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Source: *Journal of American Studies*, Aug., 1991, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Aug., 1991), pp. 259-266

Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the British Association for American Studies

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27555487>

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special dispensation to question and criticize the norms of her society. But the sanction that she thought she possessed to articulate the possibility of social change is a qualified one. An individual so compromised in social terms cannot be “the destined prophetess” and so Hester must resign herself to the roles of advisor and comforter, and to the perspective of the critic rather than the reformer.

Where Pearl and Hester find personal liberation within the restraints imposed by society, Dimmesdale finds himself enslaved by these social definitions. His words and actions are interpreted by the community so that they always offer proof of his reputed sanctity and godliness. Simply by confessing his sin, in the knowledge that his listeners will misinterpret the truth, he converts his own words into falsehoods. The awareness that he can so easily and hypocritically exploit his audience in this way is Dimmesdale’s most exquisite torture. Like the brutalized Southerner described in “Chiefly about War-Matters,” who has such urgent need of moral and intellectual education, Dimmesdale too requires the “education of the heart” that would enable him to act as a responsible being. The freedom to take responsibility for themselves is what liberates Hester and Pearl from psychological enslavement; the opportunity for self-determination on a national scale is what may liberate America into genuine democracy. Certainly, it is the inability to “own” himself that keeps Hawthorne’s bond-servant in the shadow of slavery.

## Frederick Lewis Allen’s *Only Yesterday* and the Idea of the Decade

STEVEN BIEL

*Newsweek*, in a slightly tongue-in-cheek attempt to get a jump on the competition, boldly proclaimed on 4 January 1988 that “The 80s Are Over.” The magazine’s cover featured Garry Trudeau’s character Duke as an obviously despondent investor slouched beneath the phrase “Greed Goes Out of Style.” Bill Barol, the article’s author, explained that it was legitimate to make these sweeping claims because “Decades are not a function of calendar time. They are trends, values and associations, bundled up and tied together in the national memory.” In fact, he continued, the “peculiar amalgam that we now think of as the ’80s lasted six years, 11 months and 15 days, finally collapsing with the Dow on 19 Oct. 1987.” Barol did not think to ask the next logical question: why talk about decades at all? The construct of the decade is so deeply ingrained in the historical consciousness of Americans that it has become a ritual for the popular magazines,

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television news, and commercial dailies to offer up end-of-the-decade reviews that neatly package recent history and predict the near future.<sup>1</sup>

When did the idea of the decade take hold? Why is it such a standard feature of popular historical understanding in the United States? Why, besides professional historians who frequently struggle with questions of periodization, do Americans tend to think in terms of decades? While it is impossible to locate the exact origins of this way of conceptualizing history, it seems that the roots of a mass consciousness of the decade are to be found in the “1920s,” or more precisely, in the *idea* of the 1920s that emerged during the Great Depression.

No single text was more important in imparting this consciousness than Frederick Lewis Allen’s 1931 best-seller *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen-Twenties*. Allen, of course, did not discover the decade, and he had a number of recent popular histories as models for his own book. A contemporary reviewer for *The Bookman* noted in 1926 that “The decade, whether of one color or another, whether at the turn of the century or earlier, has become current in recent publications.”<sup>2</sup> But *Only Yesterday*, which sold over half a million copies in twenty-five years and remains in print, set the standard for the decade-in-review in its literary and historical approaches toward the immediate past.<sup>3</sup>

What is most remarkable about *Only Yesterday* is not its theme of constant change; it is, more precisely, Allen’s presentation and interpretation of change – his unspoken ideas about historical process. The story of the 1920s, in Allen’s scheme, began and ended with catastrophic events. The decade was bracketed by the First World War and the stock market crash, two moments of crisis that lend a certain legitimacy to the conception of the 1920s as a distinct period of history and have sent journalist-historians searching for similar events with which to bracket decades ever since.<sup>4</sup> Allen used the war to account for everything that followed and thus supplied “a pattern which at least masquerades as history,” to

<sup>1</sup> Bill Barol, “The Eighties Are Over,” *Newsweek*, 4 Jan. 1988, 40–48. Subsequent 1980s retrospectives included special issues of *Life*, *People*, and *TV Guide* in the fall and winter of 1989, and features in *Esquire*, *Glamour*, *Essence*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *Christianity Today*, *Business Week*, *Discover*, *Seventeen*, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, and *Sport*. *Life*’s first decade-in-review issue appeared in 1940. A survey of the *Readers’ Guide to Periodical Literature* suggests that the “1960s” produced the most retrospectives to date. It has become increasingly common in these journalistic histories to hint at problems in writing about decades and then to ignore such caveats completely.

<sup>2</sup> “In Brief Review,” *The Bookman*, October 1926, 236. Interestingly, the *Reader’s Guide* did not list any articles about decades until 1940.

<sup>3</sup> David M. Kennedy, “Revisiting Frederick Lewis Allen’s *Only Yesterday*,” *Reviews in American History*, 14 (1986), 309.

<sup>4</sup> *Life*, for example, noted in 1940 that “More than a calendar decade, the 1930s were an era – with precise chronological limits. The era began on Oct. 29, 1929, with the stock-market crash and ended on Sept. 3, 1939, with Great Britain’s declaration of war on Adolf Hitler.” The article then cited Allen’s sequel to *Only Yesterday* – *Since Yesterday: The Nineteen-Thirties in America, September 3, 1929 – September 3, 1939* – and noted its “even neater historical bracketing.” See “The Thirties: An Album,” *Life*, 26 Feb. 1940, 67. Barol’s use of the 1987 stock market crash to end the 1980s in the *Newsweek* retrospective suggests an attempt to tap into the popular conception of the 1920s.

use his own self-deprecating phrase. Change did have a pattern in *Only Yesterday*. The events of the decade were an evolving response to the war, and Allen treated “the fundamental trends in our national life and national thought during the nineteen-twenties” as synonymous with “the changing state of the public mind.”<sup>5</sup>

The most dramatic change in the public mind occurred at the beginning of *Only Yesterday* with the shift from “idealism” to “realism” or “disillusionment.” Indeed, disillusionment functioned as a kind of constant by which Allen explained the entire sequence of developments that comprised the rest of the decade. “The word disillusionment has been frequently employed in this history,” he admitted at the end of the book, “for in a sense disillusionment (except about business and the physical luxuries and improvements which business would buy) was the keynote of the nineteen-twenties.” This underlying public mood remained steady throughout the decade and was “only briefly” interrupted by the “passions” surrounding the Sacco-Vanzetti case.<sup>6</sup> By describing the deepest change first, Allen could arrange *Only Yesterday* as a chronological and thematic progression from one news story or fad to the next. Disillusionment made the public’s attention span extremely short, which accounted for the rapidity of change on the surface. Allen presented every event from the Red Scare to the Mah Jong craze, the Harding scandals, and the Florida land boom as a momentary preoccupation that disappeared with some new item of interest. Despite his modesty, therefore, Allen implicitly suggested a direct correspondence between his arrangement of themes and an actual linear progression of the public mind from one concern to the next.

Throughout *Only Yesterday*, change was described as unified movement. As the story opened, a “[n]ot yet disillusioned... nation welcome[d] its heroes.” The Red Scare waned in the summer of 1920 when “there were at least other things to compete for the attention of the country.” F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *This Side of Paradise* “caused a shudder to run down the national spine.” The Harding scandals provoked little more than the raising of the “collective eyebrow.” By the spring of 1922, “radio had become a craze – as much talked about as Mah Jong was to be the following year or cross-word puzzles the year after.” In the midst of the Big Bull Market, “the public was in a mood to forgive every sin committed in the holy name of business.”<sup>7</sup> Through the construct of a public mind, Allen conceived of the historical process as a function of unity rather than conflict. David Kennedy has pointed out the urban, eastern, middle-class bias of *Only Yesterday* – a bias captured in Allen’s observation that “everybody wanted to be modern.”<sup>8</sup> But behind this bias was a strong sense of nationalism and an unwillingness to recognize permanent social, economic, political, regional, racial, ethnic, or religious tensions. *Only Yesterday* offered an *e pluribus unum* view of

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen-Twenties* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931), xiv.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 25, 77, 238, 86.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 10, 70, 91, 145, 168, 169.

<sup>8</sup> Kennedy, 314–16; Allen, 112.

history in which the public mind might experience disillusionment but never disintegration.<sup>9</sup>

Allen's concerns about unity help explain his ambivalence toward the consumer culture he perceptively identified with the 1920s. He criticized "ballyhoo" and noted with some alarm "the unparalleled rapidity and unanimity with which millions of men and women turned their attention, their talk, and their emotional interest upon a series of tremendous trifles." Yet he also valued the unifying effects of this culture. Standardization and the dissemination of middle-class mores reduced conflict, eroded parochialism and, for his immediate purposes, allowed him to speak of a monolithic public mind. In his one vague attempt to locate the origins of the new mass culture, Allen found justification for *Only Yesterday's* approach to history. "The national mind had become as never before an instrument upon which a few men could play. And these men were learning ... to play upon it in a new way – to concentrate upon *one tune at a time*."<sup>10</sup> If there was something disconcerting about the commercialization and centralization of cultural production, Allen found compensation in the apparent order this brought to American life and the historical process. By making it possible to think, speak, and write in terms of passing national attention to the latest fad or news, the maturing consumer culture created the conditions out of which the popular idea of the decade could take hold. In this sense, *Only Yesterday* owed its existence to ballyhoo. It is hard to imagine a book of its kind appearing before 1925.

Allen's notion of a public mind was central to his understanding of the decade as "a distinct epoch in American history." By casting history as a function of national temperament, he elevated the significance of the bracketing events of war and panic. These catastrophes produced or at least expedited dramatic collective mood swings and gave the decade that fell in between a distinctive personality. In the case of the 1920s, this personality was not especially pleasant. "If the decade was ill-mannered," Allen wrote, "it was also unhappy." But the salient feature of Allen's history was not its minor tone of criticism; rather it was the personification of the process itself. Historical time had a human face, a familiarity, order, and predictability. Bad moods gave way after ten or eleven years to better moods. Disillusionment, even without the crash, could not have lasted much longer. "Apparently," said Allen in a radio broadcast to promote

<sup>9</sup> The application of labels for decades, regardless of the positive or negative connotations of these labels, enhances the sense of social cohesion: for example, the "Roaring Twenties," the "Turbulent Sixties," or the "Me Decade." As the editors of *Life* wrote in 1969, "It is tempting for historians – and perhaps even more so for journalists – to paste a specific label on a decade. *Life* has labeled this special double issue on the 1960s 'The Decade of Tumult and Change.' It certainly was that." See "A Divided Decade: The '60s," *Life*, 26 Dec. 1969, 8. Even this label of a "divided decade" implied shared experiences, common responses, and unified movement from "a brisk feeling of hope" to "a growing swell of demands for extreme and immediate change" or, more succinctly, "turbulence."

<sup>10</sup> Allen, 186, 189; Kennedy, 312. The emphasis is Allen's.

*Only Yesterday*, “the collapse of the stock market had merely hastened the ending of an era.”<sup>11</sup>

From the vantage point of 1931, this was a reassuring view of history. Allen ended *Only Yesterday* with a slight admission of uncertainty buried in a metaphor that confirmed the regularity of the historical process. “The psychological climate was changing,” he wrote of 1930, “the ever-shifting currents of American life were turning into new channels.” The currents, however, did not shift randomly. They flowed together in what Allen called the “stream of time,” and the unified entity of the 1920s was yielding to something that he had already labelled “the nineteen-thirties.” Allen’s genius was his ability to explain “great change” in terms of order, largely through the complementary devices of the public mind and the decade. “[T]he United States of 1931 was a different place from the United States of the Post-war Decade,” he concluded; “there was no denying that. An old order was giving place to new.”<sup>12</sup>

Order and stable change were Allen’s keynotes. Like the New Deal post office murals that Karal Ann Marling has examined, *Only Yesterday* served its Depression-era audiences as a form of “social therapy.” Allen carefully dispensed with ambiguity, loose strands, lingering tensions, and furnished instead a firm sense of closure and progress. Hence his verdict on the Scopes trial: “Theoretically, Fundamentalism had won, for the law stood. Yet really Fundamentalism had lost.” Even disillusionment was a comforting interpretive framework for readers living amid the uncertainties of the Depression. Not only was disillusionment a unified response to the war and a fixed state of mind in the 1920s, but it was now definitively a thing of the past. The 1920s, neatly brought to a close at the end of *Only Yesterday*, was the decade of pessimism and the real period of depression. The 1930s, by contrast, would be a period of resurgent hope and commitment. Through his mildly critical tone – Kennedy has described the book as a “gentle Jeremiad” – Allen assured himself and his readers that better times lay ahead. The arrangement of history by decades, and the underlying assumption that the decade was something more than a heuristic device, meant that it was possible to make general predictions about the immediate future. A decade of progress and idealism would surely follow a decade of reaction and disillusionment. By the logic of alternating decades and corresponding changes in the public mind, Allen could safely suggest that a national reawakening was underway and that history was on the side of the present.<sup>13</sup>

It is not surprising, therefore, that the promotional literature for *Only Yesterday* touched upon the book’s therapeutic function as an antidote to confusion and

<sup>11</sup> Frederick Lewis Allen, transcript of radio broadcast, Armstrong Quakers’ program, WJZ and NBC network, 8 Dec. 1931, Frederick Lewis Allen Papers, Library of Congress; Allen, *Only Yesterday*, 121.

<sup>12</sup> Allen, *Only Yesterday*, 356–57; Allen, WJZ radio broadcast, Allen Papers.

<sup>13</sup> Karal Ann Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 9; Allen, *Only Yesterday*, 206; Kennedy, 313. See also Warren I. Susman, “Culture and Commitment” and “The Culture of the Thirties,” in *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 150–83, 184–210.



fear. In the Book-of-the-Month Club bulletin, Dorothy Canfield Fisher emphatically noted the book's value in ordering past, present, and future – in editing out ambiguity for its readers and giving them the understanding necessary to cope with the 1930s:

Those events, those styles in dresses and hair, those headlines in the newspapers, those fads and fancies and moods and happenings, that made up so jumbled a hodgepodge as we lived along through them, are revealed now as having a sequence, an inner coherence, a logic and meaning, which we did not dream of. It adds to our mental stature thus to look back into the past not only resuscitated in every detail, but so presented that it is an understandable segment of human experience and history. Readers of this portrait of the last ten years will find in their hands many clues to a better comprehension of the next ten.<sup>14</sup>

*The Catholic Book Survey* of the Cardinal's Literature Committee recommended *Only Yesterday* to its readers on similar grounds. Allen's book apparently fitted the three basic qualifications for inclusion in the survey: it was "worthy of a mature intelligence"; it did "not offend the Christian sense of truth or decency"; and it bore "the marks of good literary craftsmanship." In addition, it took the "things that are a living memory of all of us, the daily happenings and events we thought and talked about," "presented [them] in the pattern of history, reduced [them] to coherent order, and interpreted [them] in their underlying currents, so as to give an intimate picture of the last decade."<sup>15</sup> The construct of the decade fulfilled this need for a history arranged in understandable segments, made regular and predictable, and purged of open-endedness while it affirmed progress.<sup>16</sup>

Allen's powers of prognostication failed him most discernibly in his claim that the stock market crash had put a decisive end to ballyhoo. Like Allen, many Americans were uncomfortable with the consumer culture at least to the extent

<sup>14</sup> *Book-of-the-Month Club News*, November 1931, Allen Papers. For a compelling interpretation of BOMC and its panel of judges, see Joan Shelley Rubin, "Self, Culture, and Self-Culture in Modern America: The Early History of the Book-of-the-Month Club," *Journal of American History*, 71 (1985), 782–806.

<sup>15</sup> Cardinal's Literature Committee, *The Catholic Book Survey*, June 1932, 5, Allen Papers.

<sup>16</sup> *Life* offered similar reassurances of progress in its '60s issue: "This issue contains its full share of turbulence and angry faces, but it would be the height of pessimism to read these as portents of disaster. In the record of history the times of greatest change and progress are never tranquil. The passage of America through the '60s seems in close retrospect too frantic and troubled, but out of such travail other times have yielded better worlds. That hope should sustain and guide us as we move forward into the '70s." See "A Divided Decade," 9. In 1940, *Collier's* reasoned that since the bright hopes for the 1930s had crumbled, the "glum" outlook for the 1940s might well prove mistaken: "[E]verything seemed to be jogging along pretty promisingly when 1930 came in, and practically everything went sour soon after the thirties got under way. Isn't it possible that the sour promises of 1940 may go sweet before too long?" See "Dangerous Decade," *Collier's*, 6 Jan. 1940, 50. And *Time* combined the messages of optimism and social cohesion in its epitaph for the 1970s: "There is an impression now of national unity, a feeling that the U.S. is emerging from the privatism and divisions of the Me Decade." See Lance Morrow, "Epitaph for a Decade: A Lost War, A Discovery of Limits – and Good Cause for Optimism," *Time*, 7 Jan. 1980, 39.

that the major vehicles for mass consumption – advertising, the movies, radio, the popular magazines – all had to rely on traditional images and values to sell modernity.<sup>17</sup> Despite the economic crisis, however, the consumer culture survived. Movies, radio, and other forms of popular escapism arguably grew in importance during the Depression. While Allen’s conception of the 1920s as a collective learning experience or national rite of passage implied that the public had matured beyond ballyhoo, the story of *Only Yesterday* itself belied this assumption. The book’s own massive popularity signalled the staying power of the consumer culture about which Allen felt such ambivalence. In his modest assessment of *Only Yesterday*’s importance, Allen allowed that even if it failed to “make us a little wiser” and “a little less prone to take, in the future, the short and foolish view,” it would at least “give us brief entertainment.” In other words, if history had no redemptive value, at least it could provide a temporary escape from an unpleasant reality.<sup>18</sup>

*Only Yesterday* soon embarked on a round of ballyhoo that could have fitted easily into Allen’s chapter on the subject. First came the Book-of-the-Month Club selection. Next appeared a publisher’s promotional gimmick called “The Only Yesterday Game[,] based on Frederick Lewis Allen’s famous history of the 1920’s with the same title.” Harper’s described this as “a new, a fascinating game for harassed hostesses, for ‘Ask Me Another’ fans, for everyone who reads his daily paper and thinks he knows what’s going on around him.” Of the “100 questions about the decade just past,” the first fifteen or twenty were easy, but “those beyond 50” would be “difficult for those who are not experts in nineteenth-twentiethiana.” Then, in November 1933, Universal Studios announced the premiere of a movie called “Only Yesterday” and ostensibly based on the book. According to one reviewer, the film was “a lachrymose story of a little Southern girl who fell in love with a handsome soldier and then, when he returned from France, discovered that he didn’t even remember her.” Allen’s book, moreover, was described in the advertisements and screen credits as a “novel”.<sup>19</sup>

There is irony in the fact that *Only Yesterday* was swept up in the kind of hype that Allen had pronounced dead or dying in its pages. The book, the game, and the movie all suggest a basic continuity over time that the device of the decade seemed in some sense to preclude. Readers found themselves assured of orderly change and a return to moderation and public spirit while they participated vicariously in the excesses *Only Yesterday* described and eventually embodied. Allen, of course, foresaw none of this. He simply viewed the 1920s as a discrete

<sup>17</sup> Rubin, 789–96. See also T. J. Jackson Lears, “From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880–1930,” in Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (eds.), *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880–1980* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 1–38, and Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

<sup>18</sup> Allen, WJZ radio broadcast, Allen Papers.

<sup>19</sup> Advertisements for “The Only Yesterday Game” and “Only Yesterday” the film; clipping from the *New York Herald Tribune*, 10 Nov. 1933, Allen Papers. There is no evidence of Allen’s reactions to the game or movie, except that he kept these advertisements and clippings among his personal papers.



and intrinsically meaningful unit of historical time. Even so, *Only Yesterday* pointed toward the commodification of the decade – toward its packaging and re-packaging as an item for mass consumption. Allen’s original inspiration soon yielded to a different logic altogether; as *Only Yesterday* made abundantly clear, the decade sells. The pattern that Allen established continues to the present with only modifications of detail. Diverse developments are made coherent through the device of a public mind, which reinforces a sense of social cohesion. History operates in neat segments, and the forecast at the end of each decade is inevitably one of optimism and progress. Meanwhile, beneath a veneer of bemusement and often mild condemnation, the decade-in-review indulges and ultimately helps foster the appetite for trivia, superficial “events,” and other forms of ballyhoo.