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Alistair Cooke: A Response to Granville Hicks’ *I Like America*

BY KATHLEEN MANWARING

When I say I like America, I am thinking of potentialities as well as actualities. I am thinking of an America I could like—without reservation.¹

Written at the urging of his friend Louis Birk, managing editor of Modern Age Books, *I Like America* was Granville Hicks' attempt to present to a middle-class audience “the official line of the Communist Party in the Popular Front period”.² Published when the slogan ‘Communism is Twentieth-Century Americanism’ identified the interests of the mass of the American population, which was suffering from the Depression and the inadequate response of the New Deal for relief, with the aims of the Party, the book was later described by Hicks as “a venture in propaganda”.³ The Granville Hicks Papers in the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University document the history of *I Like America*, including the book outline, the proposal as presented to Louis Birk and the subsequent editorial correspondence, book reviews, and the more than 150 letters Hicks received in response to what literary historian Jack Alan Robbins describes as an “evangelical yet totally undogmatic”⁴ exercise in political persuasion.

While the collection follows the development of Hicks’ book from its inception through the reader response that continued to arrive through 1947, it also details the first efforts of Louis Birk to secure funds for one of the publishing industry’s earliest ventures into the

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3. Ibid., 154.
production of paperback books. In the pursuit of his vision of establishing a "publishing house in America which will have as its first objective the publication of worthwhile books whether they return their cost of manufacture or not", Birk, at Hicks' suggestion, enlisted the aid of the then champion of progressive causes, Lincoln Steffens. Appealing to Steffens for an introduction to Edward A. Filene, "a Boston merchant with a reputation for liberalism", Birk stated his case simply: "What we need now is initial capital". Steffens agreed to pass along to Filene, Birk's brochure entitled "Proposal in full, with endorsements, opinions, and reactions from a group of America's leading scholars and educators", cautioning that his appeal for funds, while worthy, might be ill-timed in terms of support from Filene:

He is preoccupied with a scheme of his own; he has just put one million into his scheme and it is so much more important than your plan that I, for instance, would not care for the job of presenting your idea. But I have told him about you and your publishing house aborning and he consented to see you about it.

5. Birk to Lincoln Steffens, 13 February 1936, Granville Hicks Papers, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University.
6. Hicks, *Part of the Truth*, 76.
Steffens tempered his skepticism about the success of an approach by Birk with some advice: "Your opening is price. He believes in books priced so that everybody can afford them. But I can tell you that he sees things much more fundamentally than you seem to. As for me I love to let a capitalist say things to a Red that Reds prefer to tell capitalists."9 Replying enthusiastically to Steffens’ suggestion, Birk wrote back: "... what I want most is to price books so that people can buy them, after they have bought bread".10

There is nothing further in the Hicks correspondence or in Gerald White Johnson’s biography of Filene, Liberal’s Progress, to indicate that Filene supported the Modern Age Books project or that he had even met with Birk. In any case, Charles A. Madison made the statement in Book Publishing in America that Modern Age Books was started “prematurely and amateurishly”11 without first establishing adequate means for distribution. The goal to make paperback books available to a mass market quickly disintegrated under the pressures of insufficient capital. Modern Age Books began to issue hardbound books at higher prices, but was finally forced to liquidate in 1942,12 though according to Birk the popularity of Hicks’ I Like America had saved it from earlier bankruptcy. Birk wrote: "... your book was actually what weighed the scales and kept Modern Age from going under many months ago".13 Thus Hicks’ book temporarily rescued a floundering paperback experiment that initially failed, but was revived decades later, transforming the publishing industry forever.

I Like America owed much of its success to Hicks’ conversational style, which avoided the more strident approach of much of the Communist propaganda of the 1930s: “What I want to do in this book”, Hicks wrote, “is present my case to the middle middle class, to the group to which we both belong”.14 Although the title originally included “A Communist Looks at His Country”, Hicks and Birk dropped that subtitle, fearing they might alienate the class to which the book was directed. Birk wrote: “I agree that the word

12. Ibid.
13. Birk to Hicks, 1 March 1939.
14. Hicks, I Like America, 4.
'Communist' or the implication of the word will both be out of consideration".15 In a straightforward approach Hicks argued for a spirit of nationalism that would both recognize the country's strength and admit the need for change: "We need the kind of patriotism that can look at all the facts and still say: 'I Like America' ".16 Leaving rhetoric aside, Hicks appealed to reason in stating that America's potential would only be realized when all of its citizens shared in its abundance:

I am interested in the people who, without having a conscious dislike for America, feel no positive affection. . . . They are the underprivileged, and they lack patriotism because they don't share in America's greatness. They have little or no part in the America that you and I know and love.17

Hicks' argument relied on cementing a bond between the middle class and the underprivileged. He insisted that in a society whose economic system tolerates short-term prosperity alternated with frequent depressions, no citizens except the very wealthiest are ever truly secure:

15. Birk to Hicks, 11 February 1938.
16. Hicks, I Like America, 29.
17. Ibid., 5.
If you’re not at the top, there are some unpleasant questions that may have occurred to you. Lawyers, doctors, teachers, ministers, business men, salaried officials—all have suffered in the course of this depression. How sure are you that you will not suffer in the next one? 18

Hicks went on to state that in aligning itself with progressive causes the middle class could facilitate the transfer of the means of economic production to serve the interests of all rather than the privileged few:

When the middle class was really a class, it was not afraid to fight for changes that were not only in its own interests but also in the interests of the great masses of the people. Much of what you and I cherish in American life today we owe to the struggles of our middle-class ancestors. Today the middle class is vanishing, but its ideals are not lost. We can fight for them still, and fight for them all the better because we are part of the working class. 19

Finally, Hicks challenged the middle class to create an atmosphere in which America’s potential could be realized: “There are many American dreams more splendid than the hope for simple comfort,

18. Hicks, I Like America, 110.
19. Ibid., 123.
but none more human or understandable". Cautioning against the threat of Fascism, he wrote:

There is no standing still. Either we break through to a society of planned abundance or we slip back closer and closer to barbarism. . . . We thought we were approaching the era of plenty and it turns out to be a new age of darkness.

Thus, Hicks identified two Americas: the land of beauty and abundant resources which exists in the present, and the nation of potential for which there must be shared responsibility to ensure that all citizens be given opportunity to enjoy the wealth. These were not new ideas. Rather, they represented the accepted political orientation of the Communist Party of the United States of America during the Popular Front era. In presenting his stance in a moderate, personal tone, Hicks extended his reach to a wider, more sophisticated, audience—his middle-class peers.

Among the scores of letters in the collection is ample proof that Hicks did in fact hold the attention of that audience. Teachers, doctors, lawyers, businessmen, farmers, and sales clerks responded to the book, many asking what they could do personally to meet the challenge of providing for a better America. Hicks answered some of these letters himself, but also responded in a series of four essays that appeared in the New Masses between August and November 1938. Perhaps the most interesting perspective on I Like America was provided by a newly arrived immigrant who was to document during the early 1970s, in a television series “America”, his own historical view of his adopted country:

166 East 78th Street, New York City.
May 17th, 1938

Dear Granville Hicks,

You have never heard of me but my case may interest, if not amuse, you. I have just finished reading your ‘I Like America’ and I am sending several copies of it to friends of

mine in England who doubted the wisdom or point of my settling here.

I am a young man, not yet thirty, married to an American girl. After a middle-class English childhood, I scribbled my way via scholarships and the like to Cambridge (Eng.), had some luck in the English Tripos there, took a First the same year as what may become known as 'Empson's year'. I taught school in Germany, came back to Cambridge to research in dramatic criticism. By some freak of fortune I was awarded a Commonwealth Fellowship in 1932 and my life, soul—if any—, ethos, future, and present were irrevocably changed by two years in this country,—a year at Yale, a year at Harvard. I went back to England with a wife who damn near died from English damp, became film critic to the British Broadcasting Corporation. On account of the quite grotesque emphasis that any regular broadcaster in the British Isles receives, I made a name and a reputation of sorts (enough, anyway, to have assured me comfort and jobs for the rest of my liberal life). But I had been uprooted and forced to consider, by my floating around the Melting Pot, old German and Irish origins the average Englishman is at any time faintly bored to trace. During my stay back in England I knew I was a set-up for an American immigrant. So in April of last year I emigrated.

For a year I have been broadcasting here and hope to go on, because I believe in radio, I believe in its audience and in the need to tell yourself, with them, what are the good home truths and what the whimsical ones. I believe in radio in spite of the deep reactionary suspicion of it by most intelligent literary people here. But I shall write too and I'm just starting in.

I too like America. I am not a Communist. I am a sort of liberal Englishman disturbed, but not yet to action. Being by training and profession a critic, I try always to believe in the usefulness of the man on the sidelines, separating convictions from the organic processes that convey them. Being a liberal Englishman is a generous qualification here as a dangerous radical. By this I mean that it is the force of habit, not my individual nobility, which makes me regard social insurance and free unions as the merest crumbs that the
working man should expect to tumble from his employer's table. My idea of the most fascinating and rooted tories I ever knew is not odd English landowners, many of whom retain the human integrity to supervise personally at midnight with much touching anxiety the delivery of their gardener's latest child,—but the nice, confused genial young Harvard men I directed in plays four years ago,—well-meaning young men ripe and raw for the gentle seeping of Lincoln Steffens' 'slow, inevitable corruption'.

I like America and though my roots are not here I have read patiently about it, studied its speech for a time as a specialist, seen its highways and back country in all but one of these states. I have read your book and it has depressed, then exalted me as nothing since odd recollections of Aeschylus, Ibsen, and not to draw too fine a literary point,—more recently the Federal Theatre's 'One Third Of A Nation.' More certainly now I know it was a good instinct made me declare citizenship. If ever there was a land to live and die in it is this.

So this rather roundabout confessional is a way of saying thank you for a fine book which foregoes the things that made one despair of all a priori creeds,—the convictions bred from hate, the resentment at a 'success' one does not want for oneself. I hope you sell every copy printed. I hope this letter is a cheering grace note to the lush volume of praise you deserve to get, and will. Again, the thanks of—an immigrant.

Yours sincerely,
[signed] Alistair Cooke

More than three decades later in his book on America, Cooke echoed both his own and Hicks' view of two Americas and the dichotomy inherent in that vision: "As I see it, in this country—a land of the most persistent idealism and the blandest cynicism—the race is on between its decadence and its vitality".22

While Hicks' book had caught the attention of readers, it was largely ignored by the popular press. As Hicks himself stated:

Some three months after its publication, I Like America has had only a handful of reviews. So far as I know, no New York newspaper except the World-Telegram and the Times has noticed the book. Time, the Nation, and the New Yorker have ignored it. Most of the reviews that I have seen appeared in small-city newspapers scattered through the country.23

However, there were sprinklings of noteworthy response. Reviewing I Like America for the Saturday Review of Literature, Elmer Davis wrote: "... his book (one of the handsomest of Modern Age productions) is highly respectable from any point of view—the work of a good citizen, a humane and intelligent man, who knows his country's faults but loves it anyway because he believes those faults can be corrected".24 Clyde Beck of the Detroit News had this to say: "Thus one of the world's great thinkers calls on democracy to save itself, and suggests the direction of safety".25 Not surprisingly, the left-wing

press celebrated the publication of the book. Walt Carmon of the
Daily Worker wrote: “Hicks gives a final shove to the great American
myth of individualism which has fallen lower than the stock market
in 1929”;26 Kyle Crichton, writing under the name Robert Forsythe
for the New Masses, put it simply: “I Like Granville Hicks”.27 But,
as can be seen from the following headline in the Des Moines Regis-
ter, the critical acclaim was not universal: “Hicks Hacks Out 4-Bit
Book Which Should Relax Patriots”.28 The American Mercury ex-
pressed its contempt with grudging praise: “Communism in its most
dangerous guise. . . . Good writing and good propaganda addressed
to Pink wobblies who need to imbibe their Communism with sweet-
ness and light.”29 Thus, while the publication of I Like America was
met with mixed reviews, even his detractors could not deny that
Hicks’ greatest ‘fault’ was his effectiveness as a writer in a cause with
which they did not agree.

26. Walt Carmon, “An All-American Writes to the Middle Class”, Daily Worker,
10 July 1938.
28. Des Moines Register, 22 May 1938.