

INTRODUCTION

It is now twenty-five years since *Only Yesterday* was first published and it is time to say what has long been apparent—that this is an American classic. It is by far the best account of all that happened in the United States during the wonderfully wacky 1920's. It established a pattern for books of social history which other writers have imitated but have not been able to improve. It has been widely read and enjoyed—more than half a million copies have been issued in the United States, England, Italy, Japan and Russia. The demand continues and no doubt it will continue, as long as Americans want to read wise and witty books about their past.

Frederick Lewis Allen, who wrote this book, was a Harvard-trained editor and connoisseur of human behavior who mixed the fascinating little details of history with the deeds of famous men. In *Only Yesterday* he wrote of Mah Jong and H. L. Mencken, of Couéism and Calvin Coolidge, of Listerine's flights of advertising fancy and Lindbergh's flight to Paris. In his modest preface to the original edition Allen suggested that time might make some changes in his judgments of major events. Yet one of the remarkable things about this book is the way it stands up in the light of later research. Since it was published we have had complete and scholarly accounts of the Wall Street crash of 1929, of the Harding scandals, of prohibition, of the politics and diplomacy of the period. Yet none of these books has essentially changed the overall picture that Allen gave us. And all of them have drawn on his facts and his interpretation.

Of course *Only Yesterday* is very fortunate in its general subject. It deals with the most delightful decade that has occurred

in the lifetime of anyone present. I am prejudiced in this respect, and so is anyone else who was lucky enough to grow up in the twenties. If you compare the ten years that followed World War I with the ten that came after World War II, how can there be any choice? Which menace would you rather have—Al Capone or Joe McCarthy? Which oracle from Detroit—Henry Ford or Charles E. Wilson? Which homerun hitter—the mighty Babe Ruth, or Mickey Mantle, with his bubble gum, and cheeks of downy yellow? Which kind of national scandal do you prefer—Teapot Dome with its gushers of oil and fountains of dollars, or the one and a half mink coats that got passed around in Harry Truman's Washington?

The comparisons could go on forever, and they would all be in favor of the twenties. Take the writers alone: Scott Fitzgerald, and Sinclair Lewis in his prime, and the young Hemingway, and Thomas Wolfe. Who is there to put beside them? In the twenties, we are told on page 101 of *Only Yesterday*, the movies still provided "beautiful jazz babies, champagne baths, midnight revels, petting parties in the purple dawn, all ending in one terrific smashing climax that makes you gasp." In recent times we have had an uninviting choice between Dr. Kinsey and Elvis Presley.

All of which leads us to the inescapable point—the 1920's were the last decade in which American individualism ran rampant, before the craze (and the need) for security squeezed us all into a conforming mood. Of course we had "normalcy" in the twenties, just as we have had "equilibrium" in the fifties. Of course we had golf-playing middle-of-the-road Presidents in both of the postwar decades. And of course it all ended in 1929 with a grand smash and a grim depression, and of course the politicians tell us that if we behave ourselves *that* can never happen again.

The future, it seems, is a never-ending vista of billboarded satisfactions, with automobiles colored like bathroom tiles, and

INTRODUCTION

xi

refrigerators filled with peach ice cream. Somehow it doesn't seem as stimulating as the Model T's and bathtub gin of *Only Yesterday*.

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