# *The Pursuit of American Character* by Rupert Wilkinson (review)


Sam B. Girgus

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A healthy mix of cross-cultural experience helps unsettle preconceptions about "the California of postcards." Some writers, with yearning affection, conjure up quieter, more innocent times "when airplanes always had propellers and cars had running boards and there was only the radio." In a state now famous for its crowded freeways and poisoned air, we hear of sheep halting traffic on a major thoroughfare and of a time when the dust from a wagon leaving Van Nuys could be seen for fifteen miles across the San Fernando valley.

Not all the vignettes, however, are laments for a paradise lost. We also see Depression children in Redondo Beach eating banana peels out of garbage cans, an employer humiliating a Chinese worker in front of his daughter, and —most startling—a Salinas youth who exhumes his grandmother from a local cemetery and dives around town with her draped across the hood of his car ("Didn't you ever want to do that?" he asks a friend.)

The book is not without its blind spots, which include a weak introduction and three section headings ("Northern California," "Central Valley," and "Southern California") which are more convenient than incisive. (The Central Valley, for instance, seems to extend only from Stockton, not Redding, to the Grapevine.) Noone writes about growing up in Sacramento, San Diego or Berkeley, and in a state with a 950-mile coastline, only one or two pieces concern childhood in sight of the ocean. Two-thirds of the pieces are written by men and nearly all of them are set between 1910 and 1960. More (and more well-written) selections about growing up in the 1960's and 70's would have highlighted the potent contrasts and contradictions which characterize the state.

But none of these liabilities can substantially diminish the rich accomplishments of this volume. As provocative as the subjects it tackles, *California Childhood* is required reading for those with a special interest in California writing and culture. But it will also engage any student of western literature or, for that matter, anyone with his own private version of Richard Dokey's boyhood memory of San Francisco, a city which seemed "a thousand miles away" from his house in Stockton, "because I always fell asleep in the car coming home from there."

MICHAEL KOWALEWSKI *Princeton University*

*The Pursuit of American Character*. By Rupert Wilkinson. (New York: Harper & Row, 1988. 166 pages, $16.95.)

Rupert Wilkinson's book successfully returns to an important tradition of European studies and perspectives on American culture and character as a whole. Educated at Harvard and Stanford, Wilkinson, who is an esteemed and erudite British student of American life and thought, contributes the original

and compelling thesis that contemporary critiques of American culture can be characterized by fears of, what I would term roughly, collapse, moral failure, subjection and impotence. Such fears unduly influence "the language and symbols in which policies are considered." They also often contradict the continuing importance of the many forces that have shaped us, including the Turner thesis of the western frontier and the Puritan sense of mission. The fears Wilkinson delineates help account for the negativity of most post-war interpretations of American character.

Wilkinson himself is not too hard on American culture and character. A fair critic of American excesses and extremes, he also shows the balance and judgment of a mature historian in his attack upon the stridency of recent studies in which "social-character theories become psychiatric smears." He believes that some writers overstate their cases because of a failure to incorporate such factors as class and region. Nevertheless, he challenges strains in American character that condone selfishness at home while arousing a dangerous moralistic attitude abroad. Throughout this book Wilkinson balances contending values and forces in American culture such as individuality and community. One of the most illuminating portions of the book places such conflicts within specific historic and contemporary situations, which gives great credibility to Wilkinson's theories about the nature of American culture. As history and social structure intersect in historical case studies—Northeastern revivalism, Overland companies, the Progressives, department store saleswomen, for example—the book establishes an important paradigm for cultural change and continuity. Accordingly, this is a solidly documented and concisely written book that should be considered indispensable for all serious students of American culture.

SAM B. GIRGUS *University of Oregon*

*A Sense of Place: The Life and Work of Forrest Shreve.* By Janice Emily Bowers. (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1988. 195 pages, $19.95.)

"Life is one thing, art is another," said Spanish critic Ortega y Gasset. True enough for the Continent, but in the United States, and particularly the American West, writers base their art on things far more solid to the knuckles. Despite the emotional lushness of *The Desert*, John C. Van Dyke perspired mightily over zoological and botanical accuracy. Western novelists as different as Wallace Stegner and Larry McMurtry want, first of all, to be authentic, to get their facts straight.

The fixation reflects Westerners' acknowledged debt to their physical circumstances and the close relationship of western life and art. With this in mind, perhaps too easily we forget the unsung historians, anthropologists, and botanists whose scholarly works have served as writers' guides and whose discoveries have thus broadened the public's concepts of the West.