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IN RETROSPECT

REVISITING FREDERICK LEWIS ALLEN'S *ONLY YESTERDAY*

David M. Kennedy

"Every account of [the 1920s] begins with Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday*," William E. Leuchtenburg declared in his own widely acclaimed book on the period, *The Perils of Prosperity*. Leuchtenburg magnanimously praised Allen's work as "a social history written in such a lively style that academicians often underrate its soundness."¹ They may have underrated it, but they nevertheless required their students to read it. Allen's several books, wrote Richard Hofstadter in 1952, had for more than two decades "been among the most popular books assigned for reading in American colleges."² *Only Yesterday* sold more than half a million copies from the time of its publication in 1931 to Allen's death in 1954, and it is still in print today.³ More than any other single work, it has for longer than half a century shaped our understanding of American life in the 1920s.

Hofstadter agreed with Leuchtenburg that Allen's colorful, kinetic prose accounted for much of *Only Yesterday's* appeal. Allen wrote, according to Hofstadter, with a "feeling for the concrete and vivid" and a "firm sense for the relevance of the past."⁴ This judgment echoed the comments of *Only Yesterday's* first reviewers. John Chamberlain applauded Allen for a "style that is verve itself."⁵ Compared with William Preston Slosson's *The Great Crusade and After*, published one year earlier than *Only Yesterday*, Murray Godwin found Allen's volume "far fresher, more vivid, better organized, and more flowing in structure and style." No academic historian, Godwin gratuitously added, "could do so fine a job."⁶ Stuart Chase demurred only slightly. "This may or may not be a great book," he wrote, "but it is a marvelously absorbing one."⁷ Crowning this chorus of adulation, the *New York Times* later eulogized Allen as "the Herodotus of the Jazz Age."⁸

Allen appraised his own aspirations and accomplishments more modestly. "A contemporary history," he warned, "is bound to be anything but definitive."⁹ He shied away from being identified as a historian, preferring in-

stead to call himself a "retrospective journalist."¹⁰ And he scrupulously described *Only Yesterday* in its subtitle as "an informal history of the nineteen-twenties."

In part, "informal" meant that Allen largely exempted himself from dealing with the usual historical topics of politics and diplomacy. It also meant that he was unconstrained by the respect for rules of evidence and argument that is beaten into graduate students. Years later, Allen acknowledged that his "best sources" for *Only Yesterday* had been "the daily magazines and newspapers of the period." Yet he conceded that these very sources "do not help much" in the effort "to observe clearly the life and institutions of one's own day," because "they record the unusual, not the usual."¹¹

Allen had in fact relied on other than simply journalistic sources, including Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd's pioneering sociological work, *Middletown*, Charles A. and Mary R. Beard's *Rise of American Civilization*, Stuart Chase's *Prosperity, Fact or Myth*, Silas Bent's *Ballyhoo*, Walter Lippmann's *A Preface to Morals*, and Joseph Wood Krutch's *The Modern Temper*. Indeed, so thoroughly did he digest the findings and opinions of these other authors that some reviewers complained that *Only Yesterday* amounted to little more than a survey of other surveys.

But if Allen stood on the shoulders of earlier students of the 1920s, he added his own distinctive contribution to the emerging image of the decade. That contribution derived from Allen's own keen observations of the lives of his contemporaries, and, as he acknowledged, from inventive reliance on journalism, especially "feature" articles, human interest stories, and, despite his disclaimers, the raucous sensationalism of the increasingly popular tabloids. His book focused on "the changing state of the public mind," and he plunged unhesitatingly into explorations of private sentiments and mass moods.¹² No supply-side analyst of how or why popular literary works were crafted, he instead conjectured fearlessly about what readers were thinking and feeling as they turned the pages of *The Education of Henry Adams* or *Main Street*. In a similar vein, he imaginatively projected himself into the brain of a flapper, from which vantage he explained the allegedly self-conscious semiotics of her dress and demeanor. Elsewhere he sweepingly summed up his countrymen's emotional state as "weary" or "unhappy" or, most famously, as "disillusioned." Citing some overheard conversations and a handful of Broadway plays, he proclaimed that in the realm of sexual behavior and attitudes "an upheaval in values was taking place."¹³ While few professionally trained historians would have dared to erect such lofty generalizations on such a flimsy evidentiary foundation, Allen's towering thematic structures, somewhat miraculously, have continued to stand for more than fifty years.

For all the license that his posture of "retrospective journalist" afforded him, Allen still shared some of the objectives of the traditional historian. He sought, his preface explained, not only to "tell" but also to "interpret" the 1920s. More important, he strove to find "some sort of logical and coherent order" in his subject – to present the events of the decade "woven into a pattern which at least masquerades as history."¹⁴

Readers might be forgiven for not immediately discerning that pattern. So richly ornamented was the fabric Allen wove that it might seem at first to be merely a fanciful arabesque, wildly eclectic and devoid of any consistently informing logic. What possible interpretive scheme might hold in balance such prodigiously diverse items as the tragedy of Woodrow Wilson's failure to secure ratification of the Treaty of Versailles and the triumph of Jack Dempsey over Georges Carpentier? The execution of Sacco and Vanzetti and the founding of Simon and Schuster? The Red Scare and Mah Jong? The Ku Klux Klan and Emil Coué? Flappers and Tut-Ankh-Amen? The Model A and the Pig Woman? Flag-pole sitters and H. L. Mencken? Prohibition and the Teapot Dome scandals? The Big Bull Market and Charles Lindbergh? Dion O'Bannion and Calvin Coolidge? The rise of radio and the collapse of the Florida land boom? To add to the confusion, Allen portrayed everything in the 1920s as in constant and simultaneous motion, ascending and falling on a roiling sea of change. Stocks, hemlines, and Al Capone's income went up; automobile prices, necklines, and the public's interest in politics went down.

Yet like an opulent oriental carpet, on close inspection Allen's elaborately crafted portrait of the 1920s did reveal a controlling design. The very organization of the book provided a clue to what was predominantly on Allen's mind. After a breezy evocation of the texture of everyday life in 1919, touching on fashions, food, sports, music, movies, and drinking habits, Allen began in earnest with a moving account of Wilson's doomed struggle to shepherd the United States into the League of Nations. This was immediately followed by a description of postwar labor disorders, race riots, and the Big Red Scare – a frantic series of episodes at last terminated when the country began "to regain its sense of humor" as the American people gratifyingly "were coming to their senses."¹⁵

Allen then punctuated his story with two chapters containing the sort of social history for which he is justly renowned. Here he described in fetching detail the emergence of the radio industry after the pioneering broadcast by station KDKA in East Pittsburgh on November 2, 1920, the rise of mass spectator sports, the waves of fads in games and popular entertainments, and, most notoriously, the "revolution in manners and morals," especially as it affected women.

There followed a carefully researched narrative (according to Allen, the

first comprehensive account) of the Harding scandals, a history of the early advertising industry, and then another descent into what Allen called "a series of tremendous trifles — a heavyweight boxing-match, a murder trial, a new automobile model, a transatlantic flight." The "striking" thing about these events, Allen noted, "was the unparalleled rapidity and unanimity with which millions of men and women turned their attention, their talk, and their emotional interest" to them.¹⁶

The phrase "mass culture" would later be invented to describe the phenomena that struck Allen as so unprecedented. Allen, of course, could not be expected to employ that term, but it powerfully testifies to his skill as a social observer that he identified the emergence in the 1920s of frenetic, fickle, media-induced consumerism on a colossal scale. A novelty to him, this kind of behavior seemed in the post-World War II era to have become a permanent feature of affluent democratic culture. Unfamiliar with such behavior, and not much given to analytical explanations in any event, Allen blamed this "carnival of commercialized degradation" on hyperaggressive advertising ("ballyhoo"), and on the contemptible tabloids, which "presented American life not as a political and economic struggle, but as a three-ring circus of sport, crime, and sex."¹⁷ Yet he believed that the carousel of ballyhoo and the bizarre eventually lost its momentum as the decade proceeded. It was slowed most notably by the genuine heroism of Charles A. Lindbergh, whose unadorned simplicity reminded jaded Americans what the right stuff really looked like. Once again, a distracted public showed signs of returning to its senses — though Allen ominously concluded this section of his book by anticipating the levitation of the Big Bull Market into its "sensational phase" less than a year after Lindbergh's flight.¹⁸

Allen next turned his attention to "The Revolt of the Highbrows," concentrating especially on the scoffing cultural criticism of H. L. Mencken and the social satires of Sinclair Lewis. (Conspicuously absent was any mention of some of the highest brows of all, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. And like many of his contemporaries in the 1920s, Allen took no notice of William Faulkner). This chapter, though attenuated and curiously selective, is in a sense the spiritual heart of *Only Yesterday*, for here Allen could summon onto his pages his intellectual brethren — those writers who shared his sense of disillusionment that Americans in the postwar decade were obsessed with business and monkey-business, to the neglect of serious public affairs. Allen's master motif for the decade was the common lament of these authors for the transient vanity of wartime idealism. "Disillusionment," he concluded simply, "was the keynote of the nineteen-twenties."¹⁹

Like virtually everything else that materialized in the turbulent twenties, even the "offensive against Babbitry spent itself, if only because the novelty of rebellion wore off."²⁰ Allen therefore moved on, in his concluding hundred

pages, to describe the accelerating whirligig of distractions and delusions that beset the republic as the decade approached its climax – including prohibition and crime, the Florida real estate craze, and, most conspicuously, the Big Bull Market and the Crash of 1929.

So frequently foreshadowed, now finally at center stage, the story of the steep rise and spectacular fall of the stock market was the denouement toward which *Only Yesterday* built not only chronologically but also thematically. Coming conveniently in the last year of the 1920s, the Crash tidily wrapped up Allen's history of the decade. But the catastrophe of Black Tuesday also neatly clinched the moral judgment that informed Allen's entire work – "that nobody during the Twenties really had a good time and that we deserved the Crash," as one reviewer put it.²¹

By the time the reader reaches Allen's conclusion, the "pattern" of *Only Yesterday* – the "logical and coherent order" that Allen sought to bring to his narrative – is clear. Fugue-like, the storyline has mounted to the crescendo of the Crash by alternating discussions of serious public issues (the fate of the League, Sacco and Vanzetti, the lack of probity in the Harding administration) with descriptions of the incessantly diverting ephemera of mass culture (the Hall-Mills murder trial, Red Grange, and Rudolph Valentino). Between the covers of *Only Yesterday* Allen conducted a running debate with himself about the sobriety and rationality of the American people. Faced with the grave necessity of managing a modern state, they proved distressingly susceptible to all kinds of frivolous distractions – some of them insidious, like the Red Scare, but most of them harmless, like Mah Jong and crossword puzzles. Repeatedly, as they began to tire of trivia and get serious again about life, Americans were once more diverted, like kittens in a catnip shop, by a new fad, by speculative mania, or by "hysterical preoccupation with sex."²² Unable to knuckle down for long to the task of running the republic, they did in a sense bring the Crash – and the ensuing Great Depression, the full scale of which Allen could not clearly see in 1931 – upon themselves.

And yet if Allen was critical of his countrymen, he was also tolerant, generous, and at bottom an optimist. He had more in common with the sympathetic satirizing of Sinclair Lewis than he did with the rasping mockery of H. L. Mencken, though he clearly shared both men's disappointment at the failure of Americans to be finer chaps. *Only Yesterday* was in the end a gentle Jeremiad, delivered not stridently, but in the voice of Increase Mather reborn as a reform-minded Unitarian (Allen was, in fact, an Episcopalian). The book's humane warmth has probably been among the major determinants of its durability.

Much of the book's warmth was kindled by the sense of intimacy with his readers that Allen skillfully cultivated. In the opening sentence of his first chapter he beckoned his readers to join personally in his journey back into

time by addressing them in the second person. He employed this device frequently in subsequent pages, particularly on those occasions when he was compelled to deal with the kind of numeric data that deadens so many conventional histories. "Pick up one of those graphs with which statisticians measure the economic ups and downs of the Post-war Decade," he suggested at the introduction of his discussion of Coolidge prosperity, and then proceeded charmingly and succinctly to summarize the history of business activity from 1920 to 1931.²³

This sort of artful writing came naturally to Allen, a journalist of considerable accomplishment. A tall and tweedy Bostonian, the son of an Episcopal minister, he had prepared at Groton and graduated from Harvard in 1912. Like his eminent contemporary, Franklin Roosevelt, he felt that this education obligated him to a life of public service (though where Roosevelt had edited the *Crimson*, Allen, perhaps significantly, wrote for the *Lampoon*.) He worked for a time at the *Atlantic Monthly* and at *Century Magazine*, served in Woodrow Wilson's war administration (at the Council of National Defense), and then in 1923 began his long association with *Harper's Magazine*, rising in 1941 to the editorship, a position he held until the year before his death in 1954.

Allen's field of vision, for all its comprehensiveness, was severely bounded by the view from the New York editorial offices of *Harper's*. The limitations of that perspective are evident when one considers what's left out of *Only Yesterday*. Allen's gaze penetrated scarcely at all into what one of his favorite authors, F. Scott Fitzgerald, called "that vast obscurity beyond the city." Out there where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night, some 31 million farmers—almost one in three Americans—toiled and dwelled in 1920. Few of them appeared in Allen's account, except as quaint spectators at the Scopes trial. Allen noticed black victims of race riots in Chicago and Tulsa, but the great majority of blacks who lived in the Old South were as invisible to him as was Faulkner. Perhaps even more surprising, the immigrants who teemed through lower Manhattan were somehow shielded from Allen's eyes; the historic ending of unrestricted immigration in 1924 scarcely warranted a mention.

What Allen did see with vivid clarity were the lifestyles of *Harper's* readers. He could write about them so deftly, and speak to them so intimately, because they were so familiar to him. They were both his audience and his subject matter. Knowing their tastes and habits, he could make easy reference to places like "Sauk Center" (sic) without further explanation, confident that the encoded meaning of the name would be easily decrypted by his readers. He could illustrate the erosion of mannerly behavior by describing the "flappers and their wide-trousered swains [who] took the porch cushions out in the boats and left them there to be rained on, without apology."²⁴ For those unac-

quainted with the details of Sinclair Lewis's upbringing, or without access to the waterside pleasure pavilions of the summering rich, Allen's book must have seemed like a report from a distant country.

If Allen's upscale provincialism was confining, it was not smug. He did not simply chronicle, and he certainly did not uncritically celebrate, the manners and morals of his subject-readers, and his history did more than cater to their presumed prejudices. He repeatedly donned the mantle of the objective scholar, setting the record straight, for example, about the conditions that underlay the Boston police strike, or the laughably small size of the Communist party that had inspired the Big Red Scare. Here Allen exceeded the usual mission of the journalist, even a retrospective one. He assumed instead the role of the historian, who seeks not merely to record the novel and trumpet the sensational, but to discover the subtextual and to explain the ordinary.

Yet even as an analytic historian, Allen stayed safely within the limits of the conventionally liberal, urban outlook of his day. He displayed a magnanimous sympathy for labor and for the victims of the Red Scare, but he showed little interest in understanding religious fundamentalism, which he dismissed as an archaic vestige scorned by "civilized opinion."²⁵ The Ku Klux Klan rightly merited his vigorous condemnation, but the forces that produced it did not merit much of an explanation. This omission was especially unfortunate, because the cultural tide that washed up the Klan ran sharply counter to the flood of modernity that Allen found so fascinating and so apparently irresistible. "We are a movement of the plain people, very weak in the matter of culture, intellectual support, and trained leadership," Klan Imperial Wizard Hiram Wesley Evans lamented in 1926. "One by one all our traditional moral standards went by the boards, or were so disregarded that they ceased to be binding. The sacredness of our Sabbath, of our homes, of chastity, and finally even of our right to teach our own children in our own schools fundamental facts and truths were torn away from us. Those who maintained the old standards did so only in the face of constant ridicule."²⁶

This was no less an authentic voice of the 1920s than Sinclair Lewis's, but Allen did not hear it. Had he attended to it, and discussed both the ebb and flow of the clashing currents that Lewis and Evans represented, he would have made his narrative less one-dimensional, given it more texture and dramatic interest – and rendered it more complete and more accurate. He would also have robbed future historians of the chance to discover what *Only Yesterday* masterfully obscured: that the 1920s did not witness the utter triumph of urbane "modernism." Fundamentalists, traditionalists, "dries," and all varieties of "hicks" still lived, and they clung tenaciously to values and mores utterly different from those whose seemingly unimpeded ascension Allen recorded.

Delimited geographically by the Hudson and East Rivers – or perhaps by

Cape Cod and the Hamptons — and restricted sociologically to his eastern urban and suburban subscribers, Allen's vision had temporal limits as well. He contributed to an artificial chronological isolation of the decade that has proved perversely persistent. Like a magus summoning Excalibur from the depths, Allen commanded the 1920s to arise unanchored and unbridged out of the lake of time. Bounded by the latitudes of the Great War and the Great Crash, the decade formed what Allen called "a distinct era" — a little island in history, unlappped by waves from the past.²⁷ Virtually everything that happened in the 1920s, therefore, had only proximate causes. Rarely did Allen forge an explanatory chain whose links ran back more deeply into the past than 1917. Nowhere was this radically abbreviated historical perspective more apparent than in Allen's discussion of the alleged "revolution in manners and morals," a concept that he almost single-handedly planted in the popular as well as the scholarly literature about the 1920s. "A number of forces," Allen wrote, "were working together and interacting upon one another to make this revolution inevitable." Yet in his account none of those forces had been in motion for very long: the war and its "eat-drink-and-be-merry-for tomorrow-we-die spirit"; the Nineteenth Amendment and the concomitant liberation of women from housework and for wage labor; the popularization of Freud's works; and finally "prohibition, the automobiles, the confession and sex magazines, and the movies."²⁸

Few historians today would take this as even a minimally adequate explanation for the history of manners and morals in the 1920s, and few would be comfortable with confining the discussion of women to a treatment of their dress and sexual habits. Allen had little appreciation of what is by now a richly elaborated understanding of the deep roots of modern sexual practices in the nineteenth century and even earlier. He had even less inclination to view women's history as anything other than sexual history. What's more, as he did in so many realms, he vastly exaggerated the role of the war in precipitating sexual change. And by speaking of a "revolution" in manners and morals, he almost certainly exaggerated the extent of the behavioral transformations he described.

What *had* assuredly changed was the volume and pitch of public discussion of sexual topics. A new candor about sexuality had burst into the sources upon which Allen primarily relied — the mass-circulation magazines, best-selling books, and popular plays that he imaginatively mined and mistakenly took for sure guides to actual behavior. In so doing, he created a monument of historical hyperbole that it has taken several generations of subsequent scholars to scale down to its proper dimensions.

Allen's freewheeling, inventive style of historical argumentation in *Only Yesterday* contrasted vividly with that of William Preston Slosson in *The*

Great Crusade and After, which Slosson had the great misfortune to publish at almost the same time that Allen's book appeared. A volume in the respected History of American Life series edited by Arthur M. Schlesinger and Dixon Ryan Fox, *The Great Crusade* was the work of an academic historian then an associate professor at the University of Michigan. Where Allen was selective, anecdotal, judgmental, and unfailingly interesting, Slosson was comprehensive, scientific, objective, and a trifle boring. If Allen's prose lilted musically along, Slosson's soldiered stolidly forward.

Yet for serious students of the 1920s, Slosson's book still repays the effort of reading it, probably more handsomely than does *Only Yesterday*. Despite his title, Slosson did not resemble Allen in making the European war the ultimate cause of the events of the postwar decade. He had a far keener sense than Allen of the deeper historical context of the 1920s. He consequently did not elevate the specifically postwar theme of "disillusionment" into his controlling explanation for the ills of the age. Nor did he neglect, as Allen did, life beyond the Hudson. *The Great Crusade* offered sensitive chapters on "The Changing Countryside" and "The South in Black and White." Its chapter on "The American Woman Wins Equality" passed quickly over the colorful trivia of feminine fashions and changing tastes in cosmetics, unlike *Only Yesterday*, and instead probed the political implications of the Nineteenth Amendment and recounted the debate among feminists about the wisdom of the Equal Rights Amendment. Like Allen, Slosson paid a great deal of attention to prohibition, automobiles, spectator sports, and the efflorescence of advertising. But he also included cogent discussions of immigration, education, and the truly revolutionary mechanization of agriculture (its dimensions suggested by the ten-fold increase in the use of tractors in the decade) – subjects that Allen, much more interested in middle-class urban lifestyles and a supposed revolution in sexual habits, had ignored altogether.

For all its considerable virtues, *The Great Crusade and After* has long since passed out of print, and probably goes unread today even by specialists. Consigned to even deeper oblivion is a massive compendium of information about the 1920s, *Recent Social Trends*, the report of a special presidential research committee published in 1933. With its attendant monographs, it contains a small treasury of data, compiled by more than two dozen eminent social scientists, about every conceivable aspect of American life in the postwar decade.

That *Only Yesterday* survives in print while these two impressive works have languished not only constitutes an imposing compliment to the power of Frederick Lewis Allen's pen. It also sadly suggests that the reading public prefers style to substance in its historians, and doesn't mind if they are a bit blinkered, a little preachy, and good-naturedly given to the spinning of

myths. All this can be overlooked if they are colorful writers and stick to popular subjects. Frederick Lewis Allen was, and he did. Therein lies much of the explanation for *Only Yesterday's* enormous readership, and for its longevity.

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1. William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity* (1985), p. 277.
2. Richard Hofstadter, Foreword to Frederick Lewis Allen, *The Big Change* (1952), p. vii.
3. *The New York Times*, February 14, 1954, p. 1. *Only Yesterday's* 1931 price of \$3.00 has escalated to \$30.00 for the hardcover edition. But in a striking demonstration of the economics of the "paperback revolution," the softcover edition sells for only eighty cents more than the 1931 original.
4. Hofstadter, Foreword, p. vii.
5. John Chamberlain, *The New York Times Book Review*, December 6, 1931, p. 1.
6. Murray Godwin, *The New Republic*, December 9, 1931, p. 106.
7. Stuart Chase, *Books* (the *New York Herald Tribune* book review), December 6, 1931, p. 3.
8. *The New York Times*, December 14, 1954, p. 1.
9. Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday* (1931), p. xiii.
10. "F.L.A.," *Harper's*, April, 1954, pp. 74-75.
11. *The Big Change*, pp. 156, 234.
12. *Only Yesterday*, p. xiv.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 112-13.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. xiii-xiv.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 70, 75.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 216, 81.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 225.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 238.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 243.
21. D. O. Stewart, *The Yale Review* 21 (Spring 1932), p. 605.
22. *Only Yesterday*, p. 348.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 159.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
26. Hiram Wesley Evans, "The Klan's Fight for Americanism," *North American Review* 223 (March 1926): 33-63.
27. *Only Yesterday*, p. xiii.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 94-99.