

party system, and it could soon go the way of the Berlin Wall. ■

# The Poet Laureate of the Old Right

by Justin Raimondo

**B**efore the invasion of the Buckleys, the Kristols, the Podhoretzes; before the fatuity of Jack Kemp and the platitudes of Bill Bennett; before conservatives were seduced by the temptations of Empire and the perpetual motion machine of a permanent war economy, there was the authentic and original conservative movement, what Murray Rothbard called the "Old Right."

In opposition to the looming nightmare of a second worldwide descent into barbarism, the Old Right held up the light of reasoned detachment from foreign squabbles, arguing that we would win the battle against Nazism in the trenches—and lose the war against national socialism at home. Under the banner of the America First Committee, the Old Right led the greatest anti-war movement in American history; great, not only in numbers, but in the sense of moral distinction and sheer courage.

As the Anglophiles, Communists, and militarists revved up the war propaganda machine, it became dangerous, especially for writers, to be known as "isolationists." Anyone who dared stand up for the traditional American foreign policy of nonintervention was smeared, attacked, driven out of gainful em-

ployment, and, as often as not, harassed by the FBI.

Every third-rate literary hack of a certain age has a story about McCarthy's "blacklist," but we hear not a word about the far more efficient and merciless blacklisting of an earlier time, when it was the left and its allies in FDR's White House who wielded the pen and the power.

Those few literary and political figures who dared stand up against that power were either destroyed, financially and politically, or else exiled to the margins: Charles A. Lindbergh, John T. Flynn, Albert Jay Nock, H.L. Mencken, Garet Garrett, Rose Wilder Lane, Senators Nye and Wheeler, and the anti-war populist wing of the Republican Party. Perhaps the most courageous and intransigent of these heroes was the poet Robinson Jeffers.

Born January 10, 1887, Jeffers' early years were spent in European boarding schools. In 1914, he discovered the natural beauty of the Central California coast, and settled in Carmel. Meanwhile, his first volume of poems, *Flagons and Apples* (1912) had appeared, followed by *Californians* (1916). With the publication of *Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems* (1925) and *The Women at Point Sur* (1927), he came into his own as a major American poet.

Jeffers was of that generation whose illusions were incinerated in the furnace of World War I. As he put it in *The Truce and the Peace*, written in November 1918:

After all, after all we have  
endured, who has grown wise?  
. . . They have all meant well,  
Our enemies and the knaves at  
whom we've laughed,  
The liars, the clowns in office,  
the kings in hell  
They have all meant well in the  
main  
. . . They have made war,  
Conspired, oppressed, robbed,  
murdered, lied and lied,  
Meant well, played the loud

fool...and star by star  
Winter Orion pursues the  
Pleiades  
In pale and huge parade, silence  
and peace.

Like many old-style liberals, Jeffers responded to the growing militarization and centralization of American society with a defiant reassertion of the native libertarian spirit. In "Shine, Republic," he wrote:

The love of freedom has been the  
quality of Western man.  
There is a stubborn torch that  
flames from  
Marathon to Concord, its  
dangerous beauty  
binding three ages  
Into one time; the waves of  
barbarism and  
civilization have eclipsed but  
have never  
quenched it.

Jeffers was an American patriot, celebrating his country's republican virtues, just as he mourned their decline in "Shine, Perishing Republic," and "Shine, Empire." This alone explains why he is almost never taught in American universities. Jeffers' title as the most politically incorrect of all poets is secured by his ringing reaffirmation of the classical legacy of Western civilization—

But in one noble passion we are  
one; and Washington,  
Luther, Tacitus, Aeschylus, one  
kind of man.  
And you, America, that passion  
made you.

Moral clarity and personal integrity were the bedrock of Jeffers' philosophy, and these qualities radiate from his poetry. His credo is summed up in the Introduction to the Random House edition of his *Collected Poetry*:

Another formative principle  
came to me from a phrase of

Nietzsche's: "The poets? The poets lie too much."...I decided not to tell lies in verse. Not to feign any emotion that I did not feel; not to pretend to believe in optimism or pessimism, or unreversible progress; not to say a thing because it was popular, or generally accepted, or fashionable in intellectual circles, unless I myself believed it; and not to believe easily.

Jeffers followed the tenets of his austere creed to the letter, in his art and his politics. In reply to a questionnaire from the fellow-traveling League of American Writers, he spoke up for the traditional American policy of strict nonintervention:

As to fascism: I would fight it in this country, but if the Italians want it that is their affair. The same goes for nazism. The same for communism, from which the others learned their methods.

In "Shine, Perishing Republic" (1941), Jeffers' vision is remarkably similar to that of the Old Right pamphleteer Garet Garrett, who, in his 1951 broadside *Rise of Empire*, observed that "we have crossed the boundary that lies between Republic and Empire." Jeffers declaims the same message with a similar tragic solemnity:

While this America settles in the mould of its vulgarity,  
heavily thickening to empire,  
And protest, only a bubble in the molten mass, pops and sighs out,  
and the mass hardens....

In "Blind Horses," he addresses his fellow intellectuals, most of whom were debating whether Stalin or Trotsky had cornered the market in Revolutionary Truth:

... Lenin has served the revolution,  
Stalin presently begins to betray it. Why? For the sake of power,  
the Party's power, the state's

Power, armed power, Stalin's power, Caesarean power.

But all this, says Jeffers, "is not quite a new world":

The ages like blind horses turning a mill tread their own hoof-marks. Whose corn's ground in that mill?

Of course, in today's political atmosphere, Jeffers would probably be accused of being a "conspiracy theorist" for daring to ask the forbidden question: *qui bono?* Who benefits from such a state of affairs? More evidence of the meaning of this line is in "Shine, Perishing Republic," where Jeffers cautions his children against the time when "the cities lie at the monster's feet." But who or what is the monster? In "Shiva," (1938) a hawk is

picking the birds out of our sky.  
She has killed the pigeons of peace and security,  
She has taken confidence from nations and men,  
She is hunting the lonely heron of liberty.  
She loads the arts with nonsense,  
she is very cunning,

This theme of organized evil—self-conscious, systematic, and relentlessly hunting "the lonely heron of liberty"—is the leitmotif of many of Jeffers' poems, starting in the immediate pre-war period. He knew what he was up against. As America prepared to fight its great war for capital 'D' Democracy, a poet who advised you to

Keep clear of the dupes that talk democracy  
And the dogs that talk revolution,

was considered distinctly subversive if not downright seditious. His fate was sealed with the publication of *The Double Axe and Other Poems*, in 1948. Here is Jeffers at his polemical best: audacious, unrepentant, scathing. In "The Love and the

Hate," Jeffers employs a device familiar to readers of his poems: a slain soldier returns from the dead to confront his family, his country, his fellow human beings. He haunts them for being:

the decent and loyal people of America,  
Caught by their own loyalty,  
fouled, gouged and bled  
to feed the power-hunger of the politicians and make trick fortunes  
For swindlers and collaborators.

In "The Inhumanist," the author flays the moral pretensions of the victorious Allies:

And hang the men, Goering and all his paladins: why?  
Why?  
For losing the war....  
What judges, what prosecutors,  
what a panel!

America was "the brutal meddler and senseless destroyer"; England was stained with an "old seamed and stinking blood-guilt"; the rulers of Russia were distinguished by their "cold dirty-clawed cruelty." The narrator of "The Inhumanist," an "old man with a double-bit axe"—clearly Jeffers himself—laughingly remarks:

By God, winners  
and losers too, what hellhounds.

Jeffers' protest against the war crimes tribunals was a popular theme of the right-wing press at the time, particularly *Human Events*, and in such books as *Advance to Barbarism*, by F. J. P. Veale.

In "The Love and the Hate," Jeffers points the finger at his enemies, who are a virtual rogue's gallery of the Old Right's favorite villains:

the President And his paid mouths;  
and the radio-shouters,  
the writers,  
the world-planners, the heavy

bishops,  
the England-lovers, the little  
poets and college professors,  
The seducers of boys, the pimps  
of death...

It was inevitable, given the intellectual and political atmosphere, that *The Double Axe* would get Jeffers in trouble. In 1948, as the United States stood astride the world, the new avatars of Empire were proclaiming the advent of the American Century. In the feverish flush of an artificial prosperity fueled by inflation and preparations for war, Americans did not want to be told that it was all an illusion.

This was sedition, albeit of the literary variety, a high crime for which Jeffers was duly tried and convicted in the court of elite public opinion. Convicted, first of all, by his own publisher, who inserted a notice in the front of *The Double Axe* which amounted to the volume's first bad review. After noting that this was the fourteenth book of verse by Jeffers published by Random House, and touting their "close relationship," the publishers felt "compelled to go on record with its

**RRR** *The Rothbard-Rockwell Report*. (ISSN 1080-4420) is published monthly by the Center for Libertarian Studies, 875 Mahler Rd., Suite 150, Burlingame, CA 94010. (800) 325-7257. Second-Class Postage paid at Burlingame, CA 94010 and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to RRR, P.O. Box 4091, Burlingame, CA 94011. *Editors*: Murray N. Rothbard (1926-1995) and Llewellyn H. Rockwell, Jr. *Contributing Editors*: David Gordon, Paul Gottfried, Hans-Hermann Hoppe, Michael Levin, and Justin Raimondo. *Publisher*: Burton S. Blumert. *Managing Editor*: Sybil Regan. Subscription: \$49 for 12 issues. Single issue: \$5. Copyright ©1996 by the Center for Libertarian Studies. All rights reserved. Unauthorized reproduction of this newsletter or its contents by xerography, facsimile, or any other means is illegal.

disagreement over some of the political views pronounced in this volume." After a few more lines of similar drivel, the Random House editor declared that "time alone is the court of last resort in the case of ideas on trial."

Random House also deleted ten poems from the original manuscript, and altered eight others. These were recovered and reprinted in a new edition of *The Double Axe*, edited and with an informative introduction by William Everson (1977).

"Wilson in Hell" imagines an encounter between Wilson and FDR. Wilson does all the talking:

...I  
blundered into it  
Through honest error...  
. . .But you  
Blew on the coal-bed, and when  
it kindled you deliberately  
Sabotaged every fire-wall that  
even the men who denied  
My hope had built. You have too  
much murder on your hands.

Wilson complains that he

cannot understand the  
Mercy  
That permits us to meet in the  
same heaven.—Or is this  
my hell?

Many of the suppressed poems have as their theme the use and misuse of science in the service of war and the State. In "Pourvou Que Ca Doure," he exhorts us to

Look around you at civilization  
decaying and sick: look  
at science, corrupted  
To be death's bawd; and art—  
painting and sculpture,  
that had some dignity—  
Corrupted into the show-off  
antics of an imbecile child:  
and statecraft  
Into the democratic gestures of a  
gin-muddled butcher-boy...

Even if some were blunted, or  
missing, Jeffers' arrows met their

marks—and how the critics howled!

*Time* magazine, the voice of the "American Century," decried *The Double Axe* as "a necrophilic nightmare." The Virginia Kirkus Service was properly horrified by this "puerile and violent rodomontade." In language that sounds remarkably familiar, and that might serve as a model of the classic smear technique employed against the Old Right in politics as well as poetry, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* accused Jeffers of being "unbalanced in his thinking...only the most devout followers of the right-wing nationalists, the lunatic fringe, and the most ardent Roosevelt-haters, could, after reading *The Double Axe*, welcome the return of Robinson Jeffers."

Close to his home turf, the *San Francisco Chronicle* threw up its hands in disgust at "one of the most powerful word-craftsmen of our time dipping his pen in international pus." "Hateful!" screeched the *Library Journal*; "a sorry exhibition" scolded the *New Republic*.

With the death of his wife, and a series of smears and attacks, notably by the second-rate poet and critic Kenneth Rexroth, Jeffers faded from the public scene. It would be ten years before another book, his final one, *Hungerfield and Other Poems*, was published, but this failed to revive his reputation. In spite of many requests from students and universities, Random House failed to issue any of his previous works, and these soon went out of print. In this context, the punk Rexroth felt safe in saying that "today young people simply do not read him."

The prophetess Cassandra was cursed by the gods with a burning vision of futurity; the price she paid for her wisdom was to endure universal disbelief. In Jeffers' ode to her, he asks:

...does it  
matter, Cassandra,

Whether the people believe  
Your bitter fountain? Truly men  
hate the truth; they'd liefer  
Meet a tiger on the road.  
. . . Poor bitch, be wise.  
No: you'll still mumble in a  
corner a crust of truth, to men  
and gods disgusting.—You and I,  
Cassandra.

In the short run, Jeffers was right; no one listened. In the presumptuous and unprecedented "Note" appended to the Random House edition of *The Double Axe*, the anonymous editor declared that "time alone is the court of last resort in the case of ideas on trial."

Nearly half a century later, the verdict is in. The spirit of the Old Right, of the terrible "ism" so dreaded by the custodians of Respectable Thought—"isolationism," otherwise known as *peace*—is at last making a long-delayed comeback. In these days of UN wars, more than a few will heed Cassandra's warnings—and perhaps step back from the brink. ■

# Gingrich the Strategist

by L.H.R., Jr.

**T**he school lunch hysteria was among the fiascos that doomed this Congress. I've wondered why it would have been among the first issues raised, and not, say, IMF subsidies or aid to Russia. Deliberate sabotage perhaps?

Taking on school lunches created an easy target for the media. They're taking food out of the mouths of babes! In any case, having raised the issue, they should have abolished the program as an unconstitutional subsidy to agriculture and the "poor."

The food lunch bust doomed Gingrich's reputation as a strategist and allowed the Republicans to drop all ideas of cuts in any spending program, no matter how objectionable. A year later, Gingrich is still smart-

ing, but only now has he spoken frankly about his blunders.

"We said over and over again, it's a 4-and-a half percent increase," Gingrich told the *Washington Times*, but that wasn't enough. "I think in retrospect," he says, "the morning we had the school lunch program fight, we should have had every Republican go to a school lunch the following Friday or Monday and eat a school lunch with children with all the local news media walking them through in detail how we were saving the school lunch program."

Saving the school lunch program through increased spending? That's Gingrichism in a nutshell, although I can't remember any candidate running on that issue. Republicans are supposed to be against welfare. At least that's what the voters thought in 1994.

Gingrich likes to accuse Clinton of stealing Republican issues, but in fact, he's stealing Clinton's socialism. If some brave soul doesn't run against this bonehead for Speaker, he'll be missing the chance of a lifetime. ■

**RRR**  
ROTHBARD-ROCKWELL REPORT

P.O. Box 4091, Burlingame, CA 94011  
(ISSN 1080-4420)

Periodicals  
Postage

**PAID**

AT BURLINGAME, CA 94010  
AND ADDITIONAL  
MAILING OFFICE

RON UNZ  
555 BRYANT ST # 371  
PALO ALTO CA 94301-1704

