

## HISTORICAL SOCIETY NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

### THE CONTINUING SEARCH OF A HISTORIAN: A MEMORIAL TO LELAND D. BALDWIN, 1897-1981

IN 1975 our Historical Society invited Leland Dewitt Baldwin to inaugurate its bicentennial salute to the nation. His address on that occasion, entitled "The American Quest for the City of God," proved to be his last public lecture, his last endeavor to set forth the meaning extrapolated from his study of the personalities and events in American history. In a sense it was an appropriate fate to have the final remarks in Professor Baldwin's long and distinguished career delivered from our podium. It was here almost fifty years ago that he began his own scholarly quest as a research associate with the Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey.

His four-year tenure (1932-1936) with the survey provided the opportunity to complete the research and much of the writing for three manuscripts pertaining to this region's development. All were published after he left the survey to serve as the first editor of the University of Pittsburgh Press. Bringing pioneer America to life on the printed page, these volumes quickly established Baldwin as an authority on the nation's first frontier west of the mountains. They analyzed three distinct aspects of the frontier: the first frontier city, the first major frontier reaction to Alexander Hamilton's management of the central government, and the application of technology to the system of inland water transportation.

The impact of these volumes stands dramatically visible today; after more than forty years, his *Pittsburgh: The Story of a City* is still on the active list of University of Pittsburgh Press publications. Through a series of vignettes this volume traced the city's progress from trading post to fort, to frontier village, to turbulent commercial center, and ultimately to industrial metropolis. In the final years of the eighteenth century when Pittsburgh's future was still uncertain, settlers beyond the mountains were constantly frustrated by the central government over deeds of both omission and commission. Baldwin's other two books in this series, *Whiskey Rebels* and *The Keelboat Age on Western Waters*, discussed western complaints of both types. In the former he examined the determination of westerners not to acquiesce in the whiskey excise which they suspected was

imposed because of the callous indifference of Hamilton and the Congress to their social and economic exigencies. In the latter he explored western response to the failure of the central government to assist the never-ending stream of restless transmontane settlers with a network of roads to facilitate the marketing of their surpluses. Before the advent of the steamboat on western waters, the keelboat with its shallow draft converted the rivers to highways in opening to settlement many regions which otherwise would have temporarily remained closed. No area was considered too remote if it could be served by keelboat, and the author assessed the significance of this craft in rolling back the frontier.

After publication of these three volumes, Professor Baldwin's writings changed in both subject-matter and technique. He put aside the microscope through which he had focused on specific aspects of the frontier and turned toward telescopic analyses. In the 1940s when World War II broadened the horizons of most Americans, his monographs reflected this general trend. While serving in the armed forces overseas, he continued to publish. His *Story of the Americas* was the first serious attempt to write the history of the Western Hemisphere in one continuous narrative. Through the 450 years of exploration, settlement, and cultural development following the first voyage of Columbus, he traced the interactions of the Indians, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, English, French, and Americans by means of a series of impressionistic studies.

The following year (1944) in a more significant and interpretive volume, he analyzed the development of the Anglo-Saxon spirit in a work entitled *God's Englishman*. Here he argued that the essential ingredient of this spirit that had brought fame, fortune, and power to Britain was the Common Law; he further theorized that its concomitant respect for the individual was the seed from which democracy flowered. According to Baldwin this characteristic gave the Anglo-Saxon a sense of balance which, in turn, permitted religious toleration, right of assemblage, trial by jury, and a skepticism about the high correlation between property and responsibility to flourish. As these concepts took form, this spirit transformed liberalism into a reality and sponsored the growth of democracy in England — and later in the United States. Baldwin argued that in essence this was not a set form, but a process through which human rights could most readily be advanced. He depicted it as England's most pervasive legacy to civilization and predicted that, even if her empire should pass away and this emphasis on human rights alone should endure, England would

stand as a monument — as the spiritual home of man just as Greece was his intellectual home.

In a subsequent volume, *Best Hope of Earth*, the focus changed slightly from the English setting to the meaning and methods of democracy itself. Declaring, "I cannot be neutral, for I have accepted the democratic way with its inherent values of human dignity and high moral aspirations," Baldwin proceeded to trace its impact on societies from Greek and Roman times to the present. He defined democracy as the "positive political process for putting the evolving will of the people into effect in order to advance *toward* liberty, equality, and fraternity." This was to be achieved through a never-ending succession of compromises resulting from a peaceful clash of force and counterforce (state versus national government, labor versus management, public sector versus the private, nationalism versus internationalism, and so forth) and expressed in the laws of the land. Thus in *Best Hope of Earth* the author advised his readers not to anticipate perfection in democracy, only progress *toward* a perfection or truth that is unattainable.

After arguing this theory of democracy, Leland Baldwin's next logical step was to apply it to the full sweep of American history. This he did in 1952 when he published a provocative two-volume text entitled *The Stream of American History*, which one prominent historian described as the most challenging interpretation of the nation's past since Charles and Mary Beard's *Rise of American Civilization*. His synthesis portrayed the democratic process of force versus counterforce at work from colonial to contemporary times and challenged the reader to recognize and understand democracy's methods. Here and elsewhere Baldwin's writings reflect the fear that the power of democracy and the narrow thread by which it is maintained were not fully comprehended either by the American people or by their enemies. His purpose was to make Americans less chauvinistic and more aware that constant vigilance is essential and to make democracy's enemies cognizant of its intrinsic power and force; he noted with mixed emotion that within our generation three nations (Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and Fascist Italy) failed to assess the powers of democracy with sufficient accuracy and were crushed — but with frightening losses to democracy as well as to themselves.

Asserting that he was "a propagandist for democracy because I believe in the propaganda of truth," Baldwin was obviously admitting that his concept of democracy was inexorably intertwined with his philosophy of history. To him democracy was the pursuit of an

unattainable goal and history was always an imperfect inquiry into the processes of human life; thus the never-ending search for an "un-realizable" truth was their common denominator. Because every culture has a bias and writes history in accord with the critical requirements of its conscience and because he argued that a candid study of history strengthens the conviction that democratic values are true values, Baldwin's work might best be described as democratic history.

This was the recurring theme in most of his fourteen published volumes (monographs, texts, and novels) and also in his classroom at the University of Pittsburgh where he was a superior, but unheralded, professor in the Department of History from 1945 to 1961. One of the most prolific and provocative scholars in the history of the university, he continued to write long after his retirement in Santa Barbara, California. The most bold of his theses in these years questioned the effectiveness of the Constitution of 1787 in confronting the complex problems facing the nation. His *Reframing of the Constitution* (1972) acknowledged that the Constitution fathers "wrought better than they knew," but pointed out that there were ominous signs that this cornerstone could crumble under the burden of pressing issues and identified evidences of such pending constitutional dangers. For example, he categorized the division of powers between the states and the national government as obstructive and inefficient and declared that the states themselves were no longer viable entities because they were "antiquated, clumsy, antipathetic toward each other, and no longer capable of performing their functions."

In his final address to our Society, he stressed that the Constitution had given "meaning and direction to the American mission — to the quest for the City of God," but in his *Reframing* he was looking into the future and arguing simply that the American quest had taken a new direction and required a new set of guidelines.

Few have equalled this effort to continue to look searchingly at the American scene over such an extended period — a half century. To amplify this point, it can be noted that Baldwin recently expanded his "American Quest" address into a monograph which will be published posthumously by the Mercer University Press. That manuscript, plus at least three unpublished novels which also may appear in print some day, suggests that the publication career of Leland Baldwin goes on even after death. Sorrowed by his passing, friends in our Society and in the historical profession at large can still look forward to at least one more volume from his pen.

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