

THE VOICES AMERICA LISTENS TO

An Interview With Dr. Henry Seidel Canby

IT is a curious experience to meet a man in the flesh whom one has known in print for 20 years and never thought of as an embodied spirit at all. That is what happened to us when Dr. Henry Seidel Canby walked into our office last week. It was like meeting the *Times Literary Supplement* walking along Lambton Quay. The *Saturday Review of Literature* had not been quite the same thing to us, ever, as the *Times Literary Supplement*, but it had been the same kind of thing, and come to mean an influence and an attitude rather than a man or group of men. It was strange to see its creator walk in and pull a cigarette out of his pocket.

The cigarette was interesting in other ways. First, we knew that Dr. Canby's background was Quaker and puritan. When the first cigarette came out we were tempted to ask him how old he was when he first smoked. But another and another came, and what we wanted to ask then was, did he carry them loose? Not once did we see a packet or a case. His hand just dipped at intervals into his coat pocket and a new cigarette was in his lips.

Well, cigarettes are not very important matters in the career of a scholar and social philosopher, but they helped us to detach the man from his books. And it was the man who had come in to talk to us, not the professor, editor, or litterateur: the New England American whose work lies in lecture halls and libraries, but whose instincts, as often as he surrenders to them, drive him back to a Connecticut woodland.

His Rural Retreat

His farm, he told us, with a countryman's pardonable pride—a countryman whose ancestors came from Yorkshire—cost him 12 dollars an acre 30 years ago and was now worth 60 dollars.

"It still seems ridiculously cheap for land within 45 miles of New Haven, and 150 of New York," we told him.

"Well, yes," he agreed, "but don't make a mistake. It is not good farm land. I can't grow anything on it but timber." "But isn't that valuable?"

"It is beginning to be. We didn't value it once, but during the last 20 or 30 years we are taking all timber seriously. One of the most popular things ever done by Franklin Roosevelt was establishing camps for youths who could not find work during the depression years and giving them areas of woodland to clean up and replant. Tens of thousands of acres were dealt with in this way and now what were waste lands are increasingly valuable forests."

It was during the same period, Dr. Canby told us, that the well-known regional surveys were written, a series of books about the different American States. "The idea was to provide work for unemployed writers and printers and the result, as you probably know, was a row of books—you can see them in the American Library of Information—that are absolutely first class."

These references to the countryside prompted us to ask if it was a common practice for authors and journalists in America to go into rural retreats. Were

such places available at prices that writers could pay?

"The practice is very common," Dr. Canby said. "My own place is a renovated farmhouse built about 200 years ago."

"Of stone?"

"No, of wood. There are stone houses in the South, but in the North we have always used timber. The framework of my house is made of logs of great weight and it is as sound to-day as when it was built. The outside has of course been renewed at intervals, but the heavy framework, as long as the rain is kept from it, is as durable as stone."

"What has happened to the farmers who owned these places? Have they had to walk off?"



H. D. THOREAU
Speaks for an important minority

"Well, it's a long story, but the central fact is the opening up of the Middle West. The best land in the East is still under production, and is worth hundreds of dollars an acre; but when the Middle West came into production it was no longer profitable to farm the poorer land in the East and many places were abandoned."

"And now you rich authors have taken them over for inspiration."

"We could do with more riches and more inspiration; but it is a fact that a large number of authors and journalists do live and work in the country for a considerable portion of each year."

Two Living Voices

"What voices is America listening to these days? You yourself have written lives of Thoreau and of Whitman. How much do those two still mean?"

"A very great deal indirectly, not so much perhaps directly. Thoreau's *Walden* is one of the great books of its class, full of profound thought, and memorable phrases."

"What about his *Essay on the Duty of Civil Disobedience*?"

"That is still important too. It is a minority view, but an important minority."

"And Whitman?"

"Whitman of course is entirely different. Whitman is mystical, rhapsodical. It is impossible not to know what Thoreau means, but Whitman did not always

know what he meant himself. He sang of America, saw us as a 'race of races,' and had a profound influence in making us that. But he needs an editor. Some of his pieces are meaningless in themselves, some meaningless in their context. When someone does for him what Matthew Arnold did for Wordsworth his greatness will be better understood."

The New Men

"In the meantime who are your literary gods—Hemingway and company, or the more recent lights?"

"Not Hemingway, I think, though he is everywhere widely read. Certainly not Sinclair Lewis, who ended an era and is now ended himself. Not Macleish or Dos Passos or Farrell, though they are all important. And Thomas Wolfe, who looked



ERNEST HEMINGWAY
Widely read, but not a god

like becoming something big, is now dead. The men who will mean most in the new world that is coming have not yet sorted themselves out; but I think they will come home with the fighting forces."

"You mean the correspondents?"

"Not particularly. I mean all the sensitive, shocked, inquiring, and bewildered young men who at present are remoulding the world. We are at a tremendous day in history, and when order comes out of chaos most of those who are to-day writing poems and novels will be where our nineteenth century writers were at the end of the last war."

Influence of the Negro

"Would you say something about your Negro writers—the author of *Native Son*, for example."

"I'm glad you asked me that. American literature is no longer wholly white. Our negroes are educating themselves, and some of them have such talent that it is impossible any longer to draw a colour line against them. Paul Robeson and Marian Anderson are known all over the world as singers. But there are negro poets and novelists too. There is Richard Wright, the novelist whose book you have just mentioned. As soon as it comes here, read his autobiography and you will realise how surely the negroes are emancipating themselves."

"You admit them to white universities?"

"We have always done that. The difficulty is not their colour but their lack of early education: very few of them qualify for admission."

"When they do get over the educational hurdle, are they welcomed?"

"Yes and no. They get the same treatment as white students academically, but I am not going to say there is social equality."

"Could you take Paul Robeson into an hotel for dinner?"

"I could take him, but there are some hotels in which we would not be served. One of my colleagues had such an experience quite recently. But it is possible that negroes themselves are making a mistake in demanding social equality. Political and economic equality can



RICHARD WRIGHT
Impossible to draw a colour line

be achieved by legislation, and are slowly being achieved—but you can't enact social equality. That comes when it has been earned, but can hardly be decreed."

"Why do we see so few negroes on the films? Is the feeling so strong against them that the takings would suffer?"

"There is prejudice, always; but in this case it is the negroes themselves who resist. They don't want to appear in films which perpetuate their inferior status. They would even remove the mummies if they could."

"When you say there is prejudice, do you mean that all Americans everywhere draw the colour line?"

"Not at all. Most of us have had contact with negroes all our lives, and many have a real affection for them. All the same, social equality is a long way off."

Students on the Left

"Well, Doctor, we were talking a moment ago about universities. Do the students of American universities tend to be Left Wing?"

"They did until a few years ago, but I think they have shifted their ground a little since. It depends, too, on the university. My own university, Yale, is Conservative. Harvard is less Conservative, but not Radical. Columbia is Left Wing, and so it goes on."

"You think that the war, and the events leading up to it, have made Radicals pause?"

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NEW ZEALAND LISTENER, JUNE 22