

The Jacksonian Character:

A Contemporary Portrait of American Personality, Traits, and Values

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The pursuit of the essential Jacksonian continues. The elusive fellow—and even such militant feminists as Harriet Martineau and Frances Trollope had the male rather than what the era regarded as the “female appendage” in mind when they reported the traits and values of Americans—has been interpreted as a child of the frontier, the democratic man, the product of equality, an entrepreneurial seeker after the main chance, and as a “venturous conservative” whose feet drew him irresistibly in the direction of speculative profit even as his mind held to “an ideal of a chaste republican order, resisting the seductions” of a dynamic capitalism. Nor do these explanations exhaust the list. These assessments have for the most part been arrived at through indirection, the nature of the man being inferred from the abundant evidence on his nation’s behavior. The method is a sensible one and would in fact be the historian’s only recourse were no other data available.

There does exist, however, a vast amount of evidence that throws a most direct light on the traits and values of Jacksonians. For not only did Americans themselves observe their fellow countrymen but an army of European, mainly English, visitors swarmed over this country during the Jacksonian era. They subsequently published hundreds of travelers’ accounts in response to the great European interest in the young republic and an insatiable American curiosity about what the visitors thought of them. Covering almost every aspect of American civilization—its political, social and economic institutions; its intellectual life; the striking features of its climate and terrain—these reports by no means neglected customs and traits. Yet amazingly little has been done by scholars with this great storehouse of information on Jacksonian values and personality.

American historians have tended to avoid direct discussion of national character, evidently finding the subject disconcerting. If, in David Potter’s phrase, they have accorded

national character "a *de facto* but not a *de jure* status," their hesitancy has been due to the subjectivity invariably associated with discussion of the concept, the indistinctness and the overlap between traits of different eras or even of different peoples, and above all the dubious use made of national character by chauvinists. Aware, too, of the psychological ramifications of the subject, historians have modestly turned over its discussion to those whom they believe are the better qualified. For whatever the reasons, it is indeed a fact that "it has fallen to investigators in other, nonhistorical branches of learning to undertake a more searching and more systematic analysis of national character." A recent scholarly survey of important writings on American national character discloses that psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists have done the lion's share of the work. Unfortunately, social scientists for all their acuity are not necessarily good historians. It remains the historian's task to apply to a particular historical context the useful insights into the nature of national character provided by his co-workers in the social sciences.

Certainly national traits and national character exist. At this late date it should not be necessary to show that they are not genetic in origin. A unique history, nuances of institutional evolution, distinctive physical environment and physical separation from Europe, ethnic and religious heterogeneity, together with a memorable, if brief, career as independent polity—all combined to shape the American people into something different from all others. Their traits are worth knowing, for history is made not by impersonal forces but by people. Jacksonian life owed its special qualities to the kind of men who lived it.

When they have dealt with traits at all, historians have often done so in a curiously offhand manner. Perhaps because they felt the traits to be too obvious to warrant extended discussion, some scholars have alluded to them only briefly and generally, focusing instead on interpretation. They have sought that single illuminating factor, the key which at once opens the door to understanding. David M. Potter found it in abundance; George W. Pierson in the "M-Factor": movement, migration, mobility. Frederick Jackson Turner's well known version of an American molded by his frontier experience, it has been said, relied "for proof not upon descriptive evidence that given traits actually prevailed, but upon the argument that given conditions in the environment would necessarily cause the development of certain traits." Turner was perhaps a better empiricist than this criticism suggests, yet there is no doubt that he was far more interested in the interpretation of the phenomena of personality than in their description. An original intellect will of course be drawn to the interpretive or analytical, rather than to the merely descriptive, tasks of scholarship. Problems arise, however, when the soaring speculations of the creative theorist rest on insufficient or faulty evidence.

Turner had even less to say about American character than is generally thought. A passage at the very end of his famous paper on the influence of the frontier has been treated as though it were a discussion of the frontier's influence on American *character*. Actually, Turner was describing the influence of the frontier on the American *mind* or *intellect*. "From the conditions of frontier life came intellectual traits of profound importance," begins his last paragraph. The traits in question—"coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that

buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom"—are introduced by the phrase, "to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics." Turner then proceeded to name these characteristics—of the *intellect*.

Turner, who chose his words carefully, was not even purporting to write a list of traits of American character or personality. For a careful delineation of such traits we must turn elsewhere. And if our concern is with the traits of Jacksonians, we have almost nowhere to turn among the historians.

Nothing affords a better clue to the nature of the Jacksonian than the composite version of him that emerges from the contemporary accounts. That the likeness cannot be an exact one goes without saying, since the traits are always the traits as refracted through the eyes of the beholder. Observers were never completely disinterested, nor did such men as Philip Hone, George Templeton Strong, or Calvin Colton claim to be impartial. James Fenimore Cooper is a marvelous source for the Jacksonian era, both for such novels as *Homeward Bound* and *Home As Found*, and for his collection of essays *The American Democrat*. Published in 1838, the fiction and the commentary alike afford a wealth of detail on Jacksonian mores that attest to the literary craftsmanship of its assembler, as their flashes of insight bespeak his penetrating intelligence. An impartial intelligence it was not, however, since Cooper was repelled by so many of the new ways, emotionally drawn as he was to the old.

Foreign visitors faced special problems, as the more thoughtful of them well understood. Thomas Hamilton was aware "that the narrative of a traveler is necessarily a book of inaccuracies," the range of his observations "limited to those peculiarities which float . . . on the surface of society His sources of information are always fallible and, at best, he can appeal only to the results of an imperfect experience." Much of his "narrative must be derived from the testimony of others Details are loosely given and inaccurately remembered. Events are coloured or distorted by the partialities of the narrator; minute circumstances are omitted or brought into undue prominence, and the vast and varied machinery by which fact is manufactured into fallacy is continually at work." Hamilton was alluding to the problems faced by the fairminded visitors. Not all of them were.

A number of English authors became famous or notorious precisely because their hostility was ill concealed. According to J. S. Buckingham, who came here to undo what he felt was the mischief done by some of his countrymen, they had sought "only for blemishes, and to turn even the virtues [of American life] into ridicule." Others had shown "a strong political bias, hostile to everything connected with the name of a republic." Since England was a political battleground during the era, many Tory sympathizers sought to provide political ammunition for the struggle against democratic reform at home by harsh accounts of its alleged unfortunate consequences for the America they visited. Buckingham also charged that some visitors had substituted fictitious and imaginary stories for facts, unjustifiably misrepresenting and caricaturing the American people.

Probably the most notorious as well as the most widely read traveler's account was Mrs. Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans*. Critics then as later were to explain the dim view Mrs. Trollope took of American ways by reference to a business failure she suffered in Cincinnati during her stay in this country. This is economic interpretation of human behavior with a vengeance, and is unjust to a woman of great integrity. As a snob of sorts, she simply disliked Americans—their principles, their manners, their opinions—and

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composite image that there was a large degree of agreement about its component features by so many and such unlike reporters.

Contemporary comments about Americans fall into four not always distinct categories: emotional traits or attributes of personality; mental or intellectual traits; manners, habits or customs; and values—themselves, of course, manifested in behavior. The notorious spitting done by males chewing tobacco is a nice example of a clearcut *habit* which is distinct from personality and mind, and can be related to values only by the too imaginative. Shrewdness, on the other hand, is a trait that cuts across all lines, reflecting personality, intelligence, and one's appraisal of the scheme of things. In any case the categorization emerged naturally from the observations of contemporaries.

The natural or unspoiled part of his person—precisely that aspect of personality least touched by the artificial or institutional environment that gave distinctiveness to his society—was the most admired feature of the Jacksonian. Dickens found that “by nature [Americans were] frank, brave, cordial, hospitable and affectionate.” Marryat took time out from his censure to remark that “at bottom [Americans] are a very good tempered people.” Captain Hall was amazed at how even-tempered they were, despite his faultfinding. Harriet Martineau found that westerners were the most pleasant people in the world, a judgment that George Combe would expand to include Americans from the other sections. Charles Murray believed the American people unusually hospitable and cordial, while Peter Neilson was impressed by the small but significant fact that Americans went out of their way to give directions to the traveler. Sir Charles Lyell, the great geologist, was interested above all in the country's rock formations, Cincinnati's “alluvial terraces,” for example, attracting more of his attention than did its society. When he did glance up from the fossil flora, however, he noted admiringly that the human fauna behaved with propriety and a wholesome openness. A realistic note was injected by William Thomson, who observed that the polite and gentlemanly manners of the south could be construed as an effect of the duels so lightly entered into on the merest hint of offensive behavior. On the other hand, he found northerners equally polite.

American generosity was also applauded, if not always by the American people themselves. New Englanders, Miss Martineau was advised in the nation's capital, “do good by mania.” She was herself most favorably impressed by “the generous nature of their mutual services.” America was the land of assorted benevolent associations, the leaders of which clearly were not themselves suffering from the abuses they sought to correct. Sophisticated critics of a later time might explain their charitableness as only neurotic do-gooding, brought on by emotional discord of one kind or another: it might be due to a too strong or a too weak father, or to the crisis, following the disappearance of the traditional opportunities for their privileged class to play its accustomed paternalistic part in society. Jacksonian travelers, less inclined to be psychoanalytical, noted the absence of economic or tangible self-interest in the charitable activities of Americans, and applauded. They found the most “praiseworthy feature of the American character, their steady and liberal patronage of benevolent institutions.” American prison reform had aroused worldwide interest: the official purpose of the visit here by Tocqueville and Beaumont, after all, had been to study the American penal system. Many visitors agreed with Hamilton that it was impossible “to praise too highly [the

the channel," compared with the Americans they were "whirligigs" to whom "every day is a holy day, and every night a festival." She had never seen "a population so totally divested of gaiety . . . from one end of the Union to the other. [She knew New England only by reputation.] They have no fêtes, no fairs, no merrymakings, no music in the streets, no Punch, no puppet-shows." She spoke from her own limited experience but other observers registered similar complaints about a "funeral solemnity," "oppressive atmosphere," and a general absence of gaiety. "Americans are . . . destitute of the sense of pleasure," wrote Chevalier. To judge from American behavior at public meals, Dickens thought that "undertakers on duty would be sprightly beside them." Americans probably were not unhappy with the explanation given by Tocqueville and others that their alleged dullness was due to the absence of an aristocracy here. Small enough price to pay for so great a good. Hall's well-known plaint that he never saw a flirtation in this country was likewise probably admitted with pride by some of this highly moral population.

Many Europeans found Americans a cold people. Even Miss Martineau was offended by the apparent coldness and indifference she ran into. New Englanders were singled out. Although Combe found the people "essentially amiable," they were too "cold and reserved," giving "no greeting of welcome on arriving, and no thanking you and wishing you goodbye at leaving a hotel." Shirreff likewise found that "external forms of decency" were faithfully observed, but the "rictum, phlegmatic, and calculating disposition" of its people made them "objects of dislike." Admirable but not lovable, said Hamilton. The visitors were not sure whether Calvinism or other factors were to blame for this unattractive trait. Few blamed it on the weather, as did Beaumont, but many agreed with his verdict on the Americans: "cold as ice."

The cruelty displayed so often and by so many Americans was shocking. Whether Tories or liberals, the visitors—with the exception of Lyell and a few others—were repelled at both the system of slavery and at white American attitudes toward Negroes, whether slaves or free. Joseph Pickering was horrified that a respectable crowd could watch, with feelings that ranged from indifference to *enthusiasm*, as a colored man was burned alive. In Hartford, according to Abdy, "to pelt [colored people] . . . with stones, and cry out nigger! nigger! as they pass, seems to be the pastime of the place." Europeans were dismayed not only by racism but at the cruelty shown unfortunates. Buckingham could understand neither newspapers nor their readers in treating flippantly poverty and misery "that ought to thrill the heart with horror or melt it with pity." Hangings or public executions of any kind attracted vast crowds of "respectable" or obviously well-to-do folk, as well as the other kind. William Dean Howells' father recollected that public hangings used to fill the taverns and grog shops, as thousands of people came from all over the countryside, most of them of "respectable appearance," drawn to the spectacle by "morbid curiosity." One visitor was appalled at the sight of young women cheerfully present at a hanging in New York City.

Violence was a much-observed trait, although it was reported mainly in the south and on the frontier. Personal quarrels occur everywhere but Americans seemed ready to mutilate one another for reasons that Europeans found incredible. In Kentucky one man came near to killing another for opening a coach window. As shocking as the ridiculous reasons for fighting were the extreme forms it took. Stabbing, shooting, gouging out of eyes, biting off of nose or ears were not uncommon. Frontier violence was not too surprising, but what

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observed that "other nations have been called *thin-skinned*, but the citizens of the Union have, apparently, no skins at all; they wince if a breeze blows over them, unless it be tempered with adulation." These words were written before the storm broke over her own volume. Subsequent visitors came to similar conclusions.

Marryat advised those who came after him: do not find fault with them if you seek their hospitality. Tudor referred to the "extraordinary sensibility to the slightest appearance of dispraise" as a "puerility" which had he "not witnessed on a thousand occasions (he) . . . should have believed utterly incredible." They *demand* praise. "Such an unhappily sensitive community surely never existed in this world," wrote Fanny Kemble in her journal. An American woman had told her, "I hear you are going to abuse us dreadfully; of course, you'll wait till you go back to England and then shower it down upon us finely." The prediction was not inaccurate, for Miss Kemble did in fact "shower it down" upon them, finely. It was hard to insult Americans, however, for as Dickens noted, they quickly cited their newness as a country as the excuse for all faults. When the occasion demanded it, Americans could display a very thick skin, indeed, which made them immune to insults, let alone faint praise. "This man [the American]," wrote Tocqueville, "will never understand that he wearies me to death unless I tell him so, and the only way to get rid of him is to make him my enemy for life." There is no better proof that when it suited him an American could make himself impervious to criticism than in the friendly reception he gave the book that contains those devastating words.

"The most striking circumstance in the American character," wrote Captain Hall, "was the constant habit of praising themselves." Insecurity and thin skin seemed to go hand in hand with boastfulness. Only a few observers mistook the latter trait for arrogance but almost all of them found it unattractive. Lieber, like Miss Martineau, believed that this "national contentment" was an innocent blemish, in part a simple response to the criticisms of foreigners. She did feel, however, that much of this boasting was absurd, and that combined with the insatiable hunger for flattery, was "the most prominent of their bad habits." It was agreed that Americans, in view of their achievements, had much to be vain about but need they be so wearisome about it? Americans of every sort, in all sections and of every social order, praised to the heavens their weather, their rivers, the speed of their railroads, their political system, their orators, even their roads—which were notoriously bad or at the least discomfiting to a normal human anatomy—and, of course, themselves. Only America had anything worth seeing, according to Mr. Wenham, a typical villager in Cooper's *Home As Found*. An Englishman, to his consternation, read in an American geography text that "the English tongue is spoken in greater purity of idiom and intonation with us (in America) than in Great Britain."

Americans could make a virtue of necessity. That a slaughterhouse was situated in the midst of a residential district, was praised to Mrs. Trollope as an example of the antiaristocratic quality of American society. If Marryat was right, that "Americans are the happiest people in the world in their own delusions" Tocqueville had a logical explanation for it. "As the American participates in all that is done in his country, he thinks himself obliged to defend whatever may be censured in it; for it is not only his country that is then attacked, it is himself. The consequence is that his national pride resorts to a thousand artifices and descends to all the petty tricks of personal vanity."

Tocqueville conceded that the freedom to associate openly was an assurance that conspiracies would not arise. He was nevertheless concerned that "unrestrained liberty of association for political purposes," might augment the chances of anarchy. His interpretation of the phenomenon of associationism was as logical—and as arguable—as were some of his other evaluations of democratic man: since "all the citizens are independent and feeble, they can hardly do anything by themselves, and none of them can oblige his fellow men to lend him their assistance. They all, therefore, become powerless if they do not learn voluntarily to help one another." Less controversial is his charming description: "Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations . . . religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive. The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes. . . . If it is proposed to inculcate some truth or to foster some feeling . . . they form a society."

If few of the contemporaries would have agreed that the "M-Factor" was the American's most distinctive or significant trait, certainly a need to be constantly busy was noted as one of the American's characteristic traits, and a restless movement from one place to another as equally typical of his behavior. Bustle was the rule. New York City was "the busiest community that any man could desire to live in. In the streets all is hurry . . . ; the very carts . . . are at a gallop, and always in a brisk trot," Buckingham wrote. Chevalier thought Pittsburgh the world's busiest community. Marryat found "all is energy and enterprise; everything is in a state of transition . . . of rapid improvement." The explanation given by a visiting phrenologist was that American "air is drier than that of Britain—the habitual state of the American people . . . is (therefore) one of much higher mental excitement than that of the inhabitants of Britain." Whatever the causes, Lieber believed that "an American distinguishes himself . . . by a restlessness, a striving and driving onward." He "wants to perform within a year what others do within a much longer period." Thomson spoke of a "disease of locomotion," which carried children away from families, while Hall noted that "the passion for turning up new soils" meant they had no permanent attachments. Murray, who spent several years here, found that "the American agriculturalist seems to have little local attachment. A New Englander or Virginian will leave the home of his childhood without any visible effort or symptom of regret. . . . I have seen such repeated instances of this that I cannot help considering it a national feature." His explanation was succinct. The American farmer picks himself up "if by so doing he can make ten dollars where before he made eight." In one of his remarkable passages on American *wanderlust*, Tocqueville offers a more complex explanation, according to which, movement was pursued as much for "the emotions it excites . . . as for the gain it procures."

Mrs. Trollope's book had publicized certain uncouth American habits and customs. She was shortly to be immortalized, since subsequent visitors observed that the cry, "a trollope! a trollope!" went up from American audiences when one of their number happened to be caught in that public slouching that had so offended their critical visitor. Americans slouched in theatres, they slouched in church, they were even discovered slouching when attending sessions of the Supreme Court. At one theatrical performance, Mrs. Trollope had found "the bearing and attitudes of the men perfectly indescribable; the heels thrown higher than the head, the entire rear of the person presented to the audience, the whole length supported on

the benches, are among the varieties that these exquisite posture-masters exhibit." Their subsequent attempts to police offenders indicate that Mrs. Trollope's description was not exaggerated. Like a famous statesman of more than a century later who used his shoe in part to show his scorn of the traditional diplomacy and the breeding associated with it, it seems fairly clear that some Americans slouched to political purpose, in their case to display indifference or contempt for the manners of an aristocratic society. Fortunately Mrs. Trollope's strictures had effect and Americans came to see ordinary civility as devoid of social implication.

Americans were great chewers of tobacco and, what was worse, notorious spitters. Poor Miss Kemble discovered that to her "profound disgust," gentlemen too did it. On board a boat, "it was a perfect shower of saliva all the time." Almost every user of public conveyances sounded variations on the theme. "Copious spitting" was the rule. In boarding houses and hotels after a meal, an orgy of spitting would commence—although less fastidious types did not wait for the meal to end. In homes, too, spitting "was incessant, the carpet serving as a receptacle . . . when boxes were not within immediate reach." Even among the upper classes, men of otherwise polished manners indulged themselves, although in all fairness, Boardman observed that the refined would not spit on living room floors. Dickens was amazed that even in the nation's Capitol, in law courts, and hospitals, "in all the public places of America this filthy custom is recognized." Senators and judges were adept in the art. Americans even spit in their sleep. The visitors must have exaggerated for their comments seemed to indicate that spitting threatened to drown the country.

There was some difference of opinion as to whether or not they were drunkards but there was agreement that Americans drank to excess. "Why do they get so confoundedly drunk?" asked Marryat. Mrs. Felton's explanation was that Americans drank so much from the time of infancy on, that "by the time they arrive at the years of maturity they become . . . habituated to the practice." To Buckingham as to many others, the love of liquor was one of the great evils ruining the country. Liquor was to be found everywhere, and as Tocqueville noted, at most reasonable rates. He agreed with Hall that its prevalence here was due to the inordinate influence of the common man. Senators were thus afraid to tax so popular a commodity. Jacksonian candidates plied their constituencies with quantities of fiery liquid. Vigne believed that the absence of a law of primogeniture was a major cause of the evil, elder sons burying their disappointments in brandy. Attending a meeting of the Worcester Temperance Society, Baldwin was dismayed to find that all members "drank very freely of cyder . . . of the very worst sort." What must they have drunk in the privacy of their homes? Modern scholarship discloses that the visitors' observations were on the mark. For between 1790 and 1830 "Americans drank more alcoholic beverages per capita than at any time before or since," mainly whisky and other hard liquor, with each adult male imbibing on the average 17 gallons a year or more than one-third pint a day.

Drinking went hand in hand with gambling. Oliver found incessant gambling on river boats. Southern boat trips featured all night bouts of drinking and gambling. The latter custom was also closely aligned to speculation. The Jacksonian era was characterized by what Miss Martineau called a "speculative mania." It would not have been, had the American people not been ready to gamble on the prospects of great future gains. "Everybody is speculating, and everything has become an object of speculation," wrote Chevalier. Shirreff, who liked to believe the best of the Americans, discovered in the west that "speculators have . . .

bought up, at high prices, all the building ground in the neighborhood." Back in the east, in 1836, "if two persons were seen conversing in the street of New York . . . in 19 instances out of 20, you would have overheard 'lots' and 'thousands of dollars' as the sole topics of their discourse." In *Home As Found*, Cooper includes conversations that appear to be satirical exaggerations of the speed at which the price of a lot could appreciate and speculative fortunes be made. A Hone diary entry for January 14, 1835, when the bubble was still short of the bursting point, shows that truth was the source of Cooper's fiction. Unbelievable appreciation of the price of real estate did occur.

America the land of plenty was admired but American eating habits were not. Observers held that most Americans were gluttons or something close to it. They were accused of eating huge quantities of poorly prepared food with the manners and perhaps the charm of certain barnyard animals. In fairness to the critics, they did concede that their evidence was based not on what went on in American homes but outside of them. There seemed to be a touch of sour grapes in some of the envious comment of the visitors. This country had an unbelievable abundance of the most admired foods, particularly meats, fowl, and dairy products, easily available to ordinary persons. The visitors copied down menus with great relish; in fact they reported nothing so fully or so vividly. Since Horace was not above reporting in some detail the menu at heroic Roman feasts, perhaps a detailed report on Jacksonian delicacies, as contemporaries observed them, will be forgiven.

Let us start with the morning meal. Vigne has left us the following graphic report of a breakfast aboard a Hudson River steamboat: ". . . to see 'bolting' in perfection it is necessary to go on board an Albany steamboat. [All wait for the bell to ring. When it does] the negro guards escape as best they can [since otherwise they will be trampled]. In less than one quarter of a minute, 150 or 200 persons have seated themselves at table, and an excellent breakfast of tea, coffee, eggs, beefsteaks, hot rolls, corn cakes, salted mackerel, mush, molasses, and so forth is demolished in an incredibly short space of time. The crowd then slowly reascends the staircase—and three fourths of them are quite surprised that they should be afflicted with dyspepsia! The music which usually accompanied the feasts of the ancients will never be received by the Americans."

Then to a noonday meal, this time in a New York City hotel with Boardman: "a table nearly long enough for a city feast, well covered with steaks, cutlets, eggs, ham, sausages, chickens fricaseed and barbecued; stewed and fried eels with delicious trout: add to these good things, rolls, cakes and an inexhaustible supply of excellent coffee. . . . This meal was only about 18 pence sterling each person."

Now on to Boston's famed Tremont House, regarded by many connoisseurs as the country's leading hotel, as Christopher Baldwin is greeted with the following bill of fare for Sunday dinner: "pea soup; broiled salt fish; cod's head; oysters [according to one of Grund's gourmet friends this was one food Americans knew how to prepare]; corned beef; corned pork; ham; tongue; turkey; chickens and pork; oyster pie; anguilles; mutton cutlets; fried smelt; stewed ducks and olives; hara coat mutton; curried veal; tongues; macaroni á parmesan; roast beef; pork; veal; leg of mutton; goose; turkey; chickens; partridges; puddings and pastry; dessert."

Late one evening Abdy arrives at a tavern in a small village in Connecticut and asks if he might have some tea and perhaps some eggs and bacon. The following snack was placed

before him: "four or five large slices of toast, swimming in a pool of melted butter—a large dish of fried bacon—half a dozen boiled eggs—an apple pie—some preserved quinces—cucumbers in vinegar—currant jam—potatoes with butter—sweet cake—cheese—bread and butter—and tea with its usual accompaniments."

The overwhelming consensus was expressed in Murray's understatement that Americans did eat an "unreasonable quantity of food."

The quality of American cooking and food preparation came in for sharp criticism. New York restaurant food was judged "more excellent in point of material, than of cookery," the American table in general, "more remarkable for superabundance of food than skill . . . in preparing it." Buckingham was convinced that "one of the most valuable reforms that could be effected in America would be a reform in the culinary and dietetic system of the country." His countrymen's way with food provoked Cooper to an outburst in *The American Democrat*: "The Americans are the grossest feeders of any civilized nation known . . . food is heavy, coarse, ill-prepared and indigestible . . . National character is, in some measure, affected by a knowledge of the art of preparing food. . . . It is certain that the connection between our moral and physical qualities is so ultimate as to cause them to react on each other." Verily Cooper seemed to believe that *Mann ist was er isst*.

Visitors were disconcerted most by the American style at the dinner table. Speed and silence were the rule. Huge amounts were swallowed at breakneck speed; woe to the man who dawdled. The "extraordinary rapidity" with which food was gorged or "pitchforked down" fascinated some observers, although Miss Martineau was disquieted at the "celerity" of the American attack. Even more depressing was the absence of that pleasant talk that gave charm to a table or, in the words of the ancients, turned feeding into dining. The stillness of death was one common metaphor used to describe the atmosphere at the American table; another spoke of animal gratification. Marryat expressed the popular belief that the American "eats his meals with the rapidity of a wolf," in order to rush to his business or practical affairs. And yet it was also noted that on some occasions Americans rushed through a meal in order to do nothing better than to lounge, chew, and spit in another room.

The visitors' unhappiness with American eating was an important factor in the overall negative impression so many of them had of the American. That they reacted as strongly as they did to what was after all a natural act, tells us as much of observer in this case as of observed.

The consensus was that the American was unrefined. Murray found middle-class Americans "deficient in those lighter accomplishments" which constitute charm, while Cooper bemoaned American ignorance of music—"which elevates and refines human tastes"—and in addition found his countrymen "wanting in most of the higher tastes." They had no time for or interest in the amenities, drank standing up, did not know how either to relax or live well: "every class (was) occupied in getting money, none in spending it." The standard explanation was that this people was coarse not because their nation was youthful but rather because of their warped values. "In the United States there is no standard of values," wrote Vigne. He meant that there was no standard that he could approve.

High on the American's scale of values was his egalitarian belief that one man—particularly an American—was as good as any other, certainly that he should be treated like any other. White Americans simply would not be known as "servants." Those who worked in other people's homes would not be summoned by bells. The word "mister" was omitted

from door plates. One visitor ran into a tailor who would not go to him to take the measure of a coat, insisting it was "not republican," and a carriage driver who complained that the travelers on his coach "had had private meals every day and not asked him to the table." A fastidious traveler discovered that since his landlord would not dream of carrying water up to his room, he would have to perform his toilet in the public yard. Dickens was impressed, as were others, that there was only one class of travel on railroad cars; the rule on coaches was also best seats to first comers. Lyell seemed a little disturbed that "the spirit of social equality has left no other signification to the terms 'gentleman' and 'lady' but that of 'male and female individual.'" Miss Kemble was startled both at the pride of ordinary people and their frankness in expressing it: a farmer told her "without a moment's hesitation," that while the eggs he sold her were good, "the very fresh ones, we eat ourselves." How could anyone know "who is who" in this infernal country of constant handshaking, asked Marryat? Thomson confirmed Mrs. Trollope's experience. Where she had been surprised at "the coarse familiarity of address" between all classes, he noted that men of any trade or description entered into conversation "on terms of perfect equality." Mackay was impressed that a western farmer and his help worked, ate, even slept together. (Fastidious Europeans were terribly embarrassed at the American custom of having "gentlemen" of all descriptions sleep in one bed.) While Lieber did not think Americans unusually democratic in their social relations—they are "no more angels than other people"—he believed that one of their best traits was their readiness to "make use of ability come whence it may."

Many European visitors and, for that matter, Americans, were not particularly charmed by the American stress on egalitarianism, believing as did Cooper and Hone that it was responsible for the sordid manners and mean quality of American life, or like Tocqueville, that because of it liberty was downgraded. They took a dim view of the glorification of that same common man whose traits they found so depressing. Other visitors also agreed with Cooper, John Quincy Adams, and other Americans that for all the lip service they paid to equality, Americans in fact practised the same forms of inequality as Europeans, the one great difference being that in this country money rather than blood divided men into rigidly separated worlds. In a word, Americans were hypocrites.

American hypocrisy toward Negroes and Indians was most severely censured. Buckingham's reaction was typical: "what makes (their) . . . affected horror of 'amalgamation' the more revolting is, that many of the very gentlemen who declare themselves to be so insulted and degraded by being placed so near the coloured people (in lecture halls) . . . have no scruple whatever to keep coloured women as mistresses." The violation of American promises to the Indians was also criticized. In Mrs. Trollope's words, she "might have respected them however much (her) taste might have been offended by what was peculiar in their manners and customs. But it is impossible for any mind of common honesty not to be revolted by the contradictions in their principles and practice." "You will see them," she continued, "with one hand hoisting the cap of liberty and with the other flogging the slaves. You will see them one hour lecturing . . . on the indefeasible rights of man, and the next driving from their homes the children of the soil, whom they have bound themselves to protect by the most solemn treaties." Americans understandably had grown accustomed to their own foibles, learning how to rationalize even the worst of them. Visitors, equally understandably, were horrified at the gulf between American theory and practice.

Americans had boasted to Captain Hall that they were a very moral people. He found them rather a very prudish people. In St. Louis, young women who waltzed let it be known that they were to be held at a point near the elbows, not around the waist. Female limbs were not to be exposed in dancing. *The Rape of the Lock* was regarded by some Americans as a too salacious title. Earlier described as a prostitute, after the 1830s a woman of the streets was increasingly referred to by the euphemism "soiled dove." For that matter, the increasingly negative attitude displayed by medical writers toward sexual pleasure, even when achieved in marriage, appears to have driven growing numbers of men into the arms of prostitutes. Nude models were not available to a young sculptor and when a nude sculpture was completed, viewers—who in some cases had to see it separately, according to sex—were likely to be advised she was thinking "sweet thoughts" or of Divine Providence. The sculptor Hiram Powers explained that it was not "the person" of his famous nude Greek slave that stood exposed "but her spirit." According to what one informant told Marryat, Cincinnati's best society had snubbed Mrs. Trollope because she at first had been traveling without her husband. American prudishness sometimes threatened health since "middle- and upper-class women often declined to consult physicians for gynecologic services, except as a last resort," during the era. When Mark Twain said that man is the only animal who blushes, he was thinking of an American.

The transcendent American value according to most contemporaries was materialism. The distinguishing feature of the American was his love of money. "At the bottom of all that an American does," wrote Chevalier, "is money; beneath every word, money." His sacrifices, when made, "are systematic and calculated. It is neither enthusiasm nor passion that unties his purse strings, but motives of policy . . . in which he feels his own private interests to be involved." His motto is, "Victory or death! But to him, victory is to make money, to get the dollars, to make a fortune out of nothing. . . ." On this point there was practically no disagreement. The love of money was nowhere greater; any means of securing it was considered praiseworthy. Men and things were judged according to a monetary standard. At a party, Hamilton was introduced to various personages, each introduction preceded by whispered instructions to him as to the wealth of the individual he was next to meet: "had I been presented to so many money bags of dollars . . . the ceremony would have been quite as interesting." Combe remarked that Americans were judged according to the "extent of their possessions." Miss Martineau concluded that "wealth (was) . . . the most important object in life" to the American.

Diverse evidence indicates that many Americans did indeed practice dollar worship. In a number of cities publications containing nothing more than lists of rich men and the supposed exact sums they were worth went through many editions. A not atypical newspaper editorial, in scoffing at abstract thinking, asked what it had to do "with the accumulation of wealth?" What, it continued, "has intellect to do with man, except in helping him to cast compound interest and loss and gain?" At a time when mountain men were an object of romantic curiosity to their eastern neighbors, the mountain man's behavior, according to his modern historian, showed that he was "not an alternative to the [materialistic] religion of Jacksonian America, but an idiosyncratic and extreme expression of its values." "The love of money is almost the universal passion," reported a New England minister, but he was speaking not of his region alone.

their grandfathers and grandmothers; and yet number 1 will tell you that number 2 is nobody and you must not visit there, and when you enquire why? there is no other answer, but that they are not of the right sort." For hilarious examples of the pretentiousness of northeastern urban elites, their pretended disdain for titles, their raptures at being mistaken for English family, and their abject conformity and materialism, Grund's account is indispensable.

If those near the top were snobs, those below were social climbers. Vigne told a much-repeated tale: "The captain of a steamboat . . . happened to ask rather loudly, 'General, a little fish?' and was immediately answered in the affirmative by 25 of the 30 gentlemen that were present." Murray found "the tavern kept by a general, wagon wheels mended by a colonel, day laborers and mechanics are gentlemen." Lieber ridiculed the constant name changes that were designed to suggest a respectable origin. He believed that insanity was caused in America by "a diseased anxiety to be equal to the wealthiest, the craving for wealth and consequent disappointment which ruins the intellect of many." Poor persons did without necessities to make false impressions. Working girls here earned not wages but "compensation," Dickens reported. Cooper was dismayed that "the love of turgid expressions [was] . . . gaining ground." He perhaps knew that Pickering had heard a woman address her son as "Altamont." The good widow Abbott, of *Home As Found*, had named her children Orlando Furioso, Bianca-Alzurna-Ann, Roger-Demetrius-Benjamin, and Rinaldo-Rinaldini-Timothy. Another of Cooper's creations, the New York City parvenu, Mrs. Jarvis, who spent her days intriguing to advance her social position, tells her husband, "no one in New York has a right to think himself or herself better than ourselves." The common view was that this coarse social climbing was an offshoot of egalitarianism.

Inevitably materialists and champions of equality had no respect for tradition. Americans "have no love for anything merely because it is old," observed Thomson. They were "so mutable, so much given to change . . . that [he] . . . had scarcely met with one who knew who his grandfather was." One visitor found something "cool and heartless," a sign of disrespect for the dead, in their funerals, performed in too great a hurry. Another was upset that the burial places of national heroes were so poorly kept. In Hall's indictment, "the unpleasant truth seems to be, that nothing whatsoever is venerated in America merely on account of its age, or, indeed on any other account. Neither historical associations, nor high public services, nor talents, nor knowledge, claim any peculiar reverence for the busy generation of the present hour." They were "ready to adopt whatever is proved to be . . . advantageous," according to Boardman. This explained their contempt for traditional usage, whether in language or other areas, and what Lieber called the "ludicrous" ease with which they changed their names. According to Tocqueville, a society marked by constant fluctuations produced men with a taste for novelty.

Their disrespect for tradition merged into disrespect for law. Europeans were startled to observe a jury munching on food, the foreman announcing a verdict with his mouth full. Vigne blamed the spirit of equality for a courtroom informality in which lawyers sat casually on tables while judges spat. As a result of the growing feeling of self-importance on the part of the people, Chevalier believed, "the reverence for the laws (was) . . . wearing out with the Americans." In the case of so selfish a population, "the laws had no force when they jarred with interest."

Americans valued neither learning nor intellectual accomplishment. The attempt to limit medical practice to the trained was resisted by Jacksonians. Tocqueville believed that

"in no country in the civilized world [was] . . . less attention paid to philosophy than in the United States." Others expanded the charge to include literature and learning in general. Miss Martineau found that American scholars were unhappy with the "superficial character of [American] scholarship . . . the non-existence of literature." (Although she was of that small minority which believed that intellect was "reverenced" here.) Most visitors agreed with Mrs. Trollope that pure learning held little attraction to the American mind, the "pursuit of wealth" drawing it in other directions. Grund had been told by businessmen in Boston, "we consider professors as secondary men." Able sons were trained for business; a "poor boy who is a little hard of hearing, and rather slow of comprehension, shall go to college." Scholars were held in low repute because they commanded low incomes, the results of their intellectual efforts having little market value.

Americans seemed to have contempt for life. They blandly acquiesced in terrible steamboat accidents caused by faulty construction—"What are a few hundred persons more or less?" Hone wrote sarcastically in his diary, after a particularly terrible accident. After a mournful visit to a hospital, he observed that "Americans are the most careless people on earth. They freeze because they neglect the proper precautions, they are blown up by blasting rocks, run over by railroads, scalded in steamboats, crushed by falling banks of earth, and fall from scaffolds because they disregard danger and do not keep out of harm's way." The lust for profits overrode all other considerations, according to him. Americans were accused of manifesting an "utter want of . . . sympathy for the sufferings of others." They seemed ready on the slightest provocation to shoot or stab, particularly in the west and south. "Should a stranger jostle an American by accident," warned Logan, "he runs extreme risk of being shot or stabbed." He cited many examples. Murder was often lightly punished by the law, as was lynching. Duelists, often fighting over ridiculous alleged slights to their honor, in fact dueled not to satisfy honor but to kill. Maryat was surprised at the intensive practice by the involved parties prior to a duel. In this sense, certainly, Andrew Jackson captured very well the spirit of the times.

Some observers found glaring contradictions between American lip service and practice or between their professed and actual values, recording their judgments in a series of trenchant summaries. Americans were thus ambitious but lacking in lofty ambition. They talked up liberty but restricted its practice. They talked of lofty things in the absence of lofty feelings. Grund had been told, "in the absence of enthusiasm, which would inspire them with natural eloquence, they seek to maintain themselves at a certain elevation by pressing hard on lofty topics; having no wings, they endeavor to support themselves in the air by a *parachute*." Their principles were high but "their civilization and morals fall far below." They spoke glowingly of equality but strained to demonstrate their own exalted station. They loved change but dreaded revolution. Their bodies were in constant motion but their minds were inert. They loved to talk but had nothing to say. They were avid readers but preferred newspaper gossip to literature. They were in a constant "election fever" but cold to political principles. They had appetites but no passions. And finally, they knew how to make money but not how to spend it. This mournful catalog was dubious tribute to a people who were regarded as something less than they seemed.

The portrait of the Jacksonian drawn by his contemporary observers is of a good-natured but essentially shallow man: clever but not profound, self-important but uncertain, fond of deluding himself, living almost fanatically for the flesh (although not knowing too well how),

straining every fibre to accumulate the things he covets and amoral about the methods to be used, a hypocrite who strains at gnats and swallows camels, an energetic and efficient fellow albeit a small one, who takes comfort in—as well as his standards of behavior from—numbers. It is not a very attractive picture.

Of course it was not a complete picture. The commentators were aware that there were Americans of altogether different traits, habits and values. Cooper's Effingham novels contain somewhat romanticized versions of more attractive American types, embodied in fictional persons whose characters, behavior, and even their looks correlate almost perfectly with their occupations, status, breadth of learning and experience. Landed wealth, in the person of Ned Effingham (Cooper's notion of himself), is handsome, gentle, calm, selfless, trusting, pleasant, ever gracious, of spotless character; while old mercantile wealth, personified by John Effingham, is handsome but saturnine, sardonic, brilliant, cynical, sophisticated, cosmopolitan, but does have one skeleton in the closet. Ned's daughter is not only beautiful but gracious, learned, modest, worldly and possessed of high standards of taste. The various seamen have sterling qualities: the naval officer (the young Cooper?) is brave, modest, intelligent and cultured; the deep sea captain is honest, humorous, earthy, brave and a keen judge of character; the fresh water commodore is honest, virtuous, dignified, a sensible fellow. Other admirable types—in contrast to the assortment of schemers, opportunists, speculators and snobs, who predominate—have breeding, wit, benevolence, wisdom and refinement. There *were* such people, in life as in Cooper's fiction, as many of the visitors to their satisfaction discovered. They were rare, however. Much more typical was the unlovely Jacksonian of our portrait.

What are we to make of him? There are several things he seems clearly not to be. This is no child of the frontier, neither his ways nor his values having much to do with Indian fighting. The people who lived in western towns imitated their eastern brethren, while the small minority living on the western outskirts of civilization, who were engaged in conversation by enterprising travelers, disclosed values very similar to those of their countrymen. This conformist was no inner-directed man. And there is little evidence that our Jacksonian, as he pursued the main chance, looked back longingly to a "chaste, republican" past. His thoughts were for today, while by a better he meant a wealthier tomorrow.

No monistic interpretation explains him. Possibly his materialism is his most significant characteristic, explaining as it does, not only his goals but so many of his ways and other values. What better explanation is there of his disinterest in the idealistic and reform movements which, while they proliferated during the era, commanded so little actual membership? What did it matter that some women felt unfulfilled or that colored persons were everywhere treated as less than human? What was it to him that his society might maldistribute status, so long as it promised to provide tangible comforts?

His values and intellectual traits appear to throw some light on his political and economic choices. Bigotry, supplemented by cruelty and cupidity, better explain atrocities against Indians and Negroes. Vanity and boastfulness made it easy for him to believe that his country—which was himself writ large—was superior to all others and could do no wrong. That much-admired pragmatic temper which rendered his mind indifferent to theories or fundamental principles, when combined with his lack of respect for learning, seemed to have a number of political consequences. For looked at one way, it was child's play for shrewd manipulators who sought his vote to convince this hardheaded, unlearned fellow that politics

was a kind of simple morality play: good leaders v. bad, honest men v. dishonest, the people's friends v. their enemies. The unique American major party that was born during the era—which is many if not all things to most if not all men, which avoids or deflects crucial issues rather than meet them—is perfectly suited to the man who has neither interest in “fundamental principles” nor the wit to perceive them. If, as Lee Benson and Richard Hofstadter, among others, have suggested, he voted for every variety of reason except to advance his economic interest, he may have done so precisely because he was not as bright as the politically sagacious man envisaged by Madison in his Tenth *Federalist*. That in the long run it may be “brighter” to be bland about politics, is after all not a truism but only an ephemeral value judgment made by a well-fed generation which has read Orwell and experienced both Hitler and Stalin.

Our Jacksonian's lack of intellectual sophistication may account for his blissful unawareness of the central banking, or any other complex function, performed by the second Bank of the United States, and help explain the enthusiastic support he gave to those who would rid the nation of the monster of paper money by destroying the institution that best restrained its unlimited circulation. On the other hand, a combination of lust for gain, shrewdness, and hypocrisy may have accounted for his zeal in overthrowing what he well understood to be the great obstacle to the speculative profits his dreams were made on. On a more general level, disinterest in the “principles” operating in his economy would help explain his indifference to informed criticisms of its weaknesses, while his penchant for social climbing spurred him on to try to get what he could for himself. Finally, his conformity would explain his acquiescence even in policies he might secretly disapprove of or about which he might have qualms.

Jacksonians liked to think that Americans were different from—and of course better than—other people. Students of history, however, will have recognized many familiar traits, some of them manifested as long ago and far away as first-century Rome, whose gross new ways were so decried by spokesmen of the old patrician order. Robert Kelley has recently noted that Americans going abroad during the era were shocked to find that materialism, excessive seriousness, anti-intellectualism, and obsession with success flourished too in Britain. These were traits that sprang up where a booming commercial economy was emerging. It is by no means certain that there had been significant changes in this country from Washington's era to Jackson's, significant, that is, with regard to national character. Europeans, not having been here before, had no way of knowing whether change had occurred. They did, however, have that freshness of viewpoint that so often enables the foreigner to see things the native overlooks. Nothing was too commonplace for them, they took nothing for granted.

That the portrait they drew was not a very attractive one can be interpreted in ways flattering to the American psyche. (Of course such an interpretation runs the risk of itself being interpreted as a modern example of the American refusal to accept criticism.) In this country the mass of inhabitants, whether appealing or not, were at least *visible*, downright loquacious, inevitably unattractive to the urbane observers who wrote about them. My point is that the European counterpart of the Jacksonian common man was comparatively powerless and inarticulate, no object of fascination to an army of interested reporters. The American was sometimes admired, more often criticized, but in either case treated with a respect that was the more meaningful for being unspoken. Like him or not, he had to be reckoned with.