

The Fifty Years That Made Us What We Are Today

THE BIG CHANGE: America Transforms Itself, 1900-1950. By Frederick Lewis Allen, 108 pp. New York: Harper & Bros. \$3.50.

By C. WRIGHT MILLS

MR. ALLEN, author of "Only Yesterday," is widely known as a master of the surface pasticcio of the American Twenties. In his new book, "The Big Change," he takes up the years between 1900 and 1950—and proves that the genre of writing he represents is better suited to a decade than to a half century.

The charm and cogency of Mr. Allen's work depend almost entirely upon the reader's saying to himself on every other page, "I remember, yes, it was like that." As long as he stays on the level of the graphic and the recognizable he is a master historical journalist, for on that level he sees what is worthy of note and notes it well. He never documents without interpreting, and his documentation is never dull. He is always up close and he is always human. What, he asks, was it like? What did you see? How might you have felt? The quality of his work is due as much to his style of observation as to any thought-out political view. There is much going on in Mr. Allen's America; some of it is curious, almost all of it is interesting. Isn't it enough just to see?

However, Mr. Allen tries to do more than see. His major theme in this dual choice of the Book-of-the-Month Club for November is the interplay of capitalism and democratic government, and the egalitarian results of this interplay. He develops this theme by discussing, in turn, the old order, the years between and America today.

MR. ALLEN'S portrait of the economic order of 1900 resembles the America which Moscow propagandists put out as the America of 1952. In that old order, McKinley sat serene; J. P. Morgan was king, and Senators, still selected by State Legislatures, were rich men or the allies and errand boys of rich men. Carnegie made \$23 million in one year with no income tax to pay, while the average wage-earner earned \$500. Populism was dead and no Muckraker had yet appeared.

The entire United States Government spent less money than the State of New York spent in 1900 and, in literal fact, Washington without Wall Street was at times financially helpless. "The Secretary of the Treasury was hardly more than one of Morgan's minor aides." Once, in 1897 a rich man gave a party that cost the 1950 equivalent of one million dol-

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lars. And a professor earning \$3,000 a year (today's equivalent of \$9,000 after taxes) could have an ample house and a maid.

Thus, according to Mr. Allen, in the good old days before the income tax, the top was Himalayan and gaudy; the comfortable were very comfortable indeed, and secure in their places; the bottom was an abyss of inhuman misery and filth.

Across this hideous and wonderful context the reformers marched, with their many middle-class "causes," which, according to Mr. Allen, set the moral tone of public life up to 1915 and the pragmatic temper of American politics since then. Yet, after 1918, the reforms faded; hopes became tired, and political America

withdrew from the world. There was a "contagion of delighted concern over things that were exciting, but didn't matter profoundly." Decorum collapsed as girls took off their corsets along with other repressions, and Clara Bow, the It Girl, replaced Mary Pickford, America's Innocent Sweetheart.

CAME the big slump and private enterprise and the market economy took a tumble. In one year, over 12,000,000 workers were unemployed, farmers tried to sell 5-cent cotton, and in many Americans there was planted the permanent fear. Labor rose up in mass organizations, and the New Deal's great patchwork of reforms and subsidies and interventions became part of the enlarged sphere of government. Then

out of the twenty-year crisis, there came World War II, the amazing zoom of production and productivity, and slowly, uneasily, with no victorious relaxation, America reluctantly assumed world power.

In Mr. Allen's view the paramount fact about America in 1950 is that millions of families have been lifted from poverty to "middle class" standards of consumption. The war-boom and its aftermath have of course lifted the whole income pyramid; it has also changed its shape. Now the top of this pyramid is not so Himalayan; it bulges mightily in the middle range; and its bottom layers are no longer the miserable mass they once were.

"The Big Change," in short, is that over the last fifty years America has become a better

place in which to live. Mr. Allen's explanation for this is no more startling than it is satisfying.

He thinks we have not been tearing down and building anew, but rebuilding slowly by patchwork. This was the key to the reforms of the early century and of the New Deal. So, "there is subconscious agreement among the vast majority of Americans that the United States is not evolving toward socialism, but past socialism." Americans, he writes, have "discovered a new frontier to open up: the purchasing power of the poor. That, it seems to me, is the essence of the Great American Discovery."

If this is the great discovery, it is certainly more ambiguous in its application today than it was in the Thirties. One had supposed—and Mr. Allen himself notes—that the New Deal's attempts to pump up the purchasing power of "the poor" did not succeed in balancing consumption and production. The war did that. And today the war economy does.

Mr. Allen tends to play with immediate historical images rather than think about historical epochs. Accordingly his characterization of twentieth-century America is very largely in terms of its current prosperity. Yet one might suppose the grand historical fact about the fifty years of which he writes is that during them America has zigzagged on a mighty scale—fighting two world wars, going through a disastrous slump, serious inflation. These items are noted—again in charming little slices of prose—but they are not taken into consideration when Mr. Allen forms his over-all image and judgment of what kind of set-up America represents.

THERE is no serious recognition in Mr. Allen's view of contemporary American bliss that, for a decade, we have been living in a war economy, much less any serious attempt to trace the implications of that big fact for our prosperity or our uneasy mood.

His emphasis on income distributions as the key to all economic change woefully obscures the great shift in the composition of the middle classes, especially as this shift bears on property changes. Surely the decline over the last seventy years of independent proprietors from 33 to 20 per cent and the rise of salaried middle classes from 6 to 25 per cent of the working population must be at least recognized if one wishes to speak of Great Changes.

The mark of Mr. Allen's excellence as an observer and writer is that he always maintains the interest of surface detail. The mark of his deficiency as a social analyst and historian is that when he does try to go deeper, the reader becomes impatient for the wonderful surfaces Mr. Allen recreates so convincingly.



The amazing zoom of production . . .