

RANDOLPH BOURNE

1886-1918

IN THE 1920S AND 30S, MANY WRITERS AND INTELLECTUALS REMEMBERED the First World War as a tragic, even pointless error; but during the four long years of the "senseless slaughter," as Ernest Hemingway called it, few of them publicly opposed the war. Bertrand Russell, who lost his Cambridge University fellowship and went to prison because of war resistance, was a dissenter; so was Randolph Bourne, who endured harassment and neglect because of his public opposition to American intervention. The theme of his essays, critical of Woodrow Wilson and the war fever, was summarized in an ironic phrase, "War is the health of the State."

In the postwar decade, Bourne was a guiding spirit for young writers and artists in Greenwich Village and influenced the "new" *Dial* magazine, 1920-29, edited by an admirer Schofield Thayer. Since then, such diverse social critics as Theodore Dreiser and John Dos Passos, Edward Dahlberg and Noam Chomsky have regarded Bourne as a model of honesty and personal courage and as an intellectual hero of this century.

Born in Bloomfield, New Jersey, on May 30, 1886, Randolph Bourne was physically disfigured at birth and progressively deformed later by spinal tuberculosis, but this deformity seldom impeded his vigorous, multi-faceted early career. After high school, where he indicated a talent for writing and a keen interest in the social sciences, he worked in factories and offices in New Jersey and New York City for four years before entering Columbia University on scholarship in 1909. Harsh conditions among workers and the precariousness of their lives shaped the sensibility of the young writer and prompted his commitment to socialism during his undergraduate years.

In 1913, an article on youth in *Atlantic Monthly* brought Bourne to the attention of editors and readers; that summer, he

completed an M.A. degree at Columbia and left on a traveling fellowship to Europe. He returned from there on the eve of the war, having witnessed the chaos that led to "the guns of August," 1914. For the next three years he worked hard, but unsuccessfully, to keep America neutral; and his essays between April 1917 and the armistice in 1918 charted the effects of the war fever on the youthful spirit of the times, and prophesied the disillusionment that was to characterize the post-war period. He died during the flu epidemic of December 1918 at 33 years of age.

"Call this thing that goes on in the modern schoolroom schooling, if you like. Only don't call it education." This was the first of several "disagreeable truths" that Bourne preached to his readers, in this case from the pages of the first issue of the *New Republic* magazine, November 7, 1914; over the next four years, until his premature death, he applied his vigorous intelligence to American politics and culture in a manner that was both original and prophetic. In the pages of the "old" *Dial* and the *Seven Arts*, he stood almost alone in condemning America's entry into World War I. In essays on education and the State, on the "new" poetry, fiction, and film, he also left a unique record of one man's struggle against intellectual conformity and the war-making state.

An admirer of William James and a student of John Dewey, Bourne brought a wide range of interests and experience to his discussion of "trans-national America," a country shaped by the immigrant migrations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His reflections on the promises and perils of the American experience focused on institutions such as the schools and the university, as well as on the arts—the poetry of Vachel Lindsay and Amy Lowell, the fiction of Willa Cather and Theodore Dreiser, the art of the cinema. He embraced early Modernism as an appropriate response to the new century and as a corrective to the cold intellectualism of the 19th century social engineers.

For Bourne the new pragmatism, in the writings of John Dewey, who supported the war, simply revived the old hazards of Puritanism, with its insensitivity to feeling and its self-righteousness.

Such forces, masked as modern liberalism, squandered America's emotional capital, Bourne said, and perpetuated old errors. In sinning against the spirit of American promise, the social philosophers guided the nation "through sheer force of ideas into what the other nations entered only through predatory craft or popular hysteria or militarist madness." For Bourne, America's active participation on the side of Great Britain and France ended any chance of its providing any balance in an unstable world.

Bourne opposed the war not as an isolationist or idealist, but as an enlightened realist, since America's military involvement prevented it from serving as an arbiter between the Allies and the Central Powers. In "Below the Battle," he described a young man victimized by the intellectual and social forces of a nation at war. Though not afraid to die for his country, the youth obviously had no hatred of the enemy, Bourne argued, "even when the government decided that such animus is necessary to carry out its theories of democracy and the future organization of the world." Conscripted to fight, the draftee will go, but in the work of annihilation his youthful skepticism will turn to bitterness, Bourne said. And so it did.

In the midst of the war, Bourne came to understand the excesses of the modern state and the consequences for peacetime, especially the usurpation of the individual conscience by institutions established during times of stress. Under such tyranny, he argued, the desire for personal freedom becomes the impersonal instinct of the herd for conformity, creating a "conscience" no longer capable of distinguishing between good and evil, but only between what is acceptable to the state and what is unacceptable. His theme was to recur in numerous works later in the century, in such diverse writings as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Albert Camus's *The Rebel*, and Gordon Zahn's *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars*. In the Red Scare of 1919, when American radicals and labor agitators were imprisoned and exiled, Bourne's worst fears were confirmed.

In writing about cultural issues, Bourne drew upon his knowledge in many areas, the philosophy of education, adolescent psychology, political theory, and literary criticism. His artistic

sensibility, attentive to the new directions in music and poetry, as well as fiction and film, enabled him to absorb the full impact of the war, when many of his contemporaries ignored its aesthetic and moral implications.

Bourne's portraits of young conscripts in his essays, for example, strongly resemble the fictional characters in the novels of the "lost generation" shortly afterward. And there are close similarities between the conscripts described in his anti-war essays and the three young Americans in John Dos Passos's novel *Three Soldiers* (1921), Frederick Henry in Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), and the disillusioned and psychologically troubled narrator of Robert Graves's memoir, *Goodbye to All That* (1929). Though older by several years, Bourne spoke a language similar to that of the soldiers in Wilfred Owen's ironic poems, "Futility" and "Dulce et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori" (It is sweet and just to die for one's country).

In his honesty, "his relying on analysis rather than on rationalizations or ideologies," as Olaf Hansen has said, Bourne focused his attention on immediate experience rather than on abstract concepts or preconceived ideas. He treated culture and society as something lived rather than as something passively accepted.

A posthumously published "The History of a Literary Radical" described the intellectual tradition, from Thomas Paine to William James, that sustained Bourne in his social criticism. He called it "the new classicism," combining literary art and social thought, which he thought held promise for the future:

Finding little in the American tradition that is not tainted with sweetness and light and burdened with the terrible patronage of bourgeois society, the new classicist will yet rescue Thoreau and Whitman and Mark Twain and try to tap through time a certain eternal human tradition of abounding vitality and moral freedom and so build out the future.

Bourne, a model for later social critics, redeemed the times by appreciating what the times made available, while refusing to be their prisoner.

BY RANDOLPH BOURNE

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ABOUT RANDOLPH BOURNE

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