



SK

The Work of a Generation

Once hailed as a “landmark” achievement, alumnus and Penn English professor Robert Spiller’s *Literary History of the United States* now feels not just dated but fundamentally misguided. What happened?

★ BY DENNIS DRABELLE

IT took a long time, but I finally came to understand what a paperback copy of the *Dictionary of French Literature* was doing in my local drugstore in 1964: making up for a shortage of bookstores. As noted in a much heftier reference book, the *Literary History of the United States*, as late as the 1940s “there were still only five hundred real bookstores in the country, and most of them were concentrated in the twelve largest cities. Some other machinery had to be found for mass distribution.”

Almost as odd as stocking such a specialized volume an aisle away from Bengay, Brylcreem, and Doan’s pills, you might think, is having the phenomenon of pharmaceutical book-selling explicated in the LHUS, a collaborative effort by dozens of learned experts under the guidance of a team led by Penn English professor Robert E. Spiller C’17 G’20 Gr’24 Hon’67. But the LHUS was capacious enough—running to 1,475 pages of text in its fourth and final edition—to have room for just about anything even marginally related to the field embraced by its broad title.

In addition to its grand scope, the LHUS had staying power: revised and reissued three times, it stood imposingly on library reference shelves for 40 years. Today, however, the LHUS has not only been superseded; it may be an enterprise the likes of which we’ll never see again.

Twenty-first-century students of American literature may not be aware of how recently their subject emerged from the shadow of its big brother. “It was during the peri-

od 1920-40,” Spiller recalled in the preface to his essay collection *The Oblique Light* (1967), “that my generation first challenged the assumption that American literature is one branch of English colonial literature and attempted to demonstrate that it is rather the expression, on a new continent and under new conditions of life, of the whole tradition of Western European culture.” Spiller himself was at the forefront of that challenge.

After getting his bachelor’s degree at Penn in 1917, Spiller took time out to serve in the University’s Medical Corps in World War I. Back at Penn, he earned his master’s in 1920 and cast about for a PhD dissertation topic. One of his advisers, Arthur Hobson Quinn, pointed out that American travel writing was an unplowed scholarly field. Spiller reduced that hint to a manageable topic, which he then transformed into his first book, *The American in England During the First Half Century of Independence* (1926). In the process, he discovered that James Fenimore Cooper had been not “merely [a] writer of romances of the wilderness” (i.e., the Leatherstocking Tales), but also the author of five volumes on his travels who merited recognition as “a social and political critic of comparative national cultures.” Spiller managed to get those travel books back into print and went on to write three books of his own about Cooper, including a biography.

Valuable as this work may have been, it left the ambitious young scholar unsatisfied. “The concentration on the work of one author seemed increasingly restrictive,” Spiller later recalled. “I

found myself drawn more deeply into the philosophy of literary history in general and specifically into what seemed to me the as-yet unwritten literary history of the United States.” If modern readers had a flawed perception of a canonical figure like Cooper, imagine what needed to be fixed in the portraits of lesser-known authors, not to mention in the mural of American literature as a whole.

Meanwhile, Spiller was teaching at Swarthmore College outside Philadelphia. During his almost 20 years there, he made what he called “several abortive moves toward other universities.” Nothing worked out, though, until he got a phone call from another Penn mentor, Albert C. Baugh, who invited him to return to his alma mater and help start an interdisciplinary program in American studies.

Back at Penn for good in 1945, he brought with him a project-in-progress: a new literary history of America, by Americans. (The reigning authority was *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, which dated back to 1917.) Wisely, he’d recognized that producing such a work was beyond the capabilities of any one person. He rounded up three co-editors—Willard Thorp, Thomas H. Johnson, and Henry Seidel Canby—and they designed a treatment that would supplement the standard focus on major writers and their masterworks in two ways. First, the LHUS would include “instrument chapters” illuminating such topics as when and how it first became possible for Americans to make a living by their pens, and how books have been

marketed (which is where the material on drugstore paperbacks came in); second, there would be periodic looks at the reception of American literature abroad.

Spiller et al. obtained support from the Rockefeller Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the American Philosophical Society, and lined up Macmillan as publisher. In seeking contributors, they approached not just literary scholars, but also journalists such as H.L. Mencken; creative writers such as Wallace Stegner; poet and Lincoln biographer Carl Sandburg; and eminent historians, including Allan Nevins, Henry Steele Commager, and Eric Goldman. This wide net allowed coverage of subjects that might not otherwise have found a place, such as the New Deal's buoyant effect on the nation's mood during the Depression and the profound disenchantment felt by American Marxists after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact in 1939.

Most LHUS contributors tackled only a chapter apiece, but a few stalwarts took on several, with Spiller setting an example by writing all or portions of eight. (Contributors' names are not found with their chapters, but grouped in a Table of Authors at the back of the book.) A few contributors were important enough in their own right to double as actors in the unfolding history: Mencken, Sandburg, Canby, and critic R.P. Blackmur.

For the sake of a rough uniformity, they all had to submit to being edited for style. Emeritus English Professor Gerald Weales, who is one of the few surviving contributors, recalled in an email that he was given a free hand in writing his chapter on modern drama for the 1974 edition, "and there was no editing of my text." On the other hand, it seems likely that Mencken's chapter on "The American Language" (also the title of a 1919 book by him) was tinkered with—it lacks the high dudgeon to be found in his newspaper columns and books.

In any case, the LHUS showcases plenty of wit and bite. In discussing the novelist Mrs. Lydia Maria Child, George F. Whicher quips: "Born in 1802 into a family of Boston intellectuals ... this lady when hardly out of her teens was producing successful historical fiction by the simple device of confronting herself with a quire of blank paper." (Unless otherwise noted, all LHUS quotations in this article come from the 1974 edition.) Harold W. Thompson's chap-

ter on humor quotes from Artemus Ward's interview with Brigham Young. When informed that Mormon polygamy gave Young access to 80 wives, Ward asked, "How do you like it, as far as you hev got?" And Malcolm Cowley comments slyly on the seesawing nature of American-Soviet literary influences: "O. Henry was another [Russian] favorite, not only with the masses but also with many of the Soviet writers, who studied him for his technique (so that stories with an O. Henry twist were being published in Russia at a time when American short-story writers were imitating Chekhov)."

In two volumes—the first for the text, the second for the bibliography—the LHUS appeared in 1948, to much acclaim: "the history is a landmark and itself becomes a part of our growing tradition," declared the *Saturday Review*. Among the highlights are Spiller's chapter on Emerson and Gilbert Chinard's on "The American Dream."

Emerson meant so much to Spiller that when the LHUS editors divvied up assignments, he "offered to resign if I couldn't have Emerson." In that chapter, Spiller defends the Sage of Concord against complaints about his loose prose style, the pithiest of which is Thomas Carlyle's comparison of the typical Emersonian paragraph to "a beautiful square *bag of duck-shot* held together by canvas." Spiller doesn't deny this and stipulates further that those paragraphs don't always link up very well. "But it would be a mistake," he adds, "to conclude that form is lacking. Each paragraph, each essay, has the structure of the circle containing smaller circles within it and itself contained within larger circles. 'The eye is the first circle,' wrote Emerson in the shortest of his essays; 'the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary form is repeated without end.' His method is organic, a reflection of the structure of the universe as he sees it."

(Spiller had many other trenchant things to say about Emerson, not only in the LHUS but also in "American Literature 1810-1860," the course I took from him as a grad student in the fall of 1965.)

Chinard (1881-1972) was a French-born interpreter of French literature and Franco-American relations who taught at Brown and Princeton. In a passage on Benjamin Franklin from the "Dream" chapter, Chinard



Spiller wrote that "Every generation should produce at least one literary history of the United States."

makes dazzling connections that would have escaped a less cosmopolitan mind:

"[In addition to his *Autobiography*] Franklin also contributed another important element to the composite portrait of America as it appears to European eyes. He stood, even more than [Robert] Fulton, as the embodiment of the spirit, bold in its aims and yet practical, which characterizes American science; and the great English physicist Humphry Davy praised his work as justifying not only pure scientific research, but the application of science to the service of man. Franklin was the first to give the impression that through science America could achieve the impossible. Thus was established a popular tradition which was reinforced through the pseudoscientific tales of Poe and carried out in the novels of Jules Verne, in which Americans conquer the interstellar spaces and travel to the moon. Later, the tradition, already well established, received a new confirmation in the inventions of Edison."

Readers today will have little trouble spotting the LHUS's shortcomings. It contains almost nothing on Native American influences and gives short shrift to blacks (nary a word on the Harlem Renaissance)

and women (only one female contributor was recruited, the historian Adrienne Koch). The book is also dated, though not so much in facts as in interpretation. The section on Hart Crane, for example, opines that “partly in consequence of his early emotional insecurity, he was a homosexual,” whereas now we would assume it was the other way around: that Crane’s early sense of being different—and disapproved of for it—led to his emotional insecurity. We should bear in mind, though, that these blind spots mirror the LHUS’s era, which on the plus side was also blessedly innocent of academic jargon.

An incidental benefit of a book like the LHUS is to whet interest in worthy authors and titles that have fallen by the wayside. And so we have plugs for the young Washington Irving’s waggish *History of New York* (1809), supposedly written by the Dutch historian Diedrich Knickerbocker; Jeremiah Clemens’s *Tobias Wilson* (1865), a novel about Southern Unionists “which deserves to be rescued from the oblivion that has befallen it”; the explorer Clarence King’s nonfiction *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (1872), which is called “completely charming ... exciting, gay, vigorous, witty, and written in polished and perceptive prose” (in 1973, *Mountaineering* was republished as edited by my Penn classmate Barbara Messner Long Gr’75); Robert Herrick’s *Waste* (1924), a novel of “richness and tragic scope” about an engineer disillusioned by the Progressive movement; and *Tristram* (1927), a long poem on the Arthurian legends by Edward Arlington Robinson, said to be so intensely emotional that it “makes us view with critical eyes the analogous achievements of Tennyson, Arnold, Swinburne, and Hardy.”

Occasionally, too, the reader is warned away from a book or even, in the case of John Dewey, a whole body of work. “He had no ear,” Brand Blanshard writes of the philosopher. “He lacked that sense, partly logical, partly aesthetic, of economy of word to thought, which hits an idea off precisely and memorably; there is strangely little that is quotable in all the vast volume of his writing. The literary censor was lax, so lax as to pass innumerable paragraphs and pages that are awkward, verbose, and shuffling.” After that drubbing, the CliffsNotes version of Dewey sounds like the right way to take him, if take him you must.

Prodigious as it was, the LHUS did not fully satisfy Spiller’s urge to put his stamp on his chosen subject. In 1955, he published *The Cycle of American Literature*, a one-man “by-product,” as he called it, of the big book. In *The Cycle*, Spiller recapitulated a theme sounded in the LHUS: that American literature had peaked twice, first in 1835-1855, when Poe, Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman showed that American writers could hold their own with their English cousins; and again in 1915-1935, when Pound, Eliot, Hemingway, Faulkner, Dos Passos, and other Americans were in the vanguard of modernism. The book’s argument, however, may have mattered less than its brisk comprehensiveness. Taking up just over 200 pages in the paperback reprint, *The Cycle* was assigned at my high school as a savvy tour of American writing, from Jonathan Edwards’s sermons to William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha novels.

The first edition of the LHUS had issued an invitation: “Every generation should produce at least one literary history of the United States, for each generation must define the past in its own terms.” But as subsequent editions of the book rolled out—in 1953, ’63, and ’74—the next generation seemed to be dormant. In the 1974 edition, Spiller and company took note of this sluggishness: “At the close of its first quarter-century, *LHUS* has belied its authors’ original pronouncement that ‘each generation must define the past in its own terms.’”

In 1988, the year of Spiller’s death at age 91, the baton finally passed, with the publication of the *Columbia Literary History of the United States*. The Columbia editors accounted for the long delay by contrasting the present-day climate with those in which the *Cambridge History* and the LHUS came out. “There is today no unifying vision of a national identity like that shared by many scholars at the closings of the two world wars,” they wrote. They refrained from imposing a house style on contributors and promised not to “exclude certain writers because of biases involving gender, race, or ethnic and cultural background.” Making good on that pledge, the book’s first chapter, “The Native Voice,” was a survey of Native American storytelling, both oral and written.

In 1992, a Harvard professor named David Perkins published a book called *Is Literary History Possible?* Spoiler alert: he thought not. And to buttress his case, he

categorized the *Columbia History* as “a collection of separate essays [that] deliberately avoids consecutiveness and coherence.” Meanwhile, Cambridge was back in the game with an eight-volume *History of American Literature* (1986-2004), which arrived “dead in the water,” said Elaine Showalter, emeritus professor of English at Princeton, in an e-mail to this writer.

In 2009, Harvard University Press issued *A New Literary History of America*, edited by Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors. Marcus is best known as an erudite rock critic, and the *New Literary History* takes obvious delight in kicking down the barriers between highbrow and pop culture in such chapters as “*Baby Face* is censored” (about cuts made to a racy 1933 Barbara Stanwyck movie), “Bebop,” and “Hurricane Katrina.” The editors justify this eclecticism on the grounds that the *New Literary History* is “a reexamination of the American experience as seen through a literary glass”—in other words, it’s a literary-ish history.

If the index is to be trusted, *The New Literary History*’s sole reference to the LHUS comes in Carrie Tirado Bramen’s essay on the iconoclastic critic Leslie Fiedler. Bramen points out that in a 1949 review for *American Quarterly*, Fiedler dissented from the chorus of praise for the LHUS, attacking it for, in Bramen’s paraphrase, “imposing on American fiction the religion of liberalism with its happy-ending, rags-to-riches narrative, where American literature ‘is not only virile, democratic, and humanitarian,’ but even ‘on the whole optimistic.’”

Yes, Spiller and company can fairly be accused of optimism; and in his last book, *Late Harvest* (1981), Spiller confessed to having thoroughly enjoyed his work on the LHUS and *The Cycle*. “The decade following my return to [Penn] in the fall of 1945,” he wrote, “was the happiest and most productive of my life.”

I doubt that Spiller was much bothered by either the criticisms leveled against the LHUS or its long drift into obsolescence. As he well knew, differentiating itself from its forebears is what every generation is supposed to do. But the notion that literary history itself might not be viable anymore? That, I think, he would have found baffling. ♦

Dennis Drabelle G’66 L’69 is a contributing editor of *The Washington Post Book World*. His most recent book is *The Great American Railroad War*.