



In the American Grain

William Carlos Williams , Horace Gregory (Introduction)

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Prose essays ranging in theme from Erik the Red and Christopher Columbus to Abraham Lincoln about what it means to be an American.

William Carlos Williams was not a historian, but he was fascinated by the texture of American history. He found in the fabric of familiar episodes new shades of meaning, new configurations of character and intent. He brought a poetic imagination to the task of reconstructing a live tradition for Americans, and the result is a genuinely consistent and integrated expression of the American inheritance. Williams did not invent the native conscience, but he rediscovered it, often in the more remote gestures of history, and has here given it enduring stature in prose.

"In the American Grain is a fundamental book, essential if one proposes to come to terms with American literature."

-- Times Literary Supplement

In the American Grain Details

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Joe says

It seems silly to assign stars to these sorts of books—these Important Monuments of Culture—as though my or anyone's assessment that "it was amazing" has any meaning.

At any rate, I found the book difficult, opaque, unsettling, and disturbing on several levels. And utterly unlike anything else I have ever read. I will be pondering it for a long time.

Jonathan says

"We are, too, the others. Think of them! The main islands were thickly populated with a peaceful folk when Christ-over found them. But the orgy of blood which followed, no man had written. We are the slaughterers. It is the tortured soul of our world. Indians have no souls; that was it. That was what they said. But they knew they lied—the blood-smell proof."

Those who struggle with the separation of "author" from "text", or, more specifically, the distance between the "ideas" and "views" of an author, and those in his texts, may have problems with this book (and a brief online search demonstrates this).

This is written in the book, can we criticise WCW for being a misogynist?

"Women—givers (but they have been, as reservoirs, empty) perhaps they are being filled now. Hard to deal with in business, more conservative, closer to earth—the only earth. They are our cattle, cattle of the spirit—not yet come in. None yet has raised benevolence to distinction. Not one to "wield her beauty as a scepter." It is a brilliant opportunity."

Can we claim anything about WCW's "beliefs" from this book? Do we care anyway? Even if there is a "thesis" being put forward by WCW, does it matter?

The fact that one cannot clearly differentiate between when "WCW is speaking" (whatever that means) and when it is the voice of his characters, should do nothing but make clear such a differentiation is meaningless.

Simple point being - nuance people, nuance...

Anyway. No idea why I bothered to write that, nor what I am rambling about.

Much to like here. An ancestor of Paul Metcalf and Vollmann certainly. Helpful too for those of us interested in trying to understand more of that very strange thing that is the USA. Some great writing, some that gets a little muddled and muddied.

Erica says

I probably missed the point of a lot of this, which Williams assures me is part of what it means to be an american, but other passages stopped me cold, ~90 years after its first publication and in the midst of the current political cluster****: "A most confusing thing in American history, as we read it, is the nearly universal lack of scale," and, "morals affect the food, and the food the bone..."

There is a lot here that struck me as sort of a preface for later American writing, arguing (or pleading?) for an organic place-based consciousness, rather than denying our own location and history. Pretty cool, if kind of tedious at times. I skipped the parts about battles between ships during the war for independence.

Matthew says

Using the same premise as Borges in his *A Universal History of Iniquity*, Williams here attempts to shed new light on history by writing short, fiction-esque accounts of historical topics which have fallen into cliché. The introduction states his intent in his trademark earthy, jumbled diction: *"I have tried to separate out from the original records some flavor of an actual peculiarity the character denoting shape which the unique force has given... It has been my wish to draw... the strange phosphorus of the life, nameless under an old misappellation."*

Williams, like Borges, wants to rewrite history, to participate in it in some way. He does so with consummate success. He writes short fictions in styles to match the period; a tale about Lief Ericson is in mystic prose-poetry, Columbus's story is written in the tense, descriptive style of a 15th century legal document.

Because WCW has a genuine, almost naïve interest in the subjects he wishes to explore, his volume succeeds. I don't think many other artists could have accomplished that. Borges certainly didn't do as well.

Emily says

William Carlos Williams's essay collection—or long prose poem—or piece of imaginative nonfiction—call it what you will, *In the American Grain* attempts to inhabit some of the great personalities of American history, in a bid to explore the underpinnings of the collective American psyche. Williams approaches his subjects, who range from Viking cast-out Eric the Red, through Columbus and Daniel Boone and finishing up with a brief sketch of Abraham Lincoln, from a variety of angles, including quotations from primary sources, real or imaginary debates between contemporary (1920s) speakers, fictionalized monologues in the style of the subject's time and place, and poetic dissertations on the ongoing demons of our New World society.

I know a common opinion is that the "point" of a "review" is to give an impression of whether one liked a book or not. So I'll be up front about this: I'm really not sure whether I hated *In the American Grain*, or whether I quite liked it. I spent most of the duration of the book arguing with Williams, either spluttering with pen in hand, or grudgingly admitting his points—sometimes even cheering him on. The time I wasn't spending thus, I was appreciating the stylistic breadth of the book, and by extension, of American history and literature. All in all, there could be worse ways to spend a reading interlude than locked in debate with an opponent like Williams.

First, the things that I wholeheartedly enjoyed about the book: as noted, Williams makes use of many

primary sources throughout *In the American Grain*, and incorporates them in different ways: sometimes he quotes directly from them; at others, he refers to them in supposed conversation, in yet other cases, he adopts the "voice" of the ship's log, religious treatise, diary, or autobiography in question and uses it in his own monologue on a subject. In a move reminiscent of *The Waste Land*, there is no clear marker to let the reader know when Williams is quoting verbatim and when he is mimicking a historical voice, so I'm not sure where I should congratulate him on good collage-work, where on good composition, and to what extent the division between those two doesn't even matter. Whether Williams's role is primarily that of a composer or an editor, though, the end result is a chewy combination of prose styles that captures the changing texture of American letters through the centuries. Some of my favorite bits from this milieu, just to give a sense of the variety here:

The opening sentences of the book, in the voice of Eric the Red:

Better the ice than their way: to take what is mine by single strength, theirs by the crookedness of their law. But they have marked me—even to myself.

From the chapter on Sir Walter Raleigh:

O Muse, in that still pasture where you dwell amid the hardly noticed sounds of water falling and the little cries of crickets and small birds, sing of Virginia floating off: the broken chips of Raleigh: the Queen is dead.

O Virginia! who will gather you again as Raleigh had you gathered?

From Cotton Mather's monologue:

The *New Englanders* are a People of God settled in those, which were once the *Devil's* Territories; and it may easily be supposed that the *Devil* was exceedingly disturbed, when he perceived such a People here accomplishing the Promise of old made unto our Blessed Jesus, *That He should have the Utmost parts of the earth for his Possession.*

I am very drawn to stylistic experimentation, and I admire Williams's project here. He's trying to establish the history of American speech, American thought, as distinct from that of Europe. In one of the conversational sections, he claims that Americans don't realize

that there is a source in AMERICA for everything we think or do; that morals affect the food and food the bone, and that, in fine we have no conception at all of what is meant by moral, since we recognize no ground our own. [...] And that we have no defense, lacking intelligent

investigation of the changes worked upon the early comers here, to the New World, the books, the records..."

By examining, even *inhabiting* those same books and records, Williams hopes to provide himself and his readers with a sense of the very historical ground they are already unknowingly occupying.

But the focus on books and records also creates a methodological problem for Williams, or at least exaggerate one to which he is already prone. Because who, in pre-Revolutionary America, LEFT books and records? Why, it was the the educated white men (and a few educated white women, with whom Williams does not concern himself). Williams's emphasis on primary sources means that he privileges those who operated in a mode of writing down their experiences—which means that, for example, as much as he attempts sympathy for the American Indian, his take on the Native presence in the New World is woefully ethnocentric and romanticized—in a way that's, ironically, very Rousseau-esque, very European. Similarly, his attitude toward women and the feminine is bizarrely male-centric, especially considering that he's happy enough to name-drop such contemporary American female artists as H.D., Bryher, and Gertrude Stein when he mentions his six-week trip to Paris. Normally I'm pretty good at considering an author's work in the context of his time, but for some reason, possibly because Williams's big goal here is to advance a particular view of American history, I was roused to ardent disagreement with him. It was passages like this, on Daniel Boone:

There must be a new wedding. But he saw and only he saw the prototype of it all, the native savage. To Boone the Indian was his greatest master. Not for himself surely to be an Indian, though they eagerly sought to adopt him into their tribes, but the reverse: to be *himself* in a new world, Indianlike. If the land were to be possessed it must be as the Indian possessed it. Boone saw the truth of the Red Man, not an aberrant type, treacherous and anti-white to be feared and exterminated, but as a natural expression of the place...

or this:

The land! don't you feel it? Doesn't it make you want to go out and lift dead Indians tenderly from their graves, to steal from them—as if it must be clinging even to their corpses—some authenticity...

STEAL THE AUTHENTICITY FROM THE DEAD INDIANS' CORPSES??? Dr. Williams, may I just say, "Eww"?

So much about these passages rub me the wrong way. I know it's only fair to look at Williams in context; the 1920s was a pretty bleak time for Native American/white relations. Still a decade away from the relatively enlightened tenure of John Collier as head of the Office of Indian Affairs, the United States Government was busy convincing the American public that the Indians were morally corrupt heathens who should be deprived of their remaining land and have their liquid property "put into trust"—aka stolen. The counter-argument advanced by well-meaning liberals was that the Indians, once a mass of noble savages, were now on the

verge of an inevitable extinction (Williams says that "almost nothing remains of the great American New World but a memory of the Indian"), and that, instead of killing off the remnants of them for sport like the frontiersmen were doing in the West, white folks should look to the romantic past for lessons to be learned from this bygone race of "natural," "primitive" people. (Yet if the Abenaki disappeared before 1922, why do they currently have a website?) Indians became the desirable "other" in the progressive imagination, everything white men were not: natural, authentic, in harmony with their surroundings, untouched by cultural repression. Because Williams hates the Puritans, because he hates their refusal to "touch," their fear of contamination, their sexual frigidity, their artifice, he imagines a homogeneous mass of Indian civilization to which none of these things apply. It is easier to imagine these things, of course, if one never has to come into contact with an actual Indian, who might, being human, have her own complex set of hangups and cultural standards.

And so Williams himself becomes an example of the Puritanical refusal to reach out and touch the "other." He romanticizes, most of all, white men who have been close to the Indians: the priest Rasles, who lived with the Abenaki, Kentucky frontiersman Daniel Boone; Texas governor Samuel Houston, who "descended" to live with the Chippewa until his "reascension" into white society. But no Indian subjectivity is on offer here, no Indian biography told. "They" are not "us"; they are not the story of America. Williams does not attempt to inhabit Metacom, Tecumseh, or even Moctezuma in the same way he inhabits Columbus or Franklin, just as he never attempts to voice a woman for longer than two sentences. He idolizes white male individuals who are able to live among the natives, who have opinions about them, who have sex with them, and thinks it the most noble thing imaginable when white individuals refrain from killing native ones. But he very seldom presents a native person as an individual: the only times he does (Moctezuma and Jacataqua) they're either submitting to white authority or freeing a white man from the sexual prudery of Puritanical white women. And let's not get started on the fact that his primary problem with the Puritanical repression of white women is that they're no longer able sexually to satisfy white men. Or actually, let's.

Women—givers (but they have been, as reservoirs, empty) perhaps they are being filled now. Hard to deal with in business, more conservative, closer to earth—the only earth. They are our cattle, cattle of the spirit—not yet come in. None yet has raised benevolence to distinction. Not one to "wield her beauty as a scepter." It is a brilliant opportunity.

Watch me run to cash in on this "brilliant opportunity" to be a "cow of the spirit."

I mean, I'm no fan of the Puritans' sexual mores and white supremacist doctrines, don't get me wrong. And Williams's sentimental belief in the noble savage is certainly preferable to the opinion that all Indians should be killed as soon as possible, or that decent women should be devoid of sexuality. But the way he uses the Indians and women (and later, "all the negroes [he:] has known intimately") as a crow-bar between himself and the Puritan ideology is extremely problematic to me. The frustrating thing, and one reason I have a hard time forgiving him these faults, is that he seems smarter than that, too smart and too cosmopolitan to fall victim to these predictable traps. He knows Stein; he knows Joyce; he knows Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier and H.D. He occasionally dances so close to acknowledging the subjectivity of women and people of color, and yet he always steps back from the brink. In the "Jacataqua" section, for example, in the midst of passages like the one quoted above, he says this:

She is a low thing (they tell her), she is made to feel that she is vicious, evil—It really doesn't do anything save alter the *color* of her deed, make it unprofitable, it scrapes off the *bloom* of

the gift—it is puritanical envy. When she gives, it will probably be to the butcher boy—since she has been an apt pupil and *believes* that she is *evil*, believes even that her pleasure is evil.

For just a moment there, we see a human being convinced of her own malignancy, worn down by a sexual double-standard. But Williams then quickly springs back to his main concern, lamenting the effects of American white female frigidity on white American men. And white EDUCATED men at that, given his contempt for the butcher boy, which is a little ironic considering how many more people got educated in early America than in England due to those pesky Puritans and their mandated free public schools. Basically, his attitude reads, "It makes me so ANGRY that white American women are so frigid and can't sexually satisfy white American men!! The poor white American men are going CRAZY for lack of sexual satisfaction! (And incidentally, I guess it sucks that white American women have been taught that they're dirty whores, but mostly) it's just tragic that lack of sexual generosity is keeping white American men from realizing their true potential!" The destructive effects of Puritanism on the human psyches of the women in question (terrorism), or on the native peoples (genocide) is never as important to Williams as the inconvenience to white American men.

I know it's unrealistic to apply modern political mores to works from the past, but other folks in the 1920s were doing so much better than this. Hell, for my money Longfellow did better than this all the way back in 1855 with the "Song of Hiawatha." And that's disappointing in a book that promises so much in its style and its premise.

Joe says

Williams writing bravely and all that--unafraid to make radical statements on the character of America: "And this wealth, all that is not pure accident, is the growth of fear." And, of course, too impatient to explain the logical props on which his arguments stand, which is fine, since its style which is almost always half his point. That America, what it is, is the product of explorers being sold out by the European establishment, of men seeking a way outside of society to the soil, of men seeking "the new" (which is to do violence to it) & so on. Observations on earliest explorers are perhaps the most striking as they deftly weave together Williams' berserk commentary and lengthy selections from original sources such as the journal of Columbus. His revisions of Poe, Aaron Burr, Washington & Lincoln are also engaging while his skreeds against the Puritans go on a bit too long and are, if you've encountered Williams before, predictable. It's also here where he backs away from incorporating original sources and his method of putting the book together seems to get lost. And "Advent of the Slaves" is awful. A nice primer on how to revise settled notions of history in volcanic modernistic fashion.

Michael says

What it lacks as a book, it makes up in other ways. Through a series of historical sketches, Williams tries to suss out what it means to be, first a person, then a writer in America. It is to his very great credit that when he can't exactly answer the question, he doesn't guess or cheat... he feels towards an answer, goes as far as the language will take him, leaving us with a sort of impressionist historical criticism that will mean different things to different people and at different stages of life in the reader. Some parts (especially long quotations from Columbus, Mather, and Franklin) can be dull, but they are important in the project. This book is a

project, art attempting in an essential way to be something more than play. For the most part it seems as hopeless as Aaron Burr trying to start a breakaway empire in the trans-Appalachian wilderness. I guess this book did not become the foundation of anything, but maybe it still could be.

Aveugle Vogel says

"that they had seen a tern"

J. Alfred says

Dr. Williams has some ideas about the inherited psychological character of the American people: as you might guess, the Puritans have ruined us all. Anyway, this is an interesting look at American history by a poet with a distinctly heterodox view, and who plays around with some well-known, and some other lesser known characters in building his version of the myth.

Also, you can pick up good bits of so to speak official history: for instance,

The thirty-sixth article of the Constitution of Pennsylvania runs expressly in these words: "As every freeman, to preserve his independence (if he has not a sufficient estate) ought to have some profession, calling, trade or farm, whereby he may honestly subsist, there can be no necessity for, nor use in, establishing offices of profit, the usual effects of which are dependence and servility unbecoming freemen, in the possessors and expectants; faction, contention, corruption, and disorder among the people; Wherefore, whenever an office, through increase of fees or otherwise, becomes so profitable as to occasion many to apply for it, the profits ought to be lessened by the Legislature."

This appears to be true. Look it up! We were once wiser than we are now.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

A short note for those who may have an interest ::

William Carlos Williams' 1925 essay collection ought to be read as supplementary by those reading William T Vollmann's *Seven Dreams: A Book of North American Landscapes*. It is a compact attempt to survey an american spirit by way of its history. And more than the mere sweep collected in this slim volume, and Williams' concern with the what and wherefore of what being american is all about, are his stylistic choices, mimicking the subject in its own voice, using the subject's own voice, writing from and out of the source documents themselves. Williams' choices of style, form, and voice should be familiar to Vollmann readers. Which choices also create a dense reading experience, always somewhere between essay and story, where it belongs. Prior familiarity with the subject of each piece is required in order to see exactly where Williams wants to place himself, as essayist, within the questions of the time; when a writer ventriloquizes, there is no easy route to discover merely that "which he wants to say." But, too, there is the innocent hearing of what is said, as it is said, in the manner in which it is said.

Red Eric -- Chris Columbus -- Cortez and what happened at Tenochtitlan -- Ponce de Leon -- De Soto -- Sir Walter Raleigh -- the mayflower -- de Champlain -- Thomas Morton -- Cotton Mathers and some wonderful

witches -- Daniel Boone -- Washington -- Poor Richard -- John Paul Jones -- Aaron Burr -- Poe and even a final page on Lincoln. more.

The names will be familiar to readers of Vollmann; yes, that is where my head is right now. More importantly, those names should be much more familiar to the average american citizen than they are to me; I mean of course that I know the *names* but I'll be damned if I could tell a decent story about most of them.

It occurs to me as well, dear readers of fiction, that the territory which Williams covers, in addition to all which makes me think of Seven Dreams, also overlaps with another great series of historical novels by another Great American, Gore Vidal's Narratives of Empire.

Eric says

A curious book. Very much of its time (1925), a time of the first great vogue for speculating on the savage subconscious of the nation--witness D.H. Lawrence's 'Studies in Classic American Literature,' and the Melville revival. (It is amusing when Williams dismisses the Augustan elegancies of an 18th century account of Daniel Boone as 'silly language'--his own quasi-Nietzschean vitalist rhapsodies are now just as dated as those pompous periods of Johnsonese.) Williams meditates on what are to him key episodes and figures in the New World's enthnopsychic secret history, from Eric the Red to Lincoln. He gets carried away sometimes, to no good effect, and the prose can be at times unreadably silly--but just as often it rises to an awesome pitch of revelation and insight. I like it when poets riff on incidents of history; they can compress a pithy essence better than the less speculative historians. My favorite bits:

1. When describing the massacres of Indians who refused to spiritually convert or politically submit, Williams mourns that Tenochtitlan was 'crushed out because of the awkward names [King of Spain, Jesus Christ] men give their emptiness.'
 2. 'Indians have no souls; that was it. That was what they said. But they knew they lied--the blood-smell proof.'
 3. The religious legacy of Puritanism: 'strange, inhuman, powerful...like a relic of some died out tribe whose practices were revolting.'
 4. Boone 'has remained since buried in a miscolored legend and left for rotten.'
 5. Boone was not of 'that riff-raff of hunters and Indian killers among which destiny had thrown him--the man of border foray--a link between savage and settler.'
 6. Sam Houston, 'a man of primitive vigors loosed upon her in private.'
 7. In precarious frontier settlements, women 'shooting children against the wilderness like cannon balls.'
-

Cobertizo says

"La mezquindad de nuestra historia, nuestra estupidez, nuestra pereza de espíritu, la falsedad de nuestras notas históricas, la completa pérdida de los objetivos. Abocada al disparate, la tenacidad con la que el temor inspira leyes y costumbres -la supresión de la magnífica danza del maíz de los Chippewas, símbolo del proceso generativo- como si la moral sólo pudiera tener un carácter... hasta, en la confusión, nada resta del gran Nuevo Mundo Americano sino el recuerdo del indio"

Miriam says

Didn't speak to me. I had a hard time catching the rhythm of the language; I didn't always know what he meant, no matter how many times I reread sections.

He lets the Spanish explorers off easy--Columbus, De Soto, Ponce de Leon, even Cortez are all men who came to the New World drawn by their visions, their ambitions, their desires, and they got swallowed and defeated by the New World, in one way or another. The Puritans, however, get his full wrath. Maybe he respects the Spaniards more, for at least attempting to see the "flower" of the New World, its glories and pleasures, whereas the Puritans, who similarly annihilated indigenous people and plundered the land as their own, maintained their own littleness and refused to be seduced, and instead turned inward.

The idea of the book is great: to pick out elements of history to reform, to recreate, but to understand for the first time. There are some good things to quote here:

Page 69: "Is it merely in a book? So am I then, merely in a book. You see? Here at least I find the thing I love. I mean, here **is** the thing, accurately, my own world, the world in which I myself breathe and walk and live--against that which you present."

Page 113: "Why does one not hear Americans speak more of these important things? Because the fools do not believe that they have sprung from anything: bone, thought and action. They will not see that what they are is growing on these roots. They will not look. They float without question. Their history is to them an enigma."

And this gorgeous bit of mansplaining, pg. 184, describing his correspondence with "one of the hottest women that [he] know[s]": "I liked her and enjoyed her letters. In one letter, among other things, she said that no one could **imagine** what it meant to a girl to lose her virginity. But yes, I could imagine it, better than she. It means **everything** in America."

I get tired sometimes, trying to remember to read things without judgment and put them in the context of their original time. I realize this is a stupid thing for a historian to say, but, nonetheless, I feel it. Especially when these authors from the lists of the "Great Works" contain so many voices that belittle people like me, or claim enlightenment for themselves when they condescend to imagine what life for "Others" might be like, and then congratulate themselves for the attempt, as if the attempt is automatic success itself.

Richard says

"Rather the ice than their way." This defiant declaration by Erik the Red when confronted with the choice of exile or converting to Christianity caught my attention immediately when I picked up this book fifteen years ago. I finished the first piece, put the book down, and didn't wind up reading the rest of the book until recently. I'm glad I came back to it. It's a collection of poetic essays on certain figures in American history, a meditation on the concept of "history" itself, and an explication of Williams' theories of "Americanness." (Which can be summed up by this quote: "The dreadful and curious thing is that men, despoiled and having nothing, must long most for that which they have not and so, out of the intensity of their emptiness imagining they are full, deceive themselves and all the despoiled of the world into their sorry beliefs. It is the spirit that existing nowhere in them is forced into their dreams. The Pilgrims, they, the seed, instead of growing, looked black at the world and damning its perfections praised a zero in themselves. The inversion of a Gothic Calvin.") Williams can be difficult to parse at times, and I admit to getting lost now and then while reading this book, but if you slow down, take a deep breath, and concentrate, you can work through most of the thickets. He uses many original texts (the journals of Columbus and Cortez, transcripts of the Salem witch trials) but reframes them in order to view them from new angles. Some standouts were the Eric the Red chapter and those on Daniel Boone, Aaron Burr, Cortez, and DeSoto. The book reminded me some of William Vollmann's Seven Dreams series (I'm a huge fan of his), and I wouldn't be surprised if he took some inspiration from it.

Madison Santos says

im not sure why i thought that the ezra and co.'s racism wouldnt rub off on WCW but jeez, even as one of his devotees, i cant stand this.

i get that WCW was always self-conscious about his status as the modernist that got left behind, and feels ashamed that he is not able to pull from a well of cultural mythology like joyce or pound can so he feels the need to create one, this is why he dwells needlessly on his six weeks in paris... but does that mythology need an origin story of sir walter raleigh bravely colonizing? does it need to ignore indigenous americans besides two sentences? does it need only a 4 page chapter titled "The Advent of Slaves" after a 30 page eulogy to burr with the most aggravatingly bland title "The Virtue of History"? does it need to claim that slaves were brought over on ships to america just like everyone else? WCW's mythography is hidden behind two genocides and i really hope vollmann's seven dream trilogy does much better than WCW could.
