

Rediscovering the Wisdom in American History - Imprimis

- *Wilfred McClay*

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Author, *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story*



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Professional American historiography has made steady advances in the breadth and sophistication with which it approaches certain aspects of the

past, but those advances have come at the expense of public knowledge and shared historical consciousness. The story of America has been fractured into a thousand pieces and burdened with so much ideological baggage that studying history actually alienates young Americans from the possibility of properly appreciating their past. Nearly 20 years ago I wrote a small book called *The Student's Guide to U.S. History* for ISI Books. I was unable to include in its bibliography a high school or college level textbook on U.S. history, because there was not one suitable for recommendation.

But criticism of the status quo is easy. What is harder is to create a better alternative. That was my aim in writing *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story*.

Land of Hope swims against the prevailing currents in several ways, not the least of which is that it is a physical book. It is no coincidence that the giant textbook publisher Pearson has just announced its plans to go digital-first with its own massive array of textbooks, 1,500 titles in all, including those in history. Students will eventually be required to use—and institutions will be required to offer—the constantly updated texts, tethering students and schools exclusively to the publisher's digital platform. George Orwell, please call the Ministry of Truth.

In the early years of printing, printers would often display a truncated version of a Latin proverb: *Littera scripta manet*, which means, "The written letter remains." The whole proverb reads: *Vox audita perit littera scripta manet*, which can be translated, "The heard voice perishes, but the written letter remains." It contrasts fleeting orality and settled literacy. What does such a proverb mean today, when our civilization—in which the great majority of inhabitants, as Christians and Jews, have been People of the Book—is fast becoming a civilization inhabited by People of the Screen, people tied to the ever-changing, ever-fluid, ever-malleable presentation of the past made possible by the nature of digital technology?

Land of Hope also goes against the current by not dumbing down the reading level. It is written with an underlying conviction that we should never sell short the capacity of young Americans to read challenging books

if they are interesting and well-wrought. Such books are far more likely to stoke the fire of their imaginations and convey to them the complexity and excitement of history—history not as an inert recitation of facts, but as a reflective task that takes us to the depths of what it means to be human.

Let me mention three distinctive themes that run through the book, themes that are hinted at in the book's title and are instructive about America's character.

First, there is the theme of America as a *land*—not just an idea, but also a people and a nation; a nation with a particular history, connected to a particular piece of real estate. To understand our nation, it's not enough to understand principles such as equality and liberty, as important as those are. We also have to understand how those principles were put into action, how they were developed, how they came to be forces in our national life. American history, to be sure, is inseparable from America's principles and ideals, but America is not *simply* those things. It is a place with a venerable history created by men and women to whom our veneration is owed. Think of those who lie in Arlington National Cemetery and of countless others in the long history of such sacrifices made on behalf of our country. These things bind us to the land in visceral ways that go beyond ideas or principles.

Second is the theme of *hope*. The idea of America as a land of hope shouldn't be misinterpreted as signifying a saccharine or sentimental view of America's past, but rather as taking into account history's spiritual dimension. We are creatures with free wills and aspirations, not merely tumbleweeds at the mercy of large historical forces. Hope is a quality of soul, something that's not quantifiable or explicable in strictly material terms. It is a consistent characteristic of this country that we have always sought to rise above or move beyond the conditions that are given to us at birth—something not true of every people. To be an American is to believe that the status we are born into is never the final word. We have a spirit of striving, a spirit of hope that goes back to our very beginnings.

Third and finally there is the theme of *story*. Our narratives large and small are an essential part of the way that we Americans make sense of the world. As I write in the book,

The impulse to write history and organize our world around stories is intrinsic to us as human beings. We are, at our core, remembering and story-making creatures, and stories are one of the chief ways we find meaning in the flow of events. What we call “history” and “literature” are merely the refinement and intensification of that basic human impulse, that need.

The word *need* is not an exaggeration. For the human animal, meaning is not a luxury; it is a necessity. Without it, we perish. Historical consciousness is to civilized society what memory is to individual identity. Without memory, without the stories by which our memories are carried forward, we cannot say who, or what, we are. Without them, our life and thought dissolve into a meaningless, unrelated rush of events. Without them, we cannot do the most human of things: we cannot learn, use language, pass on knowledge, raise children, establish rules of conduct, engage in science, or dwell harmoniously in society. Without them, we cannot govern ourselves.

Nor can we have a sense of the future as a time we know will come, because we remember that other tomorrows have come and gone. A culture without memory will necessarily be barbarous and easily tyrannized, even if it is technologically advanced. The incessant waves of daily events will occupy all our attention and defeat all our efforts to connect past, present, and future, thereby diverting us from an understanding of the human things that unfold in time, including the path of our own lives.

The stakes were beautifully expressed in the words of the great Jewish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer: “When a day passes it is no longer there. What remains of it? Nothing more than a story. If stories weren’t told or books weren’t written, man would live like the beasts, only for the day. The whole world, all human life is one long story.”

Singer was right. As individuals, as communities, as countries: we are nothing more than flotsam and jetsam without the stories in which we find our lives' meaning.

Of course, there are stories and then there are stories. French writer André Malraux once wrote, "A man is what he hides: a miserable little pile of secrets." That's one way of thinking about a man's life, but it's a reductive and simplistic way. We've all read biographies like that. But where in this approach is an account of a man's striving, his ambitions, his ideals, his efforts at transcendence? Is it a fair and accurate account of a man to speak only or even mainly of his secrets and failings? Similarly with a nation's history, it must be far more than a compilation of failings and crimes. It must give credence to the aspirational dimension of a nation's life, and particularly for so aspirational a nation as the United States—arguably the most aspirational nation in human history.

A proper history of America must do this without evading the fact that we've often failed miserably, fallen short, and done terrible things. We have not always been a land of hope for everyone—for a great many, but not for all. And so our sense of hope has a double-edged quality about it: to be a land of hope is also to risk being a land of disappointment, a land of frustration, even a land of disillusionment. To understand our history is to experience these negative things. But we wouldn't experience them so sharply if we weren't a land of hope, if we didn't embrace that outlook and aspiration. To use a colloquialism, we Americans allow ourselves to get our hopes up—and that is always risky.

Land of Hope's epigraph is a passage that has long been a source of inspiration and direction to me. Written by John Dos Passos, a man of the radical left in his youth who later moved to the sensible right, it is from a 1941 essay, "The Use of the Past," and it is uncannily relevant to the present:

Every generation rewrites the past. In easy times history is more or less of an ornamental art, but in times of danger we are driven to the written record by a pressing need to find answers to the riddles of today. We need to know what kind of firm ground other men, belonging to generations before us, have found to stand on. In spite of changing conditions of life they were not very different from ourselves, their thoughts were the grandfathers of our thoughts, they managed to meet situations as difficult as those we have to face, to meet them sometimes lightheartedly, and in some measure to make their hopes prevail. We need to know how they did it.

In times of change and danger when there is a quicksand of fear under men's reasoning, a sense of continuity with generations gone before can stretch like a lifeline across the scary present and get us past that idiot delusion of the exceptional Now that blocks good thinking. That is why, in times like ours, when old institutions are caving in and being replaced by new institutions not necessarily in accord with most men's preconceived hopes, political thought has to look backwards as well as forwards.

Isn't that marvelous? There's so much to unpack in it, but of special relevance today is his rather rough denunciation of "that idiot delusion of the exceptional Now." This phrase expresses something that nearly all of us who teach history run up against. It's harder than usual today to get young people interested in the past because they are so firmly convinced that we're living in a time so unprecedented, enjoying pocket-sized technologies that are so transformative, that there's no point in looking at what went on in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To them the past has been superseded—just as our present world is forever in the process of being superseded.

While this posture may be ill-informed and lazy, a way to justify not learning anything, it also represents a genuine conviction, amply reinforced by the endless passing parade of sensations and images in which we are enveloped—one thing always being succeeded by something else, nothing being permanent, nothing enduring, always moving, moving, moving into a

new exceptional Now. But it is a childish and disabling illusion that must be countered, in just the way that Dos Passos suggests.

Even in confronting the challenging questions of American history, most notably the existence of slavery, there are deep lessons to be learned. By the time of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, the institution of slavery had become deeply enmeshed in the national economy, despite all the ways that its existence stood in glaring contradiction to our nation's commitment to equality and self-rule as expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Hence there was real bite to the mocking question fired at Americans by British writer and lexicographer Samuel Johnson: "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?"

How, we wonder today, could such otherwise enlightened and exemplary men as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson have owned slaves, a practice so contradictory to all they stood for? As I write in the book:

There is no easy answer to such questions. But surely a part of the answer is that each of us is born into a world that we did not make, and it is only with the greatest effort, and often at very great cost, that we are ever able to change that world for the better. Moral sensibilities are not static; they develop and deepen over time, and general moral progress is very slow. Part of the study of history involves a training of the imagination, learning to see historical actors as speaking and acting in their own times rather than ours; and learning to see even our heroes as an all-too-human mixture of admirable and unadmirable qualities, people like us who may, like us, be constrained by circumstances beyond their control. . . .

The ambivalences regarding slavery built into the structure of the Constitution were almost certainly unavoidable in the short term, in order to achieve an effective political union of the nation. What we need to understand is how the original compromise no longer became acceptable to increasing numbers of Americans, especially in one part of the Union, and why slavery, a ubiquitous institution in human history, came to be seen not merely as an unfortunate evil but as a sinful impediment to human progress, a stain upon a whole nation. We live today on the other side of a

great transformation in moral sensibility, a transformation that was taking place but was not yet completed in the very years the United States was being formed.

A related lesson of history is that acts of statesmanship often require courage and imagination, even daring, especially when the outcome seems doubtful. Take the case of Lincoln. So accustomed are we to thinking of Lincoln in heroic terms that we forget the depth and breadth of his unpopularity during his entire time in office. Few great leaders have been more comprehensively disdained, loathed, and underestimated. A low Southern view of him, of course, was to be expected, but it was widely shared in the North as well. As Lincoln biographer David Donald put it, “Lincoln’s own associates thought him ‘a Simple Susan, a baboon, an aimless punster, a smutty joker.’” Abolitionist Wendell Phillips called him “a huckster in politics, a first-rate, second-rate man.” George McClellan, his opponent in the 1864 election, openly disdained him as a “well-meaning baboon.” For much of that election year, Lincoln was convinced, with good reason, that he was doomed to lose the election, with incalculable consequences for the war effort and the future of the nation.

To quote the book again:

We need to remember that this is generally how history happens. It is not like a Hollywood movie in which the background music swells and the crowd in the room applauds and leaps to its feet as the orator dispenses timeless words, and the camera pans the room full of smiling faces. In real history, the background music does not swell, the trumpets do not sound, and the carping critics often seem louder than the applause. The leader or the soldier has to wonder whether he is acting in vain, whether the criticisms of others are in fact true, whether time will judge him harshly, whether his sacrifice will count for anything. Few great leaders have felt this burden more completely than Lincoln.

In conclusion, let me suggest that the story of the ending of the Civil War in April 1865 might hold a lesson for those of our fellow countrymen today who seem to regard America’s past with contempt:

On April 9, after a last flurry of futile resistance, Lee faced facts and arranged to meet Grant at a brick home in the village of Appomattox Court House to surrender his army. He could not formally surrender for the whole Confederacy, but the surrender of his army would trigger the surrender of all others, and so it represented the end of the Confederate cause.

It was a poignant scene, dignified and restrained and sad, as when a terrible storm that has raged and blown has finally exhausted itself, leaving behind a strange and reverent calm, purged of all passion. The two men had known one another in the Mexican War, and had not seen one another in nearly twenty years. Lee arrived first, wearing his elegant dress uniform, soon to be joined by Grant clad in a mud-spattered sack coat, his trousers tucked into his muddy boots. They showed one another a deep and respectful courtesy, and Grant generously allowed Lee's officers to keep their sidearms and the men to keep their horses and take them home for the spring planting. None would be arrested or charged with treason.

Four days later, when Lee's army of 28,000 men marched in to surrender their arms and colors, General Joshua L. Chamberlain of Maine, a hero of Gettysburg, was present at the ceremony. He later wrote of his observations that day, reflecting upon his soldierly respect for the men before him, each passing by and stacking his arms, men who only days before had been his mortal foes: "Before us in proud humiliation stood the embodiment of manhood: men whom neither toils and sufferings, nor the fact of death, nor disaster, nor hopelessness could bend from their resolve; standing before us now, thin, worn, and famished, but erect, and with eyes looking level into ours, waking memories that bound us together as no other bond;—was not such manhood to be welcomed back into a Union so tested and assured? . . . On our part not a sound of trumpet more, nor roll of drum; not a cheer, nor word nor whisper of vain-glorying, nor motion of man standing again at the order, but an awed stillness rather, and breath-holding, as if it were the passing of the dead!"

Such deep sympathies, in a victory so heavily tinged with sadness and grief and death. This war was, and remains to this day, America's bloodiest conflict, having generated at least a million and a half casualties on the two

sides combined, [including] 620,000 deaths, the equivalent of six million men in today's American population. One in four soldiers who went to war never returned home. One in thirteen returned home with one or more missing limbs. For decades to come, in every village and town in the land, one could see men bearing such scars and mutilations, a lingering reminder of the price they and others had paid.

And yet, Chamberlain's words suggested that there might be room in the days and years ahead for the spirit of conciliation that Lincoln had called for in his Second Inaugural Speech, a spirit of binding up wounds, and of caring for the many afflicted and bereaved, and then moving ahead, together. It was a slender hope, yet a hope worth holding, worth nurturing, worth pursuing.

We all know that it did not turn out that way, due in part to Lincoln's death at the hands of John Wilkes Booth. But the story is illustrative nonetheless. If Chamberlain's troops could find it in their hearts to be that forgiving, that generous, that respectful of men who had only days before been their mortal enemies, we certainly ought to be able to extend a similar generosity towards men in what is now, for us, a far more distant past. Lincoln himself said something similar, at a cabinet meeting on April 14, the very day of his assassination:

I hope there will be no persecution, no bloody work after the war is over. . . . Enough lives have been sacrificed. We must extinguish our resentment if we expect harmony and union. There has been too much of a desire on the part of some of our very good friends to be masters, to interfere with and dictate to those states, to treat the people not as fellow citizens; there is too little respect for their rights. I do not sympathize in these feelings.

That was good counsel then and now, and it is an example of the wisdom that the study of history can provide us. May such wisdom be an impetus for us to rediscover such a humane and generous example in our own times.