

# John Dos Passos

## NEWSLETTER

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### BEGINNING DOS PASSOS RESEARCH

Anyone contemplating research on Dos Passos' life or work should start with David Sanders, *John Dos Passos: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1987). The volume is 511 pages long, including the index; its numerous descriptions of listed items are succinct, accurate, and discerning.

To describe the scope of the bibliography, we quote from its preface:

It is an annotated bibliography...designed for scholars, critics, and other readers of Dos Passos' works. I have tried to account for all his writings from his first signed work in 1911, a short story for the *Choate News* called "The City of Burnished Copper," to his long delayed posthumous novel, *Century's Ebb*, published in 1975. I have tried to describe every significant writing about him since Franklin P. Adams took amused notice of the twenty-year-old writer's "Against American Literature" in his "Conning Tower" column of the *New York Tribune* for 14 October 1916...

The primary bibliography describes Dos Passos' books, contributions to books, contributions to periodicals, and library holdings of his letters and manuscripts. It lists reprintings and translations of his writings...

The secondary bibliography describes book[s], bibliographies, and checklists primarily about Dos Passos; criticism of Dos Passos in books that are more inclusive studies, articles about Dos Passos in journals and newspapers, reviews of Dos Passos' books, and dissertations about Dos Passos.

Sanders' section on library holdings (pp. 175-99) is based on a survey of U.S. libraries through summer 1985. His pages on Alderman Library (University of Virginia), the chief Dos Passos archive, are an excellent summary of its manuscript holdings, one that should lead scholars to that library, where they can study its extensive Dos Passos catalog. For further library holdings, Sanders refers scholars to the National Union Catalog of Manuscript collections (1959-).

For materials appearing in later years than those covered by Sanders' volume, the reader should consult the MLA bibliography, available in university library reference departments.

### DOS PASSOS' U.S.A.—THE THIRTEENTH CHARACTER

by

Melvin Landsberg

Nineteen-ninety-six marked the centenary of John Dos Passos' birth. Moreover, it marked the sixtieth anniversary of the publication of *The Big Money*, the third volume of his remarkable trilogy *U.S.A.*, which included the earlier *The 42nd Parallel* (1930) and *Nineteen Nineteen* (1932). And on August 5, 1996, the *New Yorker* published an article called "U.S.A. Today," by the essayist Joseph Epstein. There he gave Dos Passos credit for awakening him to politics but declared that the novelist was for his own time, and would not endure—ironically, the *New Yorker* never published anything by Dos Passos during his own time. Dos Passos' characters "did not stick," Epstein wrote. Today, he added, academia determines whether or not an author will continue to be read. But there is no newsletter for Dos Passos scholarship, nor are there successive editions of less and less significant material by him. He has descended—"poof!—down the history hole."

Wasn't that where Melville descended—poof!—not long after he published *Moby Dick*?

Like Epstein, I shall speak almost entirely about *U.S.A.* To give it full attention, I shall omit any discussion of Dos Passos' novel *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), his essayistic travel books *Rosinante to the Road Again* (1922) and *Orient Express* (1927), and other important books by him.

*U.S.A.* is an astonishing work for many reasons. It has a dozen major characters—all of whom have stuck in my mind since my first reading. We get to know the twelve better than the people in our own lives. Though the narratives about these characters are often not contiguous, they give us virtual case histories. Or rather they do so when supplemented by the narratives about other major characters whose lives impinge on theirs.

*U.S.A.* also has a thirteenth character, who sticks like Krazy Glue. But more of this later.

Of the twelve major characters, four live in the shadow of another, a smooth, hollow opportunist named J. Ward Moorehouse. We follow his life from birth—some years before Dos Passos' own—through his creating a pioneering public relations firm in New York City before World War I, his becoming a dominant figure in his field, and his suffering a heart attack in middle age. Around him are his worshipful secretary, Janey Williams; his friend Eleanor Stoddard, a socially ambitious interior decorator, as opportunistic as Moorehouse himself; Eleanor's friend Evelyn Hutchins, who becomes known for her parties, attended by "interesting people"—writers, labor leaders, radical leftists, celebrities, etc.; and Richard Ellsworth Savage, a Harvard-educated associate in Moorehouse's firm, who once held literary and pacifist ideals.

The other seven major characters are "Daughter," a young Texan who has an affair with Savage in France during the war, and gets a brush-off from him after she becomes pregnant; the merchant seaman Joe Williams, Janey's brother; Mac, an I.W.W. member, most of whose story is told in the first seven narrative sections of *The 42nd Parallel*; Ben Compton and Mary French, two left-radical characters, he the son of a Jewish watchmaker in Brooklyn, and she the daughter of a physician in Colorado; Charley Anderson, a midwestern mechanic who becomes a decorated airman during the war and then goes to work in the airplane manufacturing business; and Margo Dowling, an actress.

The life of the seaman Joe Williams is a naturalistic novelette as well as a case history. A reader may speculate on how Joe is affected by the frequent beatings he receives from his father. His death, in the second volume, is due to his combativeness as well as to the anti-black prejudice

instilled in him at home. And the reader may link his miserable career to his having to leave high school at the end of his freshman year. Joe is a simple man who lacks smarts. It is painful to find him returning from a sea voyage with gifts for Janey (who completed high school, taking the commercial course, and now works for Moorehouse), and her not asking him up to the apartment she shares with friends, lest she be declassified by her brother's rough appearance.

Charley Anderson's story, told in one narrative section of *The 42nd Parallel* and seven sections of *The Big Money*, is another naturalistic novelette. A war hero and a mechanic who can help design airplanes, Charley is in a position to go after great wealth after the war. Joining an aircraft manufacturing corporation in Detroit, he finds himself drawn into stock manipulation—"competing against the sharks," to use a later phrase—and that competition, sexual frustration in his marriage, and heavy drinking lead to his deterioration, and finally his death in an automobile accident.

While the stories of Joe Williams and Charley Anderson are naturalistic novelettes, that of Margo Dowling, told in five sections of *The Big Money*, is a picaresque one. Margo lives by her wits as her life alternates between good and bad fortune. Her mother died giving birth to her, and she was brought up in New York by her mother's friend Agnes, who married Margo's father. When he becomes a hopeless alcoholic and the family is impoverished, Agnes sets up housekeeping with an actor, who gets Margo a job in vaudeville when she is a child, and rapes her when she is pubescent. Margo, after having willing sex with two other men, induces a young Cuban guitarist to marry her, and goes to Havana with him. He turns out to be a homosexual, and besides gives her syphilis, and a baby who is born blind and dies. Escaping from her husband, with the aid of a young U.S. consular clerk—to whom she probably gives syphilis in turn—she goes back to New York, and there gets a job as a chorus girl in the Ziegfeld Follies. She next comes close to marrying a rich Yale undergraduate, with whom she cruises to Florida. When the relationship ends abruptly, she lives with Charley Anderson, whom she has met there. Soon after his death, she and Agnes—and Margo's husband, for whom she has sent—drive from Miami to Los Angeles. After three years of playing bit parts in the movies, she encounters Sam Margolies, a director, who became infatuated with her when she was a model he photographed in a dress shop. He makes her a movie star and marries her.

Much of the Margo Dowling and Charley Anderson stories are told in nearby and often successive chapters of *The Big Money*, and we view Charley from Margo's perspective and Margo from Charley's. Similar multiple perspectives exist among other characters. Double visions—from within a given character, evidenced in the very vocabulary of the prose depicting him or her, and then from without, in the minds of other characters, in their own

#### THE JOHN DOS PASSOS NEWSLETTER

The Newsletter seeks to promote scholarship on and interest in Dos Passos' writings and biography. It will publish news items, as well as notes, letters, and queries, on relevant subjects. Among these subjects are Dos Passos criticism, work in progress, manuscript locations and accessions, bibliographies, and textual scholarship. Because of limitations on space, most items will be short, usually a column or under.

For replies or return of manuscripts, contributors should send, along with their submissions, stamped envelopes addressed to themselves. They should address all queries and manuscripts to the editor, Melvin Landsberg, Department of English, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045-2115.

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narrative sections—contribute to the brilliance and depth of *U.S.A.*

Interspersed amid the sections on the lives of the twelve major fictional characters, we get sections of three literary devices: “Newsreel,” consisting of newspaper headlines, bits of newspaper stories, advertisements, and lyrics from popular songs of the time; “The Camera Eye,” incidents from Dos Passos’ life, which he narrates in an impressionistic manner; and short non-fictional biographies, often in free verse, of important figures of the era. Altogether there sixty-seven chapters of “Newsreel,” fifty-one of “The Camera Eye,” and twenty-seven biographies.

These serve as choral accompaniments to the stories of the twelve major fictional characters. Thus Charley Anderson’s career in *The Big Money* has as accompaniments biographies of Frederick Winslow Taylor—the industrial efficiency expert—, Henry Ford, Thorstein Veblen—author of *The Engineers and the Price System*—and Wilbur and Orville Wright.

*U.S.A.* is endlessly rich. Our twelve fictional characters live in a complex social medium—exemplified by the biographies and the “Newsreels”—and they, like the author of “The Camera Eye,” are shaping their personal characters and fates every day. Juxtapositions, both within sections (narrative or auxiliary) and from section to section, produce much of the power and meaning of the trilogy.

The trilogy is an extraordinarily energetic work, its energy being due partly to these juxtapositions. But its energy is due at least as much to the language, which is most spectacular in the biographies.

Can one forget the tribute to Senator Robert La Follette for his stand in the U.S. Senate in 1917?

He was one of “the little group of willful men expressing no opinion but their own” who stood out against Woodrow Wilson’s armed ship bill that made war with Germany certain; they called it a filibuster, but it was six men with nerve straining to hold back a crazy steamroller with their bare hands...

In a book review that Dos Passos wrote in college, “Conrad’s *Lord Jim*,” he declared that Conrad’s novels furnish “mental grindstone.” This is certainly true of his own *U.S.A.* As with most great works of fiction, what you find in the trilogy depends very much on the intellect, background, experience, and imagination you bring to it.

An example of such reader-writer interdependence may be found in Jean-Paul Sartre’s essay “John Dos Passos and *1919*” (1938), an analysis of Dos Passos’ narrative style. It stresses his mechanical rendering of his characters’ words and deeds, and links the resultant portrayals to the way in which capitalist society affects the characters’ behavior. Sartre closes with the unequivocal statement: “I regard Dos Passos as the greatest writer of our time.”

Sometimes the most important fact about a situation or experience—here I am concerned with literary experience—is so pervasive that we overlook it. I think that this is the situation with Dos Passos’ *U.S.A.* I have described the twelve major individual characters. But the most important character in the trilogy is not Moorehouse or Mary French or Charley Anderson, etc. Rather it is the one that sticks like Krazy Glue once we think of it as a character—the United States of America. This is true in the same sense that the most important character in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* is not Gulliver, but mankind. As Americans watch the twelve major human characters live out their lives, they may be so accustomed to the country which these characters inhabit that they lose sight of it as a subject.

We begin with the size of the country, almost half a continent. The same kind of novel could not be written about Holland. Mac, the first fictional character we encounter, grows up in Middletown (Connecticut), and Chicago. Leaving his uncle in Chicago and setting out to make his own way in life, he travels from Saginaw, Michigan, to Seattle (by way of Winnipeg, Banff, and Vancouver, in Canada), then to Portland, San Francisco, Goldfield (Nevada), San Diego, Los Angeles, Yuma (Arizona) and El Paso, before he crosses into Juarez, in Mexico. In Portland, while hopping a freight train, he misses his footing and becomes separated from Ike Hall, a young I.W.W. member with whom he has been traveling. “That was the last he saw of Ike Hall,” Dos Passos writes. It’s an immense country.

Everywhere in Mac’s wanderings we are on ships or trains or in hotels or construction camps. We encounter railroad brakemen, prostitutes, printers, waitresses, etc., and see how they act and learn what they say. The same is true, in different forms, of the travels of many of the other characters. We have a Whitmanian sweep of the United States.

But where is the freedom Whitman idealized? Obvious vestiges of European feudalism disappeared here at about the time of the American Revolution. The United States is still a relatively free land for white men. But a now-predominating industrial capitalism wishes to erase opposition. Soldiers in Goldfield try to prevent I.W.W. agitators from entering the town during a miners’ strike, and Mac pretends to be a book salesman to get in. Ben Compton is horribly beaten by sheriff’s deputies in Everett, Washington, when the I.W.W. attempts to hold a meeting there. When the United States enters World War I—for Dos Passos a capitalist war—dissent against the conflict is punished fiercely.

Non-whites usually fare worse than economic radicals. Dos Passos’ United States is a country dominated politically and economically by people of northern European origin. The Sacco-Vanzetti affair, which is important in the Mary French narrative and climactic in the “The Camera Eye” and “Newsreel,” is the fullest and most dramatic illustration of ethnic persecution. And where in Dos Passos’ *U.S.A.* are blacks and Mexicans? So far down in the

nation's social hierarchy that they are noticeable mostly in the remarks of the "whites" (a category that doesn't include Italians and Hispanics).

In an early "Camera Eye" section, Dos Passos' mother tells him of her going to Mexico with the elder Dos Passos in a private railroad car before the boy was born. She was frightened by rifle shots fired from the back of the train. "But it was alright," she says, "turned out to be nothing but a little shooting they'd been only shooting a greaser that was all."

Doc, a heavy-drinking Floridian who converses with Charley Anderson on a boat from New Orleans to New York, says that he wants to get to France in a volunteer ambulance corps before the war goes bellyup. And when they have drunk two quarts of Bacardi—the narrative continues—"Doc was saying he didn't believe in white men shootin' each other up, only niggers, and started going round the boat lookin' for that damn shine steward to kill him just to prove it..."

But the non-radical "white" majority have stresses of their own. In most societies in history, people have performed the same work that their parents and grandparents did, and have had the same social status. A major fact about the United States that Dos Passos depicts is that this need not be so—and often cannot be so—here. Both Moore-house and Stoddard are from working class families, and both are determined to be business successes. Margo Dowling while in California buys, on payments, an old Rolls Royce displaying a coat of arms on it. Then with her husband acting as uniformed chauffeur, she sets out to impress people.

The point of the final piece in *U.S.A.*, "Vag," is that the American dream of rising economically has become less and less realizable. While Vag thumbs for a ride on the road, he sees and hears a transcontinental airplane overhead. Dos Passos contrasts the starving Vag with a businessman passenger on the plane, who vomits his steak dinner into a carton.

The airplane in this final piece reminds us also that there is a history of transportation in the trilogy. In an early section of "The Camera Eye" we found Dos Passos traveling with his parents in a horse-drawn cab, and later, in a biography, we encountered Henry Ford mass producing the automobile.

A more general point is that twentieth century America is a country with rapidly changing technologies. When we last glimpse Margo Dowling, there is gossip that she doesn't have a voice for talking pictures, and that her career is ending. Mac's uncle Tim, a printer and ironically a socialist, buys a linotype machine; and an old German typesetter working for him says: "Fifty-five years a printer, and now when I'm old I'll have to carry hods to make a living." One of Dos Passos' major themes in *U.S.A.* is that most American inventors have known and cared nothing about the social consequences of their inventions.

There is much that we might add about Dos Passos' portrayal of the country. One subject would be the role of women. Typically, women make their way socially and

economically through the favor of men; Janey Williams, Eleanor Stoddard, and Margo Dowling offer examples. What could be more significant about Dos Passos' portrayal of public life and power from the 1890s through 1936 than the fact that only one biography of a woman appears in his trilogy?

Still another feature of Dos Passos' United States, like many of the others a continuing feature, is immigration. Uncle Tim's typesetter, Ben Compton's parents, and Sacco and Vanzetti are a few of the immigrants. Millions of people have been entering in every decade—a fact that distinguishes the country, historically and sociologically, for almost any other. The United States which Dos Passos depicts, and which we still know today, is dynamic and ever-changing.

A huge place, three thousand miles across, with over a hundred million ethnically diverse people, seacoasts, lake shores, prairies, cities and villages, linked by railroads and highways—everywhere the particulars of hotels, bungalows, frame houses, restaurants—and everywhere the talk of the people. This ever-changing country is the chief character in the three books, and every human character, every place, every custom, every action, every word is an element in it.

## EDITIONS OF *U.S.A.*

The Library of America edition of *U.S.A.* (1996), edited by Daniel Aaron and Townsend Ludington, is a single clothbound volume of almost 1,300 pages in the Library's standard format. Its price is \$40.00. Unlike earlier editions, the Library's edition has continuous pagination through all three parts of the trilogy. And unlike Houghton Mifflin's 1946 three-volume edition and its one-volume Sentry edition—both of which are out of print—and the current New American Library three-volume paperbound edition, it does not have Reginald Marsh's illustrations. (These were not part of the original trilogy.) What this recent edition offers, as appendices at the end of the volume, are a chronology of Dos Passos' life (eighteen pages); a "chronology of world events cited in *U.S.A.*" (seven pages); and notes on, and to, the text (twenty-one pages). Its notes to the text are minimal, but can be helpful, as can the two chronologies. Unlike the New American Library volumes, which have an introduction by Alfred Kazin, the Library's edition offers no critical introduction.

R.R. Bowker's *Books in Print, 1997-98* lists the Library of America edition as the only clothbound one of *U.S.A.* available. According to Bowker, the three parts of *U.S.A.* in the paperback editions described above are available from NAL-Dutton at the following prices: *The Forty-Second Parallel*, \$4.50 and \$6.95; *1919*, \$7.95; *The Big Money*, \$5.95 and \$7.95. However, Bowker's information on these paperbacks is dated. Anyone wanting them should, before ordering, check availability and prices with the publisher.

## REGINALD MARSH'S ILLUSTRATIONS TO *U.S.A.*

Houghton Mifflin's three-volume hardbound edition of *U.S.A.*, with generously sized illustrations by Reginald Marsh and a handsome format, appeared when Dos Passos was fifty, just as the Library of America edition appeared in Dos Passos' centenary year. Marsh's illustrations were prepared specifically for Houghton Mifflin's 1946 edition.

A later edition of *The Big Money* (part of a three-volume set, with Marsh's illustrations), published by Houghton Mifflin in 1960, contained an appendage "Reginald Marsh: A Biographical Note and Critical Summary," by Henry McBride, Administrator of the National Gallery of Arts, in Washington, D.C. Here McBride wrote:

Given a free hand to illustrate whatever he chose, he [Marsh] re-read the whole work twice. On the second reading he underlined passages he wanted to depict. Then he made a drawing for each, directly in India ink without preliminary penciling. This method gave the drawings

a special quality of spontaneity and freshness, and to compensate for mistakes he simply made an excessive number of drawings, throwing out those he did not like.

"I didn't want to miss anything," he said. All the drawings were "from the head—no models" (504).

The illustrations got extensive discussion in Richard N. Masteller's "Caricatures in Crisis: The Satiric Vision of Reginald Marsh and John Dos Passos," *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 3 (Spring 1989), 23-45.

Masteller writes: "In about one month, Marsh conceived and completed...more than 500 ink drawings, 470 of which appear in the published volumes" (32).

During the course of the work, Marsh noted: "J. Dos Passos called up and came down to see my drawings. We are in perfect agreement..."

"In 1951," Masteller says, "Dos Passos inscribed the copy of the trilogy now in the Library of Congress: 'I've always thought this was one of the best illustrated editions of recent years'" (23-24).