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The Search for a Usable American Past in the New Deal Era

The Great Crash marked an intellectual as well as an economic watershed in American history. With the first signs of the Depression, observers sensed a change in the national mind; the very threat of adversity awakened a new social consciousness. Even before Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal threw public resources behind them, Americans began to take stock of their country. After 1933, the government-sponsored cultural projects furthered an adventure in national rediscovery which represented one of the most far-reaching developments of the Depression decade.

Manifestations of this renewed interest in America abounded: regionalism in painting and music, historical novels and films, the recovery of folklore and customs, scholarly biographies and sociological monographs, the vogue of documentary photographs and dramas, the WPA guides and historical surveys. Whatever the apparent chaos of activity, however, the overall cultural development of the decade revealed a trend. The "drive toward national inventory," as Alfred Kazin characterized the phenomenon, "began by reporting the ravages of the depression and ended by reporting on the national inheritance."

The movement was distinctly from present to past: from current affairs to history. But what did it all mean—the preservation of documents, the indexing of artifacts, the measuring of old buildings, the opening of the National Archives in 1937? To some, as Merle Curti has pointed out, it "suggested the end of an era, an effort to summarize the past, now that all the returns were in, before moving on to a new chapter." But to many others it represented, above all, a search for a usable American past, for a tradition that could provide guidance and justification for present programs and projects. In Harold Clurman's words, the Depression generation "studied our history with the purpose of shaping our future."3

The rediscovery of the American past which accompanied the New Deal years was acknowledged and its manifestations catalogued at the time. Since then, historians have seldom neglected to discuss the phenomenon in their accounts of cultural developments during the period. But no subsequent treatment has moved beyond Kazin's contemporary description. In the concluding chapter of On Native Grounds (1942), the young literary critic eloquently detailed the development; but wanting perspective he failed adequately to explain it. This lack of analysis has left many questions unanswered. How did the impulse compare with previous instances of resurgent interest in American history? Where did this renewed concern with the national past originate? What were its chief characteristics? In what ways did the Depression color this new view? What, finally, did it signify? These are some of the concerns of this essay.

There was of course nothing unique about the 1930s impulse to seek a usable national history. Other generations of Americans, too, had undertaken their own such quests. In the early years of the century, for example, a radical young generation of writers clamored for a redefinition of the American tradition in order to free the native artist from the crippling influence of contemporary culture. Inspired and led by Van Wyck Brooks, these Young Intellectuals condemned the useless past, provided them by the academic establishment, which had canonized only those authors who accommodated themselves to the "commercial mind" of the late 19th century. "The present is a void," Brooks declared, "and the American writer floats in that void because the past that survives in the common mind of the present is a past without living value." An alternative, however, lay in what Brooks called a "usable past." "If . . . we cannot use the past our professors offer us, is there any reason why we should not create others of our own?"

The reconstruction of history would perforce begin with Walt Whitman, who "laid the cornerstone of a national ideal capable . . . of releasing personality and of retrieving for our civilization, originally deficient in the richer juices of human nature, and still further bled and flattened out by the Machine Process, the only sort of 'place in the sun' really worth having."

2On Creating a Usable Past," Dial, 64 (Apr. 11, 1918), 339.
alone among American authors could move the modern writer. The past waiting to be discovered, then, was a meager one, as Brooks conceded; what stood out were “the shortcomings, the needs, the difficulties of our literary life.” But the realization that “others have desired the things we desire and have encountered the same obstacles, and that in some degree time has begun to face those obstacles down and make the way straight for us,” the young critic argued, might help the creative forces in America to unite against their common reactionary enemies.8

Whatever their despair at the current state of literary history, Brooks and his comrades, notably Randolph Bourne, Waldo Frank, Harold Stearns and Lewis Mumford, wrote in a time of buoyant optimism and hope. They were missionaries preaching the gospel of art, prophets pointing the way to cultural salvation. In that crusade, the use of the past was largely negative: history represented something to transcend.

Then came the First World War and the disruption of so much that had seemed to promise a new day for America. The disintegration of the anticipatory spirit of Young America can perhaps be seen in the short life of The Seven Arts magazine, founded in 1916 by Waldo Frank and James Oppenheim to further the Brooksian revolution: “For the first time, the aesthetic and the national . . . are joined dynamically in American literary action.” In the first issue, the editors proclaimed their faith “that we are living in the first days of a renascent period, a time which means for America the coming of that national self-consciousness which is the beginning of greatness.”9 A year later, casualty of the jingoistic reaction to its anti-interventionist sentiments, the journal folded with a last lament for the lost “current” of desire among American youth for art and freedom. “Across this current, like a sudden dam, came the war. It carried with it a menace to what we believed to be the promise of American life.”10

The particular search for a usable American past upon which the Young Intellectuals had embarked was also abandoned during the war—before, indeed, it had produced much history. Only the movement’s progenitor, Van Wyck Brooks, continued for a time to write as though nothing had changed. For most Americans, the Armistice ushered in a new era and new interests. Many seemed determined to forget the recent past, as the election of Harding and the politics of “normalcy” indicated. In times of complacency, men live primarily in the present; and as if to emphasize their emancipation from history, the generation of the 1920s made heroes of their contemporaries. The decade belonged to living embodiments of their own ideal self-images—the technologists of a business civilization. That Americans so admired Henry Ford, Herbert Hoover and Charles Lindbergh as to metamorphose them into icons is a commentary on the materialism of the postwar era.11

When readers during the 1920s turned to the past at all, they sought a scapegoat. In that peculiar literary creation, the Puritan, some writers of the time found their victim with a vengeance. A combination of pious religiosity and business acumen, this personage better represented the late 19th century than the first years of colonization, Victorianism than Calvinism, Anthony Comstock than John Winthrop. H. L. Mencken singled him out for such special abuse that a leading cultural historian of the period has found it “most difficult to explain . . . .”12 Apparently, these spurious representatives of the 19th century stood condemned as grandsires of the civilization from which the current generation sought to escape through ridicule or condemnation. For the germ of this idea, writers of the 1920s unfairly cited Van Wyck Brooks. Actually, the author of The Wine of the Puritans (1908) had never intended to foster so jejune a past.

To an extent, the “new” biography that flourished during the postwar decade also represented a reaction against the past, precipitated perhaps by animus toward those who had led the nation into world conflict and then betrayed their countrymen’s high hopes with a botched peace. It was anti-historical: psychoanalyzing or debunking the heroes of other eras, by discrediting them, only made the present loom all the larger. Apart from a sense of outrage over the mess their forebears had made of the world, however, writers of the 1920s had good reasons for abandoning the stately, sentimental tradition in Victorian biography, “the old three story gingerbread monument to a defunct reputation,” as Stephen Vincent Benét affectionately described it.13 Its practitioners, as the biographer Claude Fuess admitted, had shown a consistent “unwillingness to expose any deceit or indiscretion in the immaculate hero.”14 Besides a refreshing realism about their ancestors, the “modern” biographers brought some useful insights from psychology to bear upon the figures they sought to interpret. But candor could degenerate into cynicism, as in the case of Paxton Hib-

10Seven Arts, 1 (Nov. 1916), 52.
11Seven Arts, 2 (Oct. 1917), v.
15Debunkery and Biography,” Atlantic Monthly, 151 (Mar. 1933), 347.
ben's portraits of Henry Ward Beecher and William Jennings Bryan, and personality analysis into character assassination, when, for example, Abraham Lincoln became the victim of Edgar Lee Masters. Excesses in biography during the Twenties, then, paralleled those in other fields; and the inevitable reaction set in with the Depression. "Back to... Victorian biography," urged Bernard DeVoto in 1932. "For the great Victorians, however timorous in refusing to call fornication by a ruder name, had as biographers an invincible integrity."14

The Great Crash brought the epoch of prosperity to a sudden and dramatic close, and the Depression discredited its primary symbols. That idol, the contemporary technician with his stake in the expanding economy, collapsed along with the stock market; and the era of which he had been chief representative fell precipitously into disrepute. Indeed, the overreaction against the decade now paralleled the complacency which had accompanied the affluence: both went too far.

The new attitude of rejection encouraged some observers to view the Twenties as an exceptional interlude of irresponsibility—an aberrational interruption—separating the "normal" periods of responsible liberal reform before the War and after 1933. This notion also emboldened a number of writers to interpret the Depression-inspired revival of interest in American history, like contemporary developments in other fields, as a continuation of that which had preceded the War. A close comparison of the two movements, however, reveals the limitations of such a conception. Furthermore, the origins of both the rediscovery of America and the renewed preoccupation with the national past can be found in the same discredited decade of Ford, Lindbergh and Hoover.

The Great Depression that settled upon the land after the Crash of 1929 touched every aspect of American life. If not the exclusive cause of the revived interest in the native history, it constituted the chief catalyst. Accordingly, in motivation the 1930s search for a usable past bore a marked contrast to that of the prosperous prewar era. An optimistic spirit of rebellion, corresponding to the contemporaneous political reform impulse, had attended the early 20th century concern with history. For the radical Young Intellectuals, the men and values of the late 19th century represented barriers to their own artistic energy and creativity. The Depression generation possessed neither the impatience nor the self-confidence of their prewar predecessors. In a time of insecurity, they dared not repudiate their forebears. As John Dos Passos put it, "We need to know what kind of firm ground other men, belonging to generations before us, have found to stand on."15

Van Wyck Brooks and his apostles, filled with a sense of confidence and ambition which reflected the climate of those days, felt apologetic about their nation's prior cultural achievements. To discover and illuminate the historic barriers to innovation and accomplishment, in social life as well as art, became one of their tasks. The uses of the past then would be largely negative: the Young Radicals sought to learn from the abortive experiences of their artistic forefathers how to avoid compromise, frustration and defeat in literature. In Brooks this purpose came through in tangible terms. Out of his contempt for the contemporary cultural inheritance evolved the conception for a series of studies in 19th century literary history which would dramatize how American writers had been maimed in spirit by their society. The works began to appear after the Armistice. The Ordeal of Mark Twain (1920) and The Pilgrimage of Henry James (1925) told complementary stories of thwarted consciousness. As the author summarized his interpretation, "Mark Twain stayed at home and surrendered to the tastes of his time. Henry James fled to Europe and the uprooting withered and wasted his genius."16 At best, however, Brooks' reading of history, like that of the other Young Intellectuals, was cursory—designed primarily to justify a preconceived indictment of the present.

By contrast, the Depression generation of writers could discover in the present no promise to use as an excuse for condemning the past. Instead, they felt drawn toward history—"driven," in John Dos Passos' words—"by a pressing need to find answers to the riddles of today."17 If they turned to the past as a guide to the present, then the landmarks must be accurate and reliable or the lessons would be misleading. Hence, meticulous attention to authenticity became a canon of the decade. Writers of the prewar era had well-defined goals; accordingly, they employed history selectively to vindicate their rebellion. But their counterparts twenty years later, lacking confidence in their own vision, sought an objective version of history to provide guidelines for action.

During the 1920s, two very different literary groups had anticipated and initiated the renewed consciousness of America and the affirmative uses of its past which characterized the mood of the following decade. Awareness of native themes had sprung from an unlikely source—some of the expatriate artists who settled abroad, frequently in Paris—after the Armistice.


15The Ground We Stand On: Some Examples from the History of a Political Creed (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1941), p. 3.


17The Ground We Stand On, p. 3.
The new interest in the American past was prefigured in the work of a more conventional group. Professional historical scholars, their numbers swollen by young recruits, had undertaken two cooperative projects which helped mold the image of the past which predominated after the Crash.

That literary expatriates contributed significantly to the rediscovery of America involves no paradox if the nature of the "lost generation" and the meaning of their alienation are accurately construed. If lost, many of the sensitive young writers of the 1920s felt determined to find themselves as well as solid cultural ground to stand on. Often they sought freedom from the distractions of the present, the better to understand themselves and their heritage. Exile hardly represented a repudiation of their nationality—only perhaps of their countrymen. "I feel more American than I have ever felt before," wrote Louis Bromfield from Paris in 1927. "I find that all my senses, my perceptions, have become with regard to America sharpened and more highly sensitive." In 1934, after he had returned from France, Van Wyck Brooks' erstwhile colleague Harold Stearns admitted that "our participation which many people hailed as an end of our 'isolation' did in cold fact result in a greater nationalistic feeling than we had ever before known . . . ." The works which the expatriates produced abroad, as well as after their return, reflected their continuing preoccupation. According to their self-appointed historian, Malcolm Cowley, "In Paris or Pamplona, writing, drinking, watching bullfights or making love, they continued to desire a Kentucky hill cabin, a farmhouse in Iowa or Wisconsin, the Michigan woods, the blue Juniat, a country they had 'lost, ah, lost' as Thomas Wolfe kept saying; a home to which they couldn't go back."

Aside from Vernon Louis Parrington's Main Currents in American Thought, a three-volume reinterpretation which in impulse and emphasis belonged to the Progressive Era of Charles Beard and J. Allen Smith, the two major historical achievements of the 1920s were collaborative works which pointed in the opposite direction. Scores of scholars contributed to The Dictionary of American Biography (20 volumes, 1928–36), while a different author was responsible for each of the twelve projected volumes of The History of American Life series (1928–44). As collective enterprises, these works anticipated many of the cultural projects, such as the state guides, later undertaken by the New Deal. More important, they reflected what became the dual preoccupations of historical writing during the following decade—the achievements of individual Americans, on the one hand, and of the great democratic mass on the other.

Affirmative in spirit, ambitious in conception and inclusive in scope, the accumulating volumes of these two projects constituted a monumental rebuke to those who belittled the nation and its history. If the British had their Dictionary of National Biography, then Americans must have a comparable compilation. The lives of hundreds of their ancestors would be sketched in portraits which sought to combine the best of the old biography and the new. As the original editor, Allen Johnson, declared, "Contributors have been urged not to rest content with a bare narrative of events, but so far as possible to leave the reader with a definite impression of the personality and achievements of the subject . . . ." The work represented nothing less than a testimony to some Americans' mature sense of nationality.

While the DAB honored a small minority of the nation, Arthur M. Schlesinger and Dixon Ryan Fox's History of American Life undertook to describe the common experience of the whole people. As titles like The Rise of the Common Man and The Rise of the City indicated, the authors reached well beyond the boundaries of traditional history to embrace their subject. "It was an ambitious venture and, in many respects, a pioneer venture," Schlesinger acknowledged in 1936. "With so much basic research yet to be done, the task was somewhat like trying to write the story of Columbus while he was still sailing westward." The contributing authors' investigations took them to unconventional materials, as their bibliographies testified. They studied structural remains, furniture and costumes, as well as broadsides, paintings, travel accounts, manuals of etiquette, popular songs, pulp fiction and other ephemera. Many topics they sought to cover, too, were unorthodox: invention, agriculture, immigration, education, social customs—even society and leisure. If, finally, the History of American Life volumes never quite fulfilled their promise in freshness and originality, their contribution to the renewed passion for Americana which flowed through the 1930s like a current should not be underestimated.

Not only the motives which drove American writers during the Depression to rediscover their national heritage differed from those of the prewar generation. In its substance, too, the past which they recovered was unique. The very character of the primary influence upon the search—the Depression crisis—made it so. Economic dislocation stimulated a renewed interest in history; it also influenced the tone of the revival and the quality of its vision. The effect proved profoundly conservative. Although deeply
distressed in their present circumstance, writers who took up historical themes during the 1930s sought neither to lay the blame on their ancestors nor to discredit other eras. They could accuse only themselves of apostasy. Accordingly, they undertook to recover the traditional values and principles which the national experience had validated. Unlike the Young Radicals, the generation which turned to history during the 1930s was preoccupied with the tested and the permanent.

Their very conviction in the utility of the American past represented a significant development. It marked an admission, not always easy for Americans, that their nation could not escape the burdens of history. Moreover, it dictated a specific vision of the past. With the prospect of a placid, harmonious history of no use to them, the writers of the 1930s had to force to develop a perspective suitable for a time of crisis. The analogies and parallels they sought in the past came from other periods of storm and stress, of crisis and conflict. Accordingly, the norms they found in the story of American development differed little from the conditions of their own time.

In America, as elsewhere, the Depression encouraged an insular nationalism which colored the interpretation of history. But this was not the chauvinism of the prewar nor the xenophobia of the postwar periods. Americans during the Thirties responded particularly to the native and continental facets of their past; their impulses were isolationist rather than nativist. Thus, the nationalism of the decade stimulated an emphasis upon the uniqueness of American ideas and values, not the purity of any single racial or cultural stock. In many ways, American writers turned their backs on the Old World. Not the seaborne nation of smallclothes, transatlantic citizens and "Good Feelings" attracted them, but the interior country with its homespun garb, provincial politics and sectional anisms. The pioneer farmer much more than the merchant trader represented the American character for these 20th century citizens. They cherished his frontier penchant for tackling problems head-on. And like him, they believed that the solutions lay close at hand. Europe could provide neither guidance nor excuses.

Its democratic tendencies represented still another unique characteristic of the 1930s search for a usable American past. The leveling influence of the Depression encouraged an emphasis upon the classless, inclusive character of the national experience. In a time of common crisis, the revived past must serve all the people. This led to an accentuation of the most encompassing aspects of the American heritage: the occupations and amusements of the many rather than the manners of the few, the log cabin in the clearing rather than the plantation mansion by the river. The same Americans who acknowledged the "forgotten man"—the farmer and the worker—of their own time also wished to recognize their nameless ancestors who toiled in the fields and factories.

A sense of community, engendered by shared economic adversity, represented another aspect of the egalitarian spirit of the Thirties. Interpreters of the past responded to the mood of national unity, promoted by Franklin D. Roosevelt, which contrasted with the divisive temper of the preceding decade. Rarely speaking now in the solitary accents of a cultural elite, they sought instead to capture a wide and popular hearing. As in other times of crisis, writers turned to the American people for the ultimate verdict upon the national destiny. But the great democratic jury, they believed, must have access to a common historical literature. As a result, in general the gap between the writer and his society narrowed during the Thirties.

For some Americans, of course, the rediscovered past of the 1930s opened up romantic vistas which clashed sharply with the drab Depression foreground. No doubt this helps explain the contemporary vogue of historical novels. Perhaps this trend, best exemplified by the immense popularity of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, represented very little more than sentimental escapism on the part of millions. But some observers took even this phenomenon as a portent of serious social attitudes. Malcolm Cowley, for example, insisted that "not a few of the historical romancers who flourished in these years revealed a social purpose in their writing: at a time of crisis they were turning toward the past, not simply because it was picturesque but also to find heroes whose example would assure us about the future."23

Whatever the implications of developments in historical fiction, a new preoccupation with heroes from the past did indeed constitute one of the key features of the rediscovered American heritage. Appropriately, it found preeminent expression in a sober and solid, a conventional and conservative genre, the venerable life-and-times. The biographical vogue of the Great Depression years was remarkable. No preceding era could compare with it. In 1932, for example, publishers brought out two biographies a day, twice as many as ever before—and the trend continued through the decade. 24 Furthermore, book sales told the same story. The best-seller lists included more and more nonfiction works, with biographies of Americans prominent among them.

For all their interest in life histories, however, Depression readers had little use for the "new biography" of the preceding era. Indeed, as Alfred Kazin put it, "Where the generation of the twenties wanted to revenge

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themselves on their fathers, the generation of the thirties needed the comfort of their grandparents.'25 Thus, the army of authors which dusted off the traditional form of biography also approached their subjects with sympathy and respect. The format seldom varied: whether the subject belonged to the first or second rank, he deserved a full account and the reader expected a full accounting in pages cluttered with footnotes and bibliography. The effect was nearly always the same: if the preceding decade had threatened to compromise the reputation of many historic American heroes, the years of the Depression witnessed a great rehabilitation of national statesmen, soldiers and even scholars. It was a day for the redemption of controversial reputations, such as those of John Tyler by Oliver Chitwood, Roger B. Taney by Carl B. Swisher, and Winfield Scott by Charles W. Elliott. A time for defending the unjustly maligned, as well. Bernard De Voto, for example, wrote almost every word of Mark Twain’s America (1932) to refute the calumnies of Van Wyck Brooks’ The Ordeal of Mark Twain. But perhaps the latter’s Life of Emerson (1932) represented the most dramatic example of the new affirmative attitude toward the past. Brooks’ subsequent work, particularly the Makers and Finders series of literary histories which began to emerge later in the decade, marked an even sharper contrast with that of his prewar years. Now the once-radical author described his purpose as “reviving the special kind of memory that fertilizes the living mind and gives it the sense of a base on which to build.”26

If Henry Pringle’s somewhat hostile biography of Theodore Roosevelt (1931) retained traces of a debunking mood completely absent from its successor, the apologetic Life and Times of William Howard Taft (2 volumes, 1939), the contrast perhaps revealed something about the impact of the changing times upon an author’s view of history.27 With sympathetic, prize-winning lives of Grover Cleveland and Hamilton Fish, Allan Nevins encouraged readers to reassess the much-discredited Gilded Age; and in John D. Rockefeller (2 volumes, 1940), the Columbia history professor sought to improve the image of the Robber Barons and their contribution to what he called “the heroic age of American enterprise.” Reaching farther back in time, Carl Van Doren paid tribute in 1938 to the first of the entering Americans with his best-selling biography of Benjamin Franklin. Besides being a work of scholarship and literary art, Benjamin Franklin, a Pulitzer Prize-winner, was a “timely” book. As Carl Becker emphasized in his laudatory review, “no voice from the past speaks with greater pith and relevance to all men of intelligence and good will in the mad world of today . . . .”28

Whether recent past or distant, the spirit of the Thirties seemed somehow to improve it. The sturdy full-dress biographies proliferated, one wag observed, even more rapidly than New Deal agencies. Among the many notable new volumes dealing with American lives, a few of the most enduring were: Lloyd Lewis, Sherman: Fighting Prophet (1932), which one reviewer hailed appropriately as “old-fashioned”; Claude G. Bowers, Beveridge and the Progressive Era (1932); Douglas Southall Freeman’s four-volume monument to R. E. Lee (1934-35), which Stephen Vincent Benét claimed restored his “faith in biography”;29 Ralph Barton Perry, The Thought and Character of William James (2 volumes, 1935), a Pulitzer Prize-winner like the Lee; Philip C. Jessup’s Elihu Root (2 volumes, 1938); and Henry Seidel Canby, Thoreau (1939). All immediately won widespread admiration and respect; many remained unsurpassed for decades afterward.

“Why is it that biographic writing in this country so consistently outruns historical writing?” Allan Nevins pondered aloud in 1939.30 Perhaps because for many readers and authors, history had become biography. Despite the Marxists and their dialectics about inexorable material forces, many among the generation of the 1930s believed in the power of free men—and wished to read and write about them. Moreover, they found something peculiarly usable about biography. Edgar Johnson grasped the idea in 1938 when he wrote: “In recent years a vast exploration has been going on of the heroes of American history and folklore—for what we are is the product of the America that was.” More important, he insisted, the whole American past, mirrored in modern biography, is implicit in contemporary society, infused in contemporary consciousness. Not only is it the soil out of which the present has grown, but our biographers have everywhere been preoccupied with establishing its richness and relevance. . . . Books like Boyd’s Mad Anthony Wayne (1929) and Light Horse Harry (1931), Lewis’ Sherman and Elliott’s Winfield Scott have not been so much concerned with building an American pantheon as with clarifying an available past. And doing so, they . . . have demonstrated that the past is a living past of the present.31


27That Pringle had access to all of the Taft but only part of the Roosevelt papers may also have influenced his interpretation.
30“What’s the Matter with History?” Saturday Review of Literature, 19 (Feb. 4, 1939), 3.
selected epochs, events and, more important, the personages who figured in them. Not surprisingly, the same characteristics which many Americans chose to emphasize when they recalled their heritage dictated the historical eras they memorialized most frequently and fervently. The emphasis upon the insular and democratic in their experience, the orientation to other eras of crisis, the need for stories which were somehow both romantic and relevant—all these factors led almost inescapably to an absorption in the 19th century years of Manifest Destiny and Civil War. In the great “Middle Period” between the Missouri Compromise and Appomattox, more than any other epoch, historical interpreters of the 1930s found the past they sought to revitalize. The issues, developments and especially the personalities of those years proved compelling to Americans moving toward the middle years of the 20th century. Personalities because, even in an atmosphere infused with democracy, the people must have their heroes. More than an epoch or an event, a single American could stand for—literally embody—the lessons of the past which the Depression generation sought to recall. But interest and attention centered necessarily upon individuals of a special sort. They needs must be the spokesmen, the representatives, the symbols finally, of the whole people, the common folk. The choices then were obvious. Among literary artists they could only be Twain and Whitman; among Presidents Jackson and preeminently Lincoln.

In Old Hickory and Sam Clemens, in Walt Whitman and most of all in “Honest Abe,” the Great Emancipator, the people responded to the highest incarnations of themselves. Here indeed were the great democratic heroes of the 19th century past. But what did these four historic personages have in common besides their democratic tendencies? Each of course had emerged, in his own characteristic rough-and-tumble fashion, during the romantic, exuberant ante-bellum years. Each had about him that homespun coarseness of texture, that pungent tang of the soil which marked him as distinctly, indomitably American. Each had been cut out of the “native grain.” From their humble origins all four retained, albeit not without misgivings, warm humanitarian sympathies, a real but studied uncouthness, a tendency to defy polite convention, an earthy sense of humor, a preference for male company, and withal a self-consciousness about their public images. In life, each had stirred the blood of his contemporaries; though long dead now their emotive power remained—altered perhaps, but hardly diminished and probably enhanced. While an Emerson or a Lowell, a Webster or a Clay could inspire respect, his image remained pallid and out of reach. But a Jackson or a Mark Twain immediately conjured up an impression rich in color and application. And Whitman and Lincoln became virtually reincarnated in the minds of millions of Americans.

Appropriately, biographers turned repeatedly to these four personages. The life of Old Hickory was retold in colorful detail with great warmth and vigor in the two celebrated volumes by Marquis James, Andrew Jackson: The Border Captain (1933) and Andrew Jackson: Portrait of a President (1937), the latter of which won a Pulitzer Prize. Two more sympathetic studies of Samuel Clemens followed DeVoto’s during the course of the decade: Minnie M. Brashier, Mark Twain: Son of Missouri (1934) and Edward Wagenknecht, Mark Twain: The Man and His Work (1935). Walt Whitman was the subject of four substantial works, including a 1937 biography by Edgar Lee Masters which one reviewer found “not so soured as . . . his book on Lincoln.” Haniel Long, Walt Whitman and the Springs of Courage, Esther Shephard, Walt Whitman’s Pose, and Newton Arvin, Whitman, a political interpretation, were published in 1938. That three additional Whitman and two more Mark Twain studies appeared early in the following decade bore further testimony to their hold upon the times.

Above all other historic personages, however, Lincoln came to dominate the era. The development had profound implications. The crisis of the 1930s called out for a human symbol, epitomizing the American democratic tradition, to sustain a commitment to free institutions in the face of adversity. Lincoln the Great Emancipator filled the role. The times also demanded an example to reinforce the spirit of national unity, challenged by divisions and conflict abroad. Lincoln the Defender of the Union served in this capacity. Symbolizing neither party nor nationality, he stood for freedom and democracy, for unity and charity.

Like the renewed interest in the American past, the reclaiming of Lincoln during the Great Depression had begun in the preceding decade. Near the end of the Golden Era, two poets published fresh and curiously complementary portraits which influenced works produced after the Crash. In some of the most compelling lines of his epic, John Brown’s Body (1928), Stephen Vincent Benét revealed the Great Emancipator’s inner turmoil as he struggled under the burdens of Presidential office. Two years earlier, Carl Sandburg’s imaginative recreation of the Chief Executive’s apprenticeship, in The Prairie Years, humanized the young frontiersman from Illinois.

Inspired by the latter work, two playwrights dramatized the homespun pre-presidential background in popular plays of 1938. E. P. Conklee’s Prologue to Glory became a WPA Theatre Project hit, while Abe Lincoln in Illinois, by Robert E. Sherwood, quickly won recognition as a veritable national cultural institution, which a Pulitzer Prize merely confirmed. Hollywood responded to the new interest in Lincoln’s Illinois experiences with two feature films, Young Mr. Lincoln (1939), directed by John Ford, and an uncommonly faithful adaptation of the Sherwood play, again
starring Raymond Massey in the title role, which premiered before Washington dignitaries in 1940. No doubt concentration upon Lincoln’s years of preparation helped humanize the image of the Great Emancipator. But a generation suffering through an economic depression could never entirely lose itself in stories of the youthful rail-splitter, as the response to Carl Sandburg’s *The War Years* demonstrated.

Published late in 1939, the four-volume work detailed the travails of the lonely man in the White House. With its epic sweep, its heroic Lincoln brooding over the darkened scene, the study perhaps resembled nothing so much as Benét’s book-length poem. Longer, richer and more celebrated than any previous life of Lincoln, *The War Years* not only won recognition and prizes for its author, but firmly established the poet as the contemporary popular authority on Lincoln. This joining of two democratic humanitarians, Carl Sandburg and Father Abraham, in the public imagination further reinforced the continuity between present and past.

In their rediscovery of an heroic American past, embodied in the persons of the great 19th century spokesmen for democracy, writers of the Depression years provided their compatriots with a foundation for national confidence. They renewed the memory that, even in a bloody Civil War, the United States had somehow survived. And they both humanized and lionized the man who, as President, had held the Union together. Little wonder that Alfred Kazin counted the “passionate addiction to Lincoln” among “the most moving aspects of the decade.”

"The poetry and criticism George Santayana wrote in the 1880s and 1890s are representative of the changing concepts of art and experience which marked the transition from Victorian intellectual life to modern. His capacity to transform and transmit the tradition he inherited was deeply involved in his need to express, master and redeem the loss and deprivation at the core of his sense of life. His poetry is properly seen as the first phase of his long and fruitful effort, on one level, to conceive a world of values to succeed the disintegrating 19th century intellectual order, and on another, to project a realm in which he would enjoy compensation for the gratification which experience denied him. The sonnet sequences, especially, reveal the constituent elements of his creative life: his naturalism, his rejection of traditional religion, his recognition of the aesthetic basis of value and his sublimation of instinctual drives in ways dictated by his traumatic childhood. The naturalism and the replacement of religious by aesthetic values were, of course, to be found in his intellectual milieu. His allegiance to them rather than to other elements in 19th century life, the private meaning they had for him, and the part they played in his work were shaped in large part by that process of sublimation. They are an intellectual aspect of his effort to deal with his feelings toward his mother whose emotional withdrawal from him was climax by a three-year separation from him which began when he was five, and with his experience in those three years when he lived in Spain with his father.

Santayana wrote the first sonnet sequence over a decade beginning in 1882, publishing it finally in 1894. Although it begins with a reminiscence of his childhood religion, it is not about the loss of faith; it presupposes that loss and is concerned rather with the state of mind of the poet, intensely