THE AMERICAN DREAM

Lic. Dorothy Stark de Valverde

"The American dream" is a phrase which has appeared in songs, plays, and literature. Among Americans, at least, the phrase is employed and comprehended. It is an abstract concept which has significance because people understand its meaning, believe in its existence, and work to obtain it. Lionel Trilling remarked that "ours is the only nation that prides itself upon a dream and gives its name to one, 'the American dream.'"

Certainly the dream is not static and changes in each period and with succeeding generations. The dreams of the Pilgrims and Puritans differed radically from those of the nineteenth century frontiersmen or the twentieth century suburbanites. Even within a given era, the dream has meant things to different people. Therefore, a single definition cannot be universally applicable, although the dream could be explained as the goal of obtaining a vast economic and spiritual fulfillment. According to the epoch and the individual, the emphasis of the dream will shift between the material, physical and spiritual objectives of life.

An explanation for the origin of the American dream is that the earliest Americans were convinced that they and their country were unique in the world. This feeling of superiority blossomed and spread until it became the basis of a national myth, which can be referred to as the American Adam Myth in the Garden of Eden. This myth that Americans were the new Adams and America the new Eden had a powerful influence upon literature, politics, and history. The myth is one of the definitive factors in the American dream, and an element which is essential to the understanding of most American literature.

The American Adam myth dates back to early colonial times when the Puritans fled the persecution of James I and Charles I to arrive at the new Canaan. While there were
also immigrants of diverse faiths, Puritan “endurance and their eventual success made them... the fathers of the American way of life.” 3 The Puritans came to America due to religious persecution and “from the very beginning (they)... showed some of the traits which they have passed on into the American character. Theirs was God’s own country because they were God’s chosen people.” Their fierce individualism was essential to them for success and salvation. If necessity demanded group cooperation for survival, they complied but “no man, but only God, they recognized as their superior; tribulation they accepted, yet not in any spirit of complacency but in the certainty that the need for tribulation had to be overcome.” 4

The Puritans were the new Adams in the Garden of Eden. As early as 1657 this idea was alluded to in Thomas Morton’s book, The English Canaan, satirizing the extreme aspects of the Puritans. Certainly for the Puritans “the land that they occupied was tabula rasa on which they could write what they willed, without hindrance from the forms and traditions of an older society.” 5

Their primary goal of salvation dictated that the Puritans relegate or justify every act in relation to their faith. A man was expected to labor in the vineyards of the Lord and to show the fruits of his labor. The Puritan, then, did not work merely to survive or become rich; he labored because God had blessed work and ordained it. A Christian had to be a good steward with his wealth, and so he lived frugally and reinvested his profits to double and triple them. The ethic of the dignity of labor and the worthiness of the fruits of one’s labor can be seen as originating with early American Puritans. 6

Another aspect of the Puritan mentality which was shared by many other settlers, was the conviction of self-righteousness. To an extent this was a by-product of extreme individuality, but the religious origin of their righteousness should not be minimized since it served as a justification for extreme measures, even to the execution of one’s fellow men, as in the New England witch trials. The trials really marked the decline of the power of the New England Puritans like Cotton Mather, and after 1693 there was an increasing influence from Enlightenment ideas, with their emphasis upon the rationality and purposefulness of the laws of the universe. John Locke’s “words were everywhere and read by everyone, his influence upon the deistic thinking of American readers such as Jefferson and Franklin” was surely “greater than of any other thinker.” 7

In 1688 Locke wrote that all men are in a “state of perfect freedom to order their actions... within the bounds of the law of nature.” All men are born in a state of equality in nature. Men’s reason, rather than sacred revelation, must determine their acts and relationships. For mutual protection, Locke said that men form a compact by which they relinquish some freedom for the good of the community, but when rulers act “contrary to their trust... they forfeit the power people had put into their hands.” 8

Locke’s concept that men are born free and equal and must be governed by the natural law of reason gave a powerful justification to the individuality and superiority which most American settlers already cherished for religious reasons or on account of their own dauntless struggles to survive. At the same time the social compact idea fitted the American mentality perfectly; in fact, though not in law, most of the colonists had long governed their communities due to their great distance from England and the “salutary neglect” which had prevailed during Walpole’s and Pitt’s governments. In most areas, circumstances had demanded that the communities determine their laws and objectives and work harmoniously together. While the crown colonies were headed by royal governors, often their salaries depended upon the settlers’ approval of their rule. 9 The fact that America was a virgin continent lacking any political tradition further strengthened the theory that free equal men could create a here—to—for non—existent, just and reasonable government in accordance with natural, universal laws.

Jean Jacques Rousseau was also influential in American thought. In his Social Contract (1761), Locke’s main propositions were utilized. But while Locke regarded the
primitive man as defenseless and in need of protection, Rousseau converted the lowly man into a virtuous and noble savage whom civilization had degraded from his original free state. Rousseau wrote that “Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains.” The logical corollary was that it was necessary for man to break the chains to inaugurate a free society of equals. 10 For the American colonists, Rousseau’s view of the noble savage was adapted to apply not to the American Indians, but to the expatriate European pioneer and frontiersman who existed in communion with nature. Both Rousseau’s and Locke’s justifications of rebellion against an unjust ruler were utilized in the American Revolution.

The primary American exponent of the new age of reason was Benjamin Franklin, born in 1706 in Boston, a Puritan soapmaker’s son. From an apprentice printer he rose to edit the popular Poor Richard’s Almanac, published other magazines, made several inventions, helped found a university, assisted in writing the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. His widely read maxims for success were a combination of common sense, perseverance, frugality and morality: God helps those who help themselves. A penny saved is a penny earned. Early to bed and early to rise make a man healthy, wealthy and wise. His ideas and outstanding career made him a model for Americans, and presented a unique combination of the practical, positive, humane age of reason, yoked to a Puritan impulse to work hard, excel and attain monetary success. 11

Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, a leader of the American Revolution, and third President, synthesized and popularized beliefs which further molded national opinion toward the acceptance of the Adam myth. He had absolute faith in the common man close to nature: “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people.” He believed that the people were “the safest and most virtuous” depository of power. “Our governments will remain virtuous for many centuries as long as they remain chiefly agricultural...When they get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, they will become corrupt as in Europe.” 12

Thus the American myth was expanded from the days of the rugged, righteous Puritans up to the days of independence. The American was a free natural man, in communion with nature and removed from corrupting influences. His purity and wisdom guaranteed the rights of his acts. 13

With the 1828 election of President Andrew Jackson, the self—made man born in a log cabin, American democracy became immortalized in a philosophy which endured long beyond the tenets on which it was founded, Jacksonian Democracy was an extension of Jeffersonian Democracy; the theory of the latter became tangible reality when all free American males had the vote and could buy land at $ 1.25 an acre. 14 Old class distinctions became temporarily irrelevant, not because of theoretical aversion to class, but because class membership was in a state of flux. Americans loved Jackson because he had been poor but was no longer. While Jackson’s six Presidential predecessors had belonged to an aristocratic dynasty, after him it was difficult to become President if one had not been born in a log cabin. 15 This tremendous class mobility endured through the gold rush and until the frontier was closed after the Civil War. A result of these fluctuating classes and of fortunes won and lost overnight, was a minimizing of class differences and a lack of aristocratic cultural tradition.

Thus the election of Jackson marked the victory of democracy and the common man. This, preceded by the Puritan ethic, the philosophy of the Enlightenment, the victorious Revolution, and Jefferson’s republican ideas, had all encouraged Americans to embrace the Adam myth. While European romantic poets dreamed about a Superman who attained total fulfillment, liberty, and purity, Americans were certain that this ideal could be achieved by every American. The historian George Bancroft perceived the Jackson triumph as a purifying death blow to European culture in America. He saw Washington as a “child of nature” who had begun the American war for liberation, but
not until Jackson had Americans had time to settle in the virgin interior of America in
total union with nature. Jackson, another "child of nature" for Bancroft, was a
self-made man who was virtually unlettered and untainted by European thought and
tradition, for which reasons he was selected as the leader image of America. 16

In summary, the American Adam and Garden of Eden theory was grounded upon
the following concepts:

1) American political freedom had destroyed the pernicious, corrupt, European
traditions and institutions, permitting the American to begin anew, as a new-born, pure
man.

2) The American democratic system had established a harmonious, benevolent
society—a new Garden of Eden—in which Americans could flourish.

3) The "limitless" expanse of virgin territory, as opposed to the confining,
degrading, urban life, provided the essential fountain of spiritual strength through union
with nature to nourish the new Adam. 17
FOOTNOTES


5. Ibid., p. 48.

6. Ibid. p. 41.

7. Ibid., pp. 51,149.


   Noble, The Eternal Adam, p. 5.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


