American Heroes: Myth and Reality by Marshall W. Fishwick
Review by: Fred D. Kershner, Jr.
Published by: Organization of American Historians
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1898658
Accessed: 27/04/2012 23:28

Professor Fishwick directs his attention to a phenomenon which has attracted much scrutiny of late from other historians, journalists, litterateurs, and social psychologists. He poses three interesting questions: Why do we hero-worship? What is the process by which our heroes are made? Are American heroes different from the general European variety? The answers which he offers the reader would seem to be (for they are not always clear):

(1) Humanity requires new myths to worship as the old gods fade away; there is a need for vicarious release from the enigmas posed endlessly by everyday existence. (2) Men of action (real or symbolic) plus the services of capable "manipulators" plus the concurrence of favorable events combine to produce our heroes. (3) Although American heroes display more activism and physical prowess but less dignity and intellectuality than their European counterparts, otherwise they do not differ greatly.

In general, the foremost American heroes are Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and potentially Franklin D. Roosevelt, Fishwick believes. Passing on to special cases, he views with approval the apotheosizing of Washington, Lee, and Daniel Boone, but looks with less favor upon John Smith, Billy the Kid, Buffalo Bill, and Henry Ford. He concludes his treatment with vignettes of certain hero stereotypes: the self-made man, the folklore hero, the bad man, the movie hero, and the cowboy. In each instance he shows how devoted—or huckstering—publicists have built up and popularized the hero image.

There is always merit in a study which surveys and analyzes critically the recent literature in a field. Those who seek such a convenient summary will find American Heroes useful, although they should be warned to expect little critical analysis. In this era of rising printing costs and harried publishers, one must be chary of condemning historians for inadequate bibliographies and documentation. Yet the failure of the present author to cite secondary materials and unpublished dissertations which obviously were utilized is most unfortunate. Again, one need only compare the account of Billy the Kid on pages 87-88 with that in the Dictionary of American Biography to judge the considerable extent to which paraphrasing has been employed.

Apparently the author has attempted to write a popular version of an intellectual subject, utilizing the structure of a scholarly monograph. One of the undeniable virtues of the popular approach is that it stresses clarity and simplicity of treatment, in contrast to the deadly monotony of the conventional Ph.D. dissertation. But the result in this instance is jerky, muddy, and in general disappointing, as one flits from hackneyed quip to curious fact to platitudinous quotation, and back again. Nor is the work free from printing errors or footnote confusion (chap. 15).
More serious are the occasional impressions of scholarly pretentiousness. We are told: "Like Joseph, Dhruva Karna, and Abe Lincoln, he [Billy the Kid] was an 'Unpromising Hero'" (p. 86). Apart from the fact that there seems to be no such person as Dhruva Karna, it is doubtful if one American reader in a million would gain enlightenment from this strange juxtaposition of examples. On the other hand, José Ortega y Gasset is referred to incorrectly by his matronymic Gasset, and is listed as Ortega y Gasset in the full citation (pp. 224, 238).

This reviewer wonders if every biographer or newspaper reporter who writes with strong approval or disapproval about a human subject is *ipso facto* a hero-maker. Sometimes *American Heroes* seems to give that impression. Also left unanswered is the titular question about the mythical or real character of American heroism. It is too bad that Professor Fishwick did not throw away some of his secondhand generalizations and apply to this important subject more of his own independent judgments and insights.

*University of Wisconsin*  
Fred D. Kershner, Jr.


Fairness requires that this volume be represented for what it is not, as well as for what it is. Though it embraces historical data and theory, and bears a superficial resemblance to intellectual history, it is not history and does not pretend to be. It is, above all, an original philosophical essay, an attempt to present "a view of man's nature illustrated by selected parts of the American experience." The author, a former industrial research engineer, is a member of the philosophy department at Pennsylvania State University.

Professor Anderson's intricate, and not always lucid, thesis seems to run as follows. If man is to realize his free nature he must be willing to face the unknown. This is precisely what the American people did when they ventured into the New World and out on its great frontier. From their frontier experience they gained three insights into the nature of man. First came an exaggerated awareness of self, a widely expanded ego which nourished individualism and personal freedom. This was accompanied by a sense of creative power that led to the mastery of the environment. Something more was required, however, for individualism and enterprise bred conflict, tension, and partiality. This final something was a sense of common humanity which served as a basis for social organization. In creating formal institutions Americans understood that the good society could not be attained "by the imposition of abstract forms," but only through "the progressive accumulation of created human values." Out of the crucible of experience they devel-