

John A. Hawgood, 1905–1971

It must have been late in 1952 that I first met John Hawgood, when I gave him breakfast in the Hotel Jefferson, Iowa City. Walking round Old Capitol afterwards, I remarked that at 10.15 I was due to lecture to my ‘Western Civ.’ class on the revolutions of 1848. As I spoke, I recalled what I knew of my guest and said, not very seriously: ‘It seems silly for me to be doing that when you’re here. Why don’t you do it?’ At once he agreed, continued talking for an hour or so on other matters, reached Macbride Auditorium, and gave two hundred freshmen an admirable elementary lecture.

Willingness to try something new was always one of his characteristics. After taking his first degree at London, he went in rapid succession to Heidelberg, Vienna, Yale and Wisconsin. He studied the relations between the United States and the Frankfurt Parliament; but almost immediately he was investigating the history of German immigrants in America. Before his book on the latter subject appeared, he published an account of the constitutions of modern Europe, in which Harold Macmillan took a personal interest. It was after the War, however, that he turned seriously to what was to become his dominant interest, the West. Travelling incessantly in second-hand cars, visiting innumerable campuses, meeting people, exploring archives, collecting photographs, he built up a knowledge of the region of an intimacy no one in Britain can have matched. Once, in Birmingham, I played a tape he had made, which opened with John sitting by the Forks of the Missouri reading from the Lewis and Clark journals. A few years later, a conference of the British Association for American Studies saw with fascination a film he had helped to make at Tombstone, Arizona. A collection of Consul Larkin’s letters appeared in 1962, *The American West* in 1967; and a study of the diplomatic manoeuvres of Britain, Prussia and the United States over Mexico and the Southwest, and a short history of San Francisco, were much in his conversation during his last years. Meanwhile, at Birmingham, with an interval for government work as an expert on Germany, he rose to be Professor of Modern History in 1945, and in 1964 he was appointed to the new American History chair.

All was not fulfilment and triumph. Despite his own eminence, despite his early launching of American History courses, despite the new chair, Birmingham did not in his time develop as a leading centre of American Studies. No doubt there were some forms of expansion John himself did not desire, and perhaps the university did not assign the subject any very high priority.

Nor did his early books prove wholly successful. *Modern Constitutions* is useful, but no more than that. *The Tragedy of German-America* now seems disappointing, in that it missed the opportunity to study a great ethnic community from the inside, especially in cities of the Middle West, at a time when it was barely a generation past its peak. Yet having written such words, I know that in a sense I have been unjust. For the book appeared in the same year as Marcus Hansen's posthumous masterpiece, and a year before Oscar Handlin's book on Boston. Viewed as a pioneer work, John's study can be viewed with greater admiration. The Larkin book was of course slight, an interesting collection of letters to supplement the great collection of writings edited at the Bancroft Library. In *The American West*, however, man and subject were at last perfectly matched. The book, to be sure, is wholly traditional in its approach. It is the West of the pioneers that interested John, and little account is taken of influences, economic or political, bearing upon the region from outside; but it is a masterpiece. The balance between topics is judicious, the treatment of personalities shrewd, the sense of closeness to documents and terrain admirable, while the illustrations which John himself collected are superb. The book deserved every dollar in royalties it gained him, every prize it won.

John Hawgood's career suffered, rather obviously, from the dispersal of his energy over too many activities; but it would be absurd to call it a failure or to present a sense of frustration as a major theme of his life. He trained graduate students, one of whom, Reginald Horsman, has built a considerable reputation in America as a researcher on the older West. From their beginnings, he did much to encourage the British and European Associations for American Studies and attended many of their conferences. How many young scholars he helped I cannot know. What he did for me is very fresh in my mind: exerting influence to assign to the teaching of American history and politics the Extra-mural department tutorship to which I went from Iowa; naming me as his substitute to teach a summer session at the University of British Columbia, when he wished to work at the Huntington Library; giving the decisive opinion to a publisher in my favour. Probably I have more cause to be grateful than anyone. All who met him, however, must have admired his accessibility, his lack of consciousness of age and rank, the range of his stories about two continents. Above all, they respected, as I did, his enthusiasm. Some have written more books and more good ones. Some have been more inventive in their scholarship. None has done more to proclaim, by example, that the study of history is a life's work in which a man may rejoice.

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Nothing could be more natural than that Philip A. M. Taylor (an Englishman) should first meet John Hawgood in Iowa City, and that I (an American) should make his acquaintance when he called to see me at The Queen's College, Oxford. For John Hawgood, more than any person I know, was a citizen of two lands and personified two cultures. Thoroughly British in background and loyalty, he was nevertheless so much at home in the States that his wife believed him to be only truly happy when on his constant visits there. And constant visits they were. John was forever crossing the Atlantic; some years ago he had spanned the ocean thirty-nine times and must have doubled that number before his death, for he made the journey at least once each year and sometimes two or three times. This meant a heavy drain on the family finances, despite John's uncanny ability to unearth charter flights and inexpensive airlines, and his success at extracting funds from foundations; at one time he spoke facetiously of forming a Machiavellian Society for those who had received more than \$100,000 in grants. Expensive though they were, those repeated excursions were essential to John Hawgood's peace of mind as well as to his scholarship. In America he found himself among men who thought and acted as he liked to think and act; there he could expand and be his natural self. For John, despite his upbringing, possessed many of the character traits that are usually associated with the frontiersmen he studied – traits that today help distinguish the American from his British ancestors.

The pioneers, history tells us, scorned social distinctions in their passionate devotion to democracy. So did John. His friends were legion, drawn from every walk of life from statesman to caretaker, without thought of rank or influence. Many were young, for John Hawgood made an art of cultivating rising academic stars, flattering them with his attention, and aiding them in their researches. They gave him their loyalty in return; one, visiting England for the first time, returned highly disappointed that all people there were not exactly like John Hawgood.

The pioneers were unusually mobile, with slight attachment to place. John Hawgood was perpetually ambulatory, so haughtily disdainful of distance that even the most seasoned travellers viewed him with awed admiration. He always kept a car in the States, usually put to pasture with a friend during the intervals when he was at the University of Birmingham, and normally a venerable relic that seemed untrustworthy for even a journey of a few yards. Yet those ancient machines carried him over impossible distances through impassable obstacles, for sleet and snow and fog were challenges rather than deterrents. The usual Californian today thinks nothing of driving fifty miles to a cocktail party; John thought nothing of driving a hundred.

The pioneer was generously hospitable, and expected to be entertained in

return. John Hawgood's home in Old Marston was always open to visiting American historians who were never reluctant to abuse his hospitality. And superb hospitality it always was. In return he was forever dropping in on his American friends for a few hours – or a few days; they were so numerous that he could criss-cross the United States in every direction without patronizing a hotel.

Above all John Hawgood radiated the exuberant energy that drove the American frontiersmen westward. He was forever on the go, forever driving himself to finish the excessive tasks that he assumed, forever assuming new tasks. In his daily routine there was little time for the social amenities that add charm to British life: the elevenses, the leisurely luncheon, the relaxing tea, the extended exchange of wit and wisdom over the dinner table and port bottle. Like most Americans, John was too busy at his multitudinous tasks to savour the pleasures of a leisurely life.

Hence his death in California rather than Oxfordshire was tragically appropriate. He had happy plans for his retirement: spring and summer with his friends and books in Old Marston, fall and winter at the home he was building in the mountains near San Francisco, with frequent excursions to the Bancroft and Huntington libraries of western Americana, his two favourites. That mountain retreat was his magnet when he flew to Los Angeles in September, accompanied by his wife and daughter. Typically his first visit was to the Huntington Library to lunch with the legion of friends there, and to talk glowingly of the future: the book on San Francisco that was well under way, the volume that he was editing for the Lakeside Classics, the session on the history of bourbon drinking over which he was to preside at the October meeting of the Western History Association in Santa Fe (it would, he gleefully predicted, outdraw a rival session with Senator Barry Goldwater in the chair), the many weeks that he planned to spend at the Huntington. The next day he flew northward to his American home, and there he died two days later.

John Hawgood died far too soon, for he had much to tell the historical world. As a pioneer in introducing American studies into British universities, as a scholar whose books and searching articles added new dimensions to our knowledge of the American West, and as a sympathetic interpreter of the American scene he will be long remembered. John Hawgood will be missed on both sides of the Atlantic and missed deeply.

The Huntington Library

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