

Robert M. Crunden. *A Brief History of American Culture*. Finnish Historical Society. Helsinki 1990. 284 pp. Fm. 140.

Robert Crunden's book is a useful addition to the field of American studies. In 1976 Professor Crunden was the first holder of the Bi-Centennial Chair of American Studies at the University of Helsinki and his book is partly the outcome of a need to provide students of American studies in Scandinavia (and elsewhere) with an overview of important cultural movements in the States from colonial times to the present day. In this he has succeeded admirably. Crunden's book is clear and engagingly written. His overall thesis, perhaps at times a little over-stressed, is that "American culture is essentially a peculiar mixture of Christianity, capitalism and democracy, in that order" (p. 9). This three-fold force underpins the Puritans' domination over the other early settlers; it is reaffirmed in the aftermath of the Civil War when northern religious, economic, and political ideas spread both south and west; and it reemerges in such slogans as "the Protestant ethic," "the American character," and "social Darwinism" from the late nineteenth century to the present day. Such is the thematic structure. It interacts with an overall chronological organization, for Crunden divides up his work into the following four sections:

1. The impact of local culture from roughly 1630-1815, and the successive cultural centres of first Boston then Philadelphia and finally Virginia.
2. The development of regional culture between 1815 and 1901, the forces for unity giving way to northern supremacy after the Civil War.
3. The growth of a national culture between 1901 and 1941, in politics, the arts and the sciences.
4. The emergence of a cosmopolitan culture as America moves from isolation to intervention in world affairs and all sections of her national life become racially and culturally more pluralistic.

Crunden's grasp of the ebb and flow of cultural tides is persuasive and authoritative. Yet from time to time one feels that he places too much emphasis on individual figures, who seem to mould events or cast their shadows across the age. At times the cultural history of America seems to be the history of "great men". Thus, John Winthrop is seen as "the most important political figure to make the transition to America" (p. 19); he makes "the first important contribution to American political thinking" (p. 19), and his death in 1649 marks "a convenient end to the power of the first generation in Massachusetts Bay" (p. 25); the painter William Dunlap is "the individual most responsible" (p. 80) for giving the nation the little cultural life it supposedly had at the beginning of the nineteenth century; likewise, Theodore Roosevelt's inauguration in 1901 marks the point at which the national phase begins, and we are told that "All of (Teddy) Roosevelt's thinking was national rather than local or sectional" (p. 215). One can see the problem. Covering over 350 years in less than 300 pages is a Herculean task and one in which detail must sometimes give way, even at the risk of distortion — though for greater depth the student can always consult the thorough and very useful bibliography.

One of the best features of Crunden's work is his forthright and occasionally amusing style. The American colonists' distrust of the mother country's system of representation is presented in a vivid image of a British Member of Parliament as "a fox-hunting drunkard from some forgotten rural borough" (p. 33). This picture is immediately followed up by the impact of the past on the present: "Americans ever since have insisted that each representative must actually live in the district he wishes to represent" (p. 34). Crunden is, in fact, particularly good at citing the historical roots of a contemporary idea—the American Revolution, for example, was remarkable in that its most significant leaders were conservatives and men of substance, consequently, Crunden argues, "Americans are ... often unfriendly to (more radical) contemporary revolutions" (p. 30). Crunden is also good at leaping between centuries to draw thought-provoking parallels—"Not even Sigmund Freud believed more firmly in the 'Id' than the puritans" (p. 32). After the initial shock one realizes that the writer has a point. What, after all, was the brutal backlash of the Salem witch trials but a futile and fearful attempt to destroy the id?

I personally found the sections on twentieth century developments the most rewarding. The section on America's "Reunion with Europe" (1901-41) is a model of its kind, moving effortlessly from Whistler and the Salon *des Refuse's* to the international modernism of Henry James, from the quirky aesthetics of Gertrude Stein to the achievement of a true style in Hemingway's clean prose, and from Pound and Eliot as a highpoint of American cosmopolitanism to the amazing (and terrifying) leaps forward in science around the time of the Second World War as German, Austrian and Italian scientists come to the United States to escape Hitler, Mussolini and the war. "The Primacy of Foreign Policy" (1941 to Present) is another very good section, in which Crunden clearly shows that moral rhetoric has bedevilled American foreign policy from Woodrow Wilson to Eisenhower, Kennedy and Kissinger. The book closes with three representative and well-chosen figures of American cosmopolitan culture: Ralph Ellison, Vladimir Nabokov and Saul Bellow.

All in all, this book is highly recommended, either as an introductory text for students of American studies both within and outside of the States, or as a stimulating and intelligent guide for the interested general reader.

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