is bad. But most of it is here and presented in brilliant style. There are the Roosevelt years, the drama of World War II, and the immediate postwar years when the victory celebration surrendered to the anxieties of the Cold War. But happily another depression never came, and most Americans enjoyed the prosperity of the 1950s, at least when they were not worrying about
“Reds,” the family mortgage, car payments, and young people. They endured McCarthyism, with perhaps only Manchester’s Good Liberal (which he perceives the reader to be) outraged by its excesses. Fighting with the troops in Korea, going to college after the war was over, and joining the corporation after that, reminds the reader that, like Manchester, he was part of it all. Crushed by the deaths of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King, the Good Liberal is challenged by “the students,” whose opposition to the Vietnam war he shared, but whose rhetoric he found appalling, even frightening. And finally, after the abdication of the disbelieving Lyndon Johnson, there was Nixon and Watergate. But, at least, the killing of Americans in Vietnam had ended; however, since to Manchester the glory and the dream left us forty years ago, only the little children in the old pictures were still smiling.

In a work so expansive, slips are bound to appear, and do so here. This reviewer did not find Manchester’s narrative very much informed by recent Cold War scholarship; and while Speaker Sam Rayburn was no raging liberal in his declining years, he was hardly a conscious ally of the so-called Republican-Southern Democratic coalition; and Muhammed Ali did not first capture the heavyweight title by knocking out Sonny Liston in the first round.

The quality of Manchester’s work far outweighs the occasional error, and the resource notes on each chapter could keep a student busy for years. While there is less analysis than one might want in two large volumes, the writing is graceful, and the pages are crammed with useful information describing the American people of the past four decades.

Department of History
California State College
California, Pennsylvania

Thomas H. Coode


_Coal Age Empire_ is the latest in a growing number of studies, including those of Peter Temin and Alfred D. Chandler, which seek to explain early nineteenth-century American economic change and growth through reference to fuel resources and utilization. As techno-