

Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History, The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Pantheon, 1984. Pp. 321. Illustrations, index, notes. \$12.95 (paper).

I never thought of myself as a particularly good student when I was in Warren Susman's graduate class. But he harbored hopes that I might pan out after all, and he was consistently generous of his time with me. Years after I had finished my graduate work, I would have lunch with Warren—hours at a crack away from the hustle of a convention. And for months and even years after that lunch, I would find myself thinking back to things he had said and what he might have meant. More than with anyone else I have ever known, a few hours with Warren could give a lot of benefit for a shockingly long time. At the same time, none of our luncheon conversations had just one single theme; and I am sure that a "fly on the wall" would have thought we sometimes rambled.

It is with this in mind that one might best read Warren Susman's *Culture as History*—a book likely to frustrate as many people as it excites. It is a book enormously rich in insights, illuminated with flashes of genuine brilliance, and dazzling in an erudition possible only in someone whose love of history and culture were matched by his passion for reading and learning. But Susman's sometimes eccentric use of language—actually a written reflection of his spoken intonation—and his eclectic references to an unfamiliar sweep of cultural sources will simply baffle some who confront them. Susman's work recalls the technique which anthropologist Clifford Geertz has called "thick description," depending not on syllogistic presentation but on sequential overlays of information and analysis which brings the reader toward understanding without a conventional trail of formal logic.

Composed of some fourteen essays published at various times in Susman's career, this volume makes readily available some important work which has lain little used in less heralded journals. "The Frontier Thesis and the American Intellectual," for example, first appeared in the *Bucknell Review* in 1963. Rather than analyze the applicability of Turner's ideas to the past which they seek to explain, Susman treats them as a key element in the culture of the early twentieth century, seeing beyond the notion of "safety valve" to find an underlying and rapidly accelerating rejection of the frontier. Originally published in the *Journal of Human Relations* in 1967, "The Persistence of Reform" explores the conservative implications of the reform impulse, especially when it focuses on the individual rather than on the social structure. In addition, essays

first released by leading publishers and journals are included, such as his important work "The Thirties" from *The Development of an American Culture* and one now called "Culture and Commitment" after the title of the book in which it was originally printed.

Specific references to sport are comparatively rare. But the potential applications of Susman's cultural observations to sport, especially in the era of mass popular sport in the twentieth century, are myriad. For example, in "The City in American Culture," Susman argues boldly that anti-urban sentiment in America has never been as broad or deep as cliché would have it—an assertion which imperils explanations of certain sports as a kind of agrarian reverie. In "Culture Heroes: Ford, Barton, Ruth," he underscores not only the fact that Babe Ruth showed that the individual could survive in the modern, industrialized world but—too often forgotten—that he at last had to conform to the imperatives of society to do so. Quoting Huizinga, Susman observes that "free youthful forces and courage" are thus "reduced to normality and uniformity. . . ." And his theorizing on "'Personality' and Twentieth-Century Culture" invites a fundamental reevaluation of the role of sport heroes, their function as celebrities, and the strengthening of the self supposedly experienced by spectators.

Susman's greatest contribution—and the greatest challenge to the sport historian—is his defiant emphasis on *cultural* history as something quite distinct from *social* history. Those who have riled at calling sport history a branch of social history will readily agree. Yet few have followed Susman's path and developed the sources for cultural history, especially few in the study of sport history. In the end, there may be no better way to improve one's understanding of sport and to sharpen one's historical study of it than to expand one's appreciation of the nature of culture itself. Susman's virtual equation of culture with history surely forces such reconsideration.

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