
A Walter McDougall Symposium

'The Backside of the Universe': McDougall's Throes of Democracy

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Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1852 novel, *The Blithedale Romance*, has been overshadowed for many years by *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*. Perhaps its unsparing analysis of the psychology of utopian reformers still strikes a little too close to home for it to make its way onto reading lists at most schools and colleges. Perhaps it still tells us something too true about who we are. It ought to be better known if for no other reason than for Hawthorne's sophisticated handling of America's public and private face in the mid-nineteenth century—an insight perhaps unique in the nation's literary canon. In a meditative chapter simply called "The Hotel," Hawthorne's narrator, Miles Coverdale, takes up temporary residence in town, having left behind the utopian community of Blithedale (a stand-in for the real Brook Farm). From his back room on the hotel's third floor, away from the noise and bustle of the street, Coverdale, seated comfortably in a rocking chair, with a pipe in one hand and a boring book in the other, looks out his window onto one "little portion of the backside of the universe." We could think of him as Jimmy Stewart in a nineteenth-century version of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*.

Walter McDougall quotes from this passage about a third of the way through *Throes of Democracy: The American Civil War Era, 1829-*

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1877, his recent *tour de force* of the unmaking of the United States in the fifty years surrounding the Civil War. He praises the sonorities of Hawthorne's prose. And it is indeed a beautifully rendered passage. Coverdale can see the backs of new, fashionable houses. He notices a few fruit trees, kept alive in the bitter New England climate only through human ingenuity, and some busy birds and a cat with murderous intent. The entire paragraph, from which McDougall quotes just over half, makes it clear why he admires its rhythm and its eye for detail:

Bewitching to my fancy are all those nooks and crannies, where Nature, like a stray partridge, hides her head among the long-established haunts of men! It is likewise to be remarked, as a general rule, that there is far more of the picturesque, more truth to native and characteristic tendencies, and vastly greater suggestiveness, in the back view of a residence, whether in town or country, than in its front. The latter is always artificial; it is meant for the world's eyes, and is therefore a veil and a concealment. Realities keep in the rear, and put forward an advance-guard of show and humbug. The posterior aspect of any old farm-house, behind which a railroad has unexpectedly been opened, is so different from that looking upon the immemorial highway, that the spectator gets new ideas of rural life and individuality, in the puff or two of steam-breath which shoots him past the premises. In a city, the distinction between what is offered to the public, and what is kept for the family, is certainly not less striking.

Americans not "somehow released from the human condition."

From this point on in *Throes of Democracy*, McDougall himself seems perched at that window. He would never claim to be a modern Hawthorne, but like the novelist he observes the back of American history, the parts we hide from public view. It's not all sin and squalor back there. It's just not meant for public display. After quoting from this section and contrasting Hawthorne's love of history with Emerson's open contempt for the past, McDougall notes that while Hawthorne embraced American democracy and individualism he "could not bring himself to believe Americans were somehow released from the human condition."

This passage from *The Blithedale Romance* might just hold the key to what has become McDougall's characteristic approach to history. The historian shares with the novelist an assumption out of which grows a distinctive way of handling America's past. They share a key principle of observation, a presupposition about how human history works, or at least what is most likely to be true about our ancestors given what we know about human nature.

Hawthorne, or at least Coverdale, calls it a “general rule.” This rule assumes that the backside of human civilization contains “far more of the picturesque, more truth to native and characteristic tendencies, and vastly greater suggestiveness” than does the front. The front is “always artificial,” is “meant for the world’s eyes,” and offers “a veil and a concealment” while the rear holds the “realities.” In short, the front is “show and humbug.” Here is McDougall’s dominant theme of “pretense.”

It doesn’t take McDougall long to show his reader that the past we prefer to hide from view is indeed “picturesque” and “suggestive.” This is a rollicking book, and some of the best anecdotes appear in the 145 pages of often sly, humorous, even self-deprecating footnotes. They are not to be missed. But if this were all the “back yard” McDougall intended to expose, his book would be little more than a highly entertaining romp through America’s boisterous past. McDougall’s talent for spotting quirky bits of forgotten history is obvious, but he also brings a sobering moral purpose to his task. Along with the “picturesque,” he, like Hawthorne, finds a hidden history “more true to native and characteristic tendencies.” What we prefer to keep from public display (and even from ourselves) is “more true” to who we really are. The front yard is all humbug. The back yard gives us a better shot at finding the truth. Even raising the possibility that American history has a “back yard” is provocative in itself. Consider how many naïve, earnest conservatives would not be able to admit this possibility. Consider how many cynical, calculating neoconservatives sell millions of books that ignore that back yard.

McDougall knows that not every secret is a “dirty little secret.” Some secrets, some pretenses, smooth the sharp edges off life in this otherwise prickly world. Some secrets we deliberately keep from children until they gain enough experience and wisdom to handle the truth. My parents’ finances were certainly secrets in my home growing up, not because they had something to hide—they didn’t—but because some knowledge is not public, even within the intimate circle of the family. And I certainly didn’t dare get caught in my parents’ bedroom. But their reticence wasn’t in any way what we call “pretense.” They simply understood the difference between the public and the private. Nor is the back yard necessarily filled with vice and trash. We excuse the soldier who boasts to his comrades about how brave he is or spins yarns for the folks back home

Some pretenses help keep us civilized.

or even for himself about why it is he fights. As these few examples remind us, there may be necessary pretenses that keep us civilized, that keep us wrapped in drapery fitted for fallen men who otherwise could never stand each other's moral nakedness.

But if we concede that some pretenses are harmless or even helpful—that there might be something we could call the “white lies” of American history—then we should also acknowledge that other pretenses impede self-knowledge and jeopardize our national character. This was certainly the case in antebellum America. McDougall's list of that age's pretenses is long: Americans pretended they were in control of their destiny when they were not; proclaimed their love of equality while the “common man” wanted to be anything but common; attended high-brow symphony concerts when they would rather be at the circus; avowed their love of the past while striving to escape history; and achieved their foreign-policy objectives the way any other nation did but called it “Manifest Destiny.”

Pretense dangerous when it hinders soul-searching.

McDougall's unmasking of national pretense provokes all sorts of hard questions about the American identity. Hard questions lead to hard truths, and the “peddlers of pretense” will always resist and denounce the “truth tellers.” Public pretense cloaks private anxiety. In short, American pretense enables us to “feel good about doing well”—a memorable phrase McDougall uses to link *Throes of Democracy* back to his preceding work, *Freedom Just Around the Corner*. As one Civil War financier promised, we can have “patriotism and profit.” We can have patriotism on public display in the front yard and profit tucked away in the back. Doing so doesn't make us less than human. But it certainly doesn't make us more than human. And the danger comes when such pretense in politics and economics—and the rhetorical pretense necessary to dress it all up—prevents us from doing any soul-searching as a nation. It prevented us from doing so, McDougall concludes, even in the wake of the Civil War. And if that catastrophe couldn't shake us free from pretense, what experience could? What amount of suffering could ever lead us into truth? Just how resilient are our pretenses?

The very attributes that made America had the power to unmake it. The Founders failed to bequeath a unifying vision and faith to which all Americans could or did subscribe. Nineteenth-century Americans could not answer two defining questions: “What was the United States all about? What was the purpose of liberty?” Thinking back to *Freedom Just Around the Corner* (and

drawing from David Hackett Fischer's indispensable *Albion's Seed*) McDougall recalls that Americans never did agree about liberty, from the moment colonists first stepped foot in Massachusetts, Virginia, and Pennsylvania, or headed for the frontier. But if Americans ever admitted this lack of cohesive vision, there would be nothing else to hold such a disparate nation of hustlers together. The only "glue holding the Union together was pretense." Perhaps any attempt to build a single civic religion was doomed to fail and ought to have failed as the greatest pretense of all. Competing visions of the meaning of America, and competing civil religions, led to violence and then to fratricidal war.

Founders failed to bequeath a unifying vision.

Perhaps the most refreshing aspect of McDougall's work is his refusal to tell a smug story of national progress. He begins the book with portents of fire, an eclipse, famine (in Ireland), war, and again fire. America shares in these disasters. If history has winners, it also has losers—even in America. If history adds to our collective wealth, security, and prestige, it also subtracts—even in America. If history has its heroic triumphs, it also has its tragedy—even in America. Bit by bit, McDougall unmasks the pretense of exceptionalism. If our national history teaches us anything, it ought to show us that so-called exceptionalism can never mean that Americans are exempt from original sin, self-interest, the limits of power and material resources, or, in short, that we alone among the peoples of the world escape from being part of the City of Man. What McDougall says of Hawthorne is true of the historian himself: he, too, cannot "bring himself to believe that Americans [are] somehow released from the human condition."

It would be unjust to McDougall to leave the impression that he is a debunker. This is far from the case. His admiration for America and his delight in telling her story come through in page after page of *Throes of Democracy*. The American achievement is real and, yes, in many ways even unique. A mere debunker would take perverse satisfaction in exposing America's sin and hypocrisy. Instead, McDougall shows us a more human, recognizable, and uncomfortable past. It is a more complicated past than the defenders of American pretense will ever acknowledge. Is McDougall's scholarship subversive? To a degree it is. But it subverts only those myths that keep America from national self-knowledge and from the national adulthood that such wisdom offers us.

McDougall subverts myths that keep America from self-knowledge.