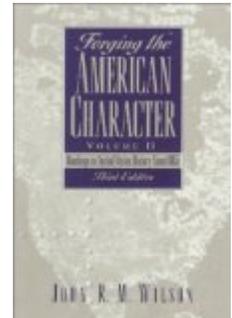




John R. Wilson, ed.. *Forging the American Character, Vol. II: Readings in United States History since 1865.* Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000. x + 241 pp. \$31.35, paper, ISBN 978-0-13-011284-2.



Reviewed by Gordon E. Harvey

Published on H-Survey (March, 2000)

John Wilson, with *Forging the American Character*, tells us he wants to achieve a dual purpose. First, Wilson wants to explore those concepts and topics that always seem understudied in U.S. survey texts. He also wants to add to our knowledge by shedding new light on a topic or adding to an extant historical interpretation. Ambitious goals to be sure, but Wilson comes as close as anyone in reaching them. His selection of essays is intriguing, thought provoking, and, in one instance, confusing.

The title of the book gives us a hint as to the broad theme of this edited compilation. Wilson has set about to help students define America's character. But this is easier said than done. Wilson admits as much in the introduction: "Trying to define the American character can be very frustrating" (ix). But that doesn't stop the author from positing one himself. "Perhaps the most useful definition," writes Wilson, "is that national character means generalizations about a national character or nationality developed to clarify the way in which it is distinctive" (ix).

Wilson's introduction is one of the strongest areas of the work. He doesn't merely introduce the essays and their authors; he goes beyond that, giving those students who bother to read the introduction a sense of just how long people have been trying to define America's character and how elusive the task can be. Taking the search as far back as de Tocqueville, and especially Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, Wilson quotes the latter for the seminal question of the book: "What then is this new American, this new man?" (x).

It would not be useful to discuss all sixteen of the essays in this volume, but several merit attention. It is pleasing to see that Wilson has included Eric Foner's standard interpretation on the nature of Reconstruction. Many books of this type seem to forget that the nature and failure of this first Reconstruction is a little more important than whether Andrew Johnson should have been impeached or not.

Another thought-provoking essay, and one in keeping with the central theme of the book, is a piece by David Brion Davis published in 1954. In "Ten Gallon Hero," Davis explores the genesis of

the Cowboy image as he witnessed it on television and film as well as how the image proliferated in the minds of young boys living in the 1950s. Wilson uses the article to explore how one's choice in entertainment and "heroes" can reveal multitudes about the American character. My only regret is that Wilson failed to draw some comparison to the cowboy image of the 1980s and 1990s and how it had been transformed by American culture and cinema and the ever-changing national character. No longer did the cowboy appear as a clean, straight-shooting, honest broker of frontier justice. By the time my generation was growing up, we saw cowboys as violent, conflict-ridden, occasionally dishonest men. For example, a discussion of any one of the films of Clint Eastwood, especially his Oscar-winning *Unforgiven*, would suffice to bring the discussion some closure and provide an illustration of the fluidity of national icons.

On the other hand, Wilson provides us with excerpts from a Margaret Marsh article on masculine domesticity and the suburban breakdown of the Victorian separate spheres barrier as early as 1905. Here is an excellent example of what Wilson wanted to do with under-explored areas in U.S. survey textbooks. Rarely does feminism and masculinity, especially the Victorian notions of separate spheres, get any full treatment other than passing notions about how the Progressive Era and 1960s Civil Rights movement sowed the seeds of their destruction. As a sub-theme of both Wilson's rationale of selection and Marsh's essay, we see a glimpse of how the rise of suburbia transformed gender stereotypes and relations in the early twentieth century.

Two essays of particularly interest and application to classroom discussion stand out. The first is by John Steele Gordon, "What We Lost in the Great War." Even though it does not explore the American character specifically, Gordon's essay shows students what World War I did to the confident Victorian world. Among other things, writes Gordon, World War I dashed the confidence ema-

nating from the Victorian Era, destroyed empires that once seemed indestructible, and generally set the world stage for another world war. In short, the Great War made world instability and pessimism a matter of fact. This is an excellent essay for discussing the lasting effects of wars. Students often feel that wars sometimes exist in a vacuum, that once war ends, things return to normal.

The second essay concerns the centrality of the atomic bomb on post-World War II relations with the USSR. The authors, Gar Alperovitz and Kai Bird, examine the years 1945 to 1949 and argue that the bomb was the primary catalyst of cold war tension. Alperovitz and Bird argue that it was possession of the bomb that allowed the United States to rearm and rebuild Germany after the war. But more intriguing is an assertion by the authors that had no such weapon existed, the United States and Soviet Union might have reached a great power understanding soon after the war. Instead, argue the authors, any such understanding was postponed for forty years. The authors also argue that historians fail to fully account for the role technology played in dictating the power relationship between the United States and Soviet Union in the early cold war years.

But not all the essays seem to be the best fit for the book's central theme. Wilson concludes his volume with a selection from Arthur Schlesinger's 1991 book, *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*. In short, Schlesinger's essay is more of a conservative reaction to the rise of ethnic consciousness in the United States than it is an attempt to define the national character. Schlesinger provides us with a Eurocentric view of multiculturalism that seems to defend the teaching of Western Civilization in America's college classrooms more than it wants to understand the roots of ethnic consciousness in the United States. In his vigorous defense of the outdated American "melting pot" myth, Schlesinger celebrates what Gunnar Myrdal called the "most explicitly expressed system of general ideas." He

also quotes Emerson, who called the United States an "asylum for all nations." Unfortunately, Schlesinger's indictment of multiculturalism as an attack on the American melting pot ideal is, among other things, dated and very WASPish. Virtually none of the great thinkers and writers that Schlesinger draws upon for his defense is from any of the ethnic groups Schlesinger criticizes for multiculturalism and accuses of wanting a separatist society.

A much better choice for the concluding essay would have been a portion from Eric Foner's new book *The Story of American Freedom*. Foner's goal is similar to Wilson's: exploring the origins and definition of American freedom. Wilson wants to define the American character. In many ways a distinctive trait of the American Character has been freedom expressed in one way or another, including depriving someone else of their freedom. According to Foner, American freedom has been defined by what America is as much as by what America is not. This seems to fit nicely into Wilson's theme, at least more so than Schlesinger's tired defense of Western Civ classes.

Overall, Wilson has done an admirable job collecting a divergent group of essays that should foster discussion in the classroom. That being said, books like these do not work by themselves. Without a proper foundation and outright prodding by the instructor, students will treat such ancillary books as they do primary textbooks: with disdain for cost and length and energy taken to read. If the sure test of this book is whether it provides a tool to help us identify traits of the American character, if not agree on some definition in principle, then Wilson has succeeded.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact <h-net@h-net.msu.edu>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-survey>

Citation: Gordon E. Harvey. Review of Wilson, John R., ed. *Forging the American Character, Vol. II: Readings in United States History since 1865*. H-Survey, H-Net Reviews. March, 2000.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3927>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.