BOOK REVIEWS


This is a slight book on a large historical question. Did the disillusionment that became obvious in America in the 1920s stem from the shocks of the First World War, as the textbooks used to say, or did it originate in the prewar years, as Henry May maintains in his masterful book, The End of American Innocence (1959)? Stuart Rochester offers a revisionist argument. He does not deny that what May calls a "loss of innocence" — the falling away in the young intellectuals and artists of the belief in the nineteenth-century certainties that progress was assured if moral and cultural values were maintained — had begun by 1917. Yet Rochester thinks that May and Christopher Lasch, in The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963 (1965), have obscured the vital role the war did play in nourishing and diffusing the loss of innocence, the disillusionment with traditional values and modes of thinking. "If it [the war] did not create liberalism's tensions and dilemmas," Rochester writes, "it intensified them and in the end resolved them with sledgehammer finality" (p. 103).

As "liberal" Rochester includes people such as John Dewey, Walter Lippmann, Herbert Croly (the New Republic crowd generally), the socialist Charles Edward Russell, Jane Addams, Lincoln Steffens, Brand Whitlock, and many more, many of whom like Clarence Darrow and Ida Tarbell are only mentioned once or twice. Even such writers as F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Dos Passos and radicals like Randolph Bourne, whose caustic, prophetic criticisms of liberalism Rochester appropriates in wholesale fashion, are included as liberals. Rochester's definition of liberal — those who were "forces of betterment"—is worse than vague and misleading, it is virtually meaningless if not explained. Secondly, Rochester never explains the absence of or inconsequential treatment given to: John Reed (a liberal, certainly, if Bourne was), John Spargo (mentioned once), E. A. Ross, and Franklin Giddings, to name only a few. The era's prominent, liberal women are given scant attention. Jane Addams is here, but Frances Perkins Gilman, Lillian Wald, and Ida Tarbell receive mini-
mum discussion. Absent are Elsie Clews Parsons, Amy Lowell, Margaret Sanger, and Vida Scudder — and there are others whom one could cite.

In a sense, though, Rochester has chosen too many people. The result is, in this 150 pages of text, that he is reduced to mentioning names and offering bits and pieces of information, much of it biographical, little of it analytical. He is good on Brand Whitlock's disillusionment and the New Republic's drift into ardent support of the war, but the latter is hardly necessary in light of the expert analysis Charles Forcey and David Noble have given the magazine and many of the liberals Rochester surveys. Nor is there any reason for a chapter — in such a short book — on Woodrow Wilson's failures at Versailles. Scholars do not need this sort of "background" chapter.

Given all these criticisms one has to conclude that American Liberal Disillusionment fails in its revision of May and Lasch. It is too bad; there is probably need for such a book.

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With Douglas C. McMurtrie, co-compilers Dr. Bruntjen, executive director of the Pittsburgh Regional Library Center, and Ms Young, librarian and a director at the Defense Documentation Center in Alexandria, Virginia, have performed a valuable service in bringing attention to a man whose name is known to few yet whose activities have given pleasure to a world of bibliophiles and inestimable aid to countless historians. We need only scan the books "wanted" and "for sale" in successive issues of the Antiquarian Bookman to know the interest he has generated and the respect accorded him among professional bookmen.

In this volume, Number 4 in the Great Bibliographers Series, the compilers have done much to introduce him to the uninitiated by assembling a fascinating and carefully chosen compilation of writings both by and about McMurtrie (1888-1944).