

BOOK I

**SON OF A FAMOUS MAN: THE DISCORD OF
YOUTH**

He was a man of intense loyalties — to his family, his friends, his teachers, his students, to every school he ever attended, but above all to Cornell, and to his country... He was an immensely complicated man — in a way noble, in a way intensely human and vulnerable. He was a famous man, and deservedly so.

— Cornell University Professor Alfred Kahn,
eulogizing his friend and colleague Clinton
Rossiter, a suicide at 52.

Chapter 1

MY BACK PAGES: HEROES AND ROGUES

Oh, the history books tell it, they tell it so well.
The cavalries charged, the Indians fell.
The cavalries charged, the Indians died.
Oh, the country was young, with God on our side.

— Bob Dylan, “With God on Our Side”

It is a self-serving conceit of adults that children are best served by fairy tales with easy answers, by histories where the noble prevail over the scabrous, and by ancestors who are heroic rather than flawed. Given a choice, children are drawn to Grimm more than Disney, to complex characters more than cardboard cut-outs, and to the drama of a murky world more than the banality of a rosy one.

As a child in the 1950s, my spirit was shaped by the convenient myth of heroism, that desperate, pervasive effort of adult society, hiding like the Wizard of Oz behind a curtain and some sound effects, to disguise its frailties as pomp. I was as happily duped as the second-grade children I observed in the 1970s acting out the same skits on Washington’s birthday I once had — the cherry tree, the silver dollar, and the crossing of the Delaware. How, I asked the teacher, can you lionize this man without telling these descendants of slaves and masters that he was a slave-holder? She replied that it would just confuse them. I replied that talking about one of the essential facts of American history could hardly be as confusing to the children and their country as pretending that it didn’t exist

By ignoring the dark side, by chanting a mantra of self-congratulation, societies enshrine lies as history. America’s staged celebration in 1991 of the rout of Iraq was simply another manifestation of the primitive urge to blind ourselves to our shortcomings by, to paraphrase Walker Evans’ book on the Great Depression, praising famous men. The counterpart to wallowing in dubious victory is the national amnesia that shrouds defeat, like the

failure to admit the crime and repair the damage from our arrogant expedition to Indochina.

A Polish friend of mine, when accosted by Jews for not rejecting her people because they allegedly helped the Germans kill their people, has a sound standard for judging today's Poles by yesterday's history. She doesn't trivialize the allegation by noting that anti-Semitism had existed in Europe for a millennium but that only the Nazis built and operated gas-chambers, or ridicule it by noting that Poland was an occupied country; she doesn't recount the awful calculus created by the German army's devastation of any village caught hiding Jews, or point to the thousands of Poles who still risked the lives of their families and neighbors to do so. Instead, she seeks the answer for the past in the present: do today's Poles talk honestly about the history of anti-Semitism and their role in it, and do they honor Jewishness and protect the few remaining Jews?

I accept her standard. A civilized people should be obsessed with improving the current life of those they have once mistreated, and learning how the mistreatment came to be. As his first act as president of short-lived Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel called on his citizens to apologize for discrimination against ethnic Germans 45 years before, and to accept responsibility for not doing more to stop discrimination against ethnic Germans 45 years before or to resist the communist life they had been forced to live. In the United States, we of the Caucasian ruling culture have lacked this strength to understand and accept our history. We want to think about Vietnamese, African-Americans, and Indians as if the past and our people's amoral destruction of their people did not exist, as if history started today. Yet we acknowledge the role of history in national consciousness by telling tales of valor and genius, from Christopher Columbus's perseverance to the courage under fire that the commander of US forces in the war with Iraq, Stormin' Norman Schwarzkopf, showed two decades earlier during his tour in Vietnam. We've spent millions on parades and plaques for Vietnam veterans and nothing on the reconstruction of Vietnam.

If you question the heroic version of our past, you will quickly be labeled a "blame America firster," in the words of Ronald Reagan's UN ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, and a "nattering nabob of negativism," in the words former speechwriter William Safire put in the mouth of that paragon of American values, Spiro Agnew. Sometimes these silly labels actually work: national security advisor Robert MacFarlane testified that

he didn't voice his opposition to the contra war because he was afraid that Kirkpatrick would "call me a commie."

The ruling culture feels compelled to enforce its heroic myths. During the 500th anniversary of Columbus's voyage, Lynn Cheney, the director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, cut off funding for one project because it included the uncomfortable but well-founded characterization of Columbus's treatment of the first Indians he came upon as "genocide." Columnist George Will called her action a well-aimed shot in a cultural war as important to America as the war with Iraq being led by her husband, Defense Secretary Dick Cheney. He was right, if you substitute "America's rulers" for "America."

This anti-intellectual attitude toward history obscures our future as well as our past. Historian Richard Hofstadter has written that "the precise line between useful and valid criticism of any society and a destructive alienation from its essential values is not always easy to draw," but the cumulative weight of our self-congratulation would require years of scathing soul-searching by the media and the intelligentsia before that line would even be approached. The apology and reparations by Congress to Japanese-Americans imprisoned during World War II shows that Kirkpatrick, Safire, and Cheney notwithstanding, we at times do have the potential to acknowledge our past and treat its wounds. My childhood was not one of those times.

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By silence and exaggeration, as a child I was misled into abstracting as demi-gods rather than understanding as human beings the crucial characters in the history of our town, Ithaca, New York: its first white settlers and the man who founded the university, Cornell, that dominates it today. I was raised on stolen land, like all Americans, like all people, if you follow the trail of tears back far enough. Angles and Saxons storming into the green and scepter'd isle, slaughtering the Celts and driving them north; the Viet rooting out the Khmer: in the mist of time, every patch of land on every continent was stolen, only to have the thieves' progeny lose it later. The land to which I was born is so recently stolen, however, that its particulars need not be murky to its citizens, and indeed the accounts of the thieves, our first establishment, and the victims, our first homeless, can be easily found in the dusty archives of the local historical society.

Before September 24, 1779, this soothing jewel of flatland, surrounded on three sides by thousand-foot slopes and looking north up one of the "finger lakes" was called Coreorgonel. It was

a principal village of the Cayuga, one of the six nations of farmers and hunters comprising the Iroquois Confederacy. The Cayuga had controlled the lake, which was then called Tiohero and now is called Cayuga, for at least 300 years. There were some 20,000 Iroquois scattered in villages from the Hudson River to Lake Erie, of whom perhaps 2,000 were Cayuga.

The small number of Cayuga after so many years of settlement was a measure of the high rate of disease and early death in their lives, and perhaps it accounted for their willingness in 1753 to adopt a small band of Sioux ancestry, the Tutelo. In the 17th century, the Tutelo had lived at the fringe of the Powhatan confederacy in central Virginia, but they had been displaced by the ripple effect of English expansion and forced steadily northward through a series of temporary protectorates until they sought, and received, formal adoption by the Cayuga. In 1771, the Tutelo were assigned to the land at the southern end of Tiohero. They had built it into a village of perhaps 40 houses surrounded by fields of corn and pumpkins by the day eight years later when 200 soldiers from the Continental Army under the command of Lt. Col. Henry Dearborn burned their houses, stores, and fields.

In the years leading up to the Revolution, the British had promised the Iroquois that their lands would be unmolested, while the Americans were constantly pushing their settlements westward into Iroquois territory. The British had kept a similar promise after the seven-year war against the French in the 1750s, in which the Iroquois were also their allies. The Iroquois war-chief Thayendanegea had seen the British Army defeat American invaders at Montreal in 1775, and a year later he visited the King in London, a city whose population and development made all American cities pale. These comparisons led him to throw in with the Tories. All the Iroquois nations except the Oneida followed him, and all of them — including the Oneida — were thrown to the winds of history within a decade, as victorious American soldiers made their way west to upstate New York, bearing land titles they had been issued in lieu of pay.

Dearborn's commander, Gen. John Sullivan, was ordered by commander-in-chief George Washington to "lay waste" to the lands of the five hostile Iroquois nations, who had moved beyond isolated raids on farmhouses to form an army that had killed 600 Continental soldiers in battles at Wyoming Valley, Pennsylvania, and Oriskany, New York. Sullivan's force far outnumbered the Iroquois warriors, and except for one sharp, short confrontation near Elmira, New York, the frustrated defenders could only watch

from the wings as his 5,000 soldiers ravaged the confederacy, systematically destroying its villages and fields.

Dearborn marched down the west side of Cayuga lake, ordered by Sullivan to destroy every artifact of human life he encountered; Lt. Col. William Butler carried out a similar mission on the east side. Butler's task was more laborious, as there were three major Cayuga villages and an orchard of 1,500 peach trees to be destroyed on his side of the lake, while there were only a few small settlements on the other, so Dearborn reached the village at the south end first, and destroyed it. The Cayuga of Coreorgonel scattered after the soldiers left, since winter was coming on and it was too late for another planting. Some fled to Canada and some wandered as refugees for a few years until New York signed a treaty giving them a reservation at the marshy north end of the lake. Within fifteen years, despite the treaty, they were driven off by more settlers. The remnants of the Cayuga nation ended up on reservations in Canada and in Oklahoma, entering the minds of the new inhabitants of their land only through lawsuits in the 1970s and 1980s that threatened property titles.

The theft of my land came in the context of a war in which its previous owners chose the wrong side, but it would have occurred even if they hadn't. The hordes of Europeans flocking to America took whatever they could hold, invented a rationale for it that comported with their Christian culture, and then declared the beginning of the history, law, and neighborliness on which we pride ourselves and raise our children. That is why I could grow up in the shadow of a nearly successful genocide of 20,000 people and be completely ignorant of it. Our lessons in Ithaca's history would start with a glancing reference to Sullivan's "march" — which sounds more like a parade than an invasion — and quickly move into the exploits of the "settlers." The history of the Iroquois was treated as undocumentable myth, but it was the treatment itself that was the fairy tale.

By virtue of geography, the Iroquois had been the initial gatekeepers for the fur trade between the colonial powers Holland, France, and England and the Indian nations to the west. With the establishment of the Covenant Chain in 1677, they became the formal maintainer of peace between England and the inland nations, creating what one of its chroniclers calls the "ambiguous Iroquois empire." Empires, of course, don't happen by chance. In the thirty years before the Covenant Chain confirmed their supremacy, the Iroquois had done to their rivals exactly what Sullivan eventually did to them: the Huron, to the west, and the

Mahican, to the east, were virtually exterminated in campaigns led by Iroquois nations. This was no myth. All the warfare and all the negotiations with the colonial powers were documented not just in the record-bearing artifacts of the six nations, but also in the minutes and reports of the Dutch, French and English governments — for those who cared to know.

The settlers around Ithaca were hardy men and women who with industry and invention coaxed a living from the land and the water, but they were also weak people, unable to resist preying on the property of others, and so at least as savage as the “savages” they disparaged and displaced. They couldn’t have been the heroes we learned they were in school, because they committed the crime of silence, the ultimate crime for the only animals with the ability to talk. They never talked about the time before their people, as if it hadn’t existed, and their successors continued this crime.

I went through every possible level of schooling in Ithaca, from the Cornell Nursery School to a Cornell doctorate, yet had to learn on my own the history of the people who were on the land before ours, and who gave us as much spiritually as we took physically. To the extent that our past is examined at all, Americans are taught that the transformation of a class-based, conformist European character into an American character distinguished by egalitarianism and individualism arose from the demands of the inanimate frontier of a harsh wilderness. I was long out of school before I came across the argument in Robert Pirsig’s novel *Lila* that who we are today is due much more to the animate frontier of Indians, their example, and their values. This failure to teach the inconvenient past is a far deeper indictment of our system of education than the low percentage of high-school graduates who can find Australia on a map or match Aristotle with a philosophy.

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Cornell University, the dominant institution in Ithaca, where inquiry is hailed as its own reward, was also strangely reticent about inquiring into its shady origins. “The Founder,” Ezra Cornell, had created Western Union and made the telegraph a viable technology by perseverance and risk-taking...and not a small amount of tricky financing, broken pledges and discarded partners. In the 1860s, he decided to found a university in his city. Characteristically, success came from a stunning breach of promise and law, a mixing of public and private roles that was bitterly attacked then and, unfortunately, could never even be conceived of today.

Cornell was serving in the state senate as chair of one of the two committees relevant to his goal. He promised his colleagues that he would donate a staggering half a million dollars to found a university bearing his name, but only if the legislature appropriated a token annual contribution and, more importantly, designated it the state's sole "land-grant" college. Congress had distributed to the states the rights to millions of acres of Indian timberland in western territories. The states could sell these lands and use the proceeds to support their agricultural and industrial colleges. As the most populous state, New York had received a huge land-grant, a million acres.

Cornell originally faced resistance to his plan from the chair of the other key committee, Andrew Dickson White, but in the next session White had a change of heart. The legislature codified the bargain in 1865, and White went out through the revolving door to become the new university's first president. Cornell immediately reneged on his part of the bargain by donating to the university not half a million dollars but rather a pledge, backed by Western Union stock, for that amount. On his crucial contribution, he kept his word late, if at all.

For the next nine years, the university lived in financial crisis, with the board of trustees begging their chairman to pay off his pledge, and with Cornell instead providing just enough cash to forestall closing. He bought the land-grant rights from the state privately, promising to turn over all profits from future sales to the university. Of course, had Cornell simply sold the stock and paid his pledge, the university could have bought the lucrative rights itself, and it is not clear why he refused to do so. Perhaps he had committed the same stock as collateral on other projects, and it appears that he did sell some to finance ill-fated railroads into Ithaca. Certainly such dual commitment or sale would have broken the law, and simply by delaying payment, he was more than bending it.

Disaster struck Cornell's fortune in 1873 when the value of his Western Union and railroad stocks fell to almost nothing. As his health failed him, he made a final, desperate effort to make good his pledge. The hagiography that grew up around the Founder makes it nearly impossible to tell whether he fully paid the half-million in the generous settling of accounts around his death-bed in 1874. All the available biographies assume that the pledge was met by counting against it Cornell's private purchase of the land-grant, but some of the considerable profits from his land-grant sales could easily have been included.

Many newspapers and legislators attacked Ezra Cornell during his lifetime for the murky mixture of his public, institutional, and private roles, and particularly for the possibility of him profiting from his trusteeship of the millions of government dollars represented by the land-grant. A state commission cleared him of the charge during his life, but no inquiry was made into his dubious death-bed accounting. The charge itself was almost meaningless, since Cornell's roles were so fluid and so devoted to leaving as much money as possible to the university. The finances of Cornell the man had become indistinguishable from those of Cornell the university: had the man profited by his involvement with the university, he would have returned the profits, before or after his death.

In the end, Ezra Cornell's contribution to Cornell University was not his largesse, but his energy and acumen. His ploy in the legislature created a house of cards that stood without its intended foundation; his refusal to cash in the land-grant at moderate prices eventually created an enormous endowment that dwarfed his original pledge. He was great in a pragmatic if not a moral sense, a Founder but a hustler as well, a magician, like the high-flying financiers of the 1980s, daring and amoral enough to make something out of nothing or many somethings out of one thing for as long as the illusion would last.

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All this knowledge, this balance of the good and the bad in one's people, would only come to me many years later. As a child I swallowed whole the myth of heroism, living in a comforting dream-world of legends. Upon arrival at nursery school, I would inform Mrs. Taietz, the nurse who used a daily throat examination as a pretense to give a few special minutes to each of us, that I was not Caleb, but Robin Hood, Davey Crockett, George Washington, Francis Marion (South Carolina's "Swamp Fox" during the War of Independence) or John Mosby (Virginia's "Gray Ghost" during the Civil War). The strains of their television theme songs echoed in my head as I charged around the playground, fighting selflessly for my good men and modest ladies.

My identification with heroes mixed easily with my identification with animals and objects, as my mother's notes taken at the time show:

Caleb likes to be a certain character for days on end.
He is most often a little boy kitty or a cowboy kitty.
He is also, often, Chuggy the engine, and I am Lucy,
the Blue Caboose...This is the year of Davey

Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier. Caleb can sing the entire song in tune, and makes up variations on the story, which he relates. For his birthday, he says, he wants “Davey Crockett everything.”

My fantasies were serious. I thought Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday really were there in the theater with my father and older brother when I was denied permission to go to an evening movie with them, bringing this inconsolable wail to my lips when I answered the phone that night: “He’s not here. He’s gone to The Gunfight at the OK Corral!” Once I learned to read, my world became populated with the characters I communed with late into the night, hiding under my covers with a flash-light. By second grade, I had devoured the score of books about the good-hearted denizens of the Land of Oz, which I would walk the two miles downtown to buy with my carefully hoarded allowance, my cunningly extorted bonuses for chores, and the final dollars sometimes stolen from my mother’s purse. She noted when I was eight:

The land of Oz is perhaps more real to him than the earth he walks on. He draws maps of it, makes lists of the inhabitants, believes he has been there and taken part in the adventures of Dorothy and her friends.

My deep identification with the characters threw me for a loop when a spunky boy was revealed at the end of one book to be a girl, the lost princess Ozma of Oz, whom Mombi the Witch had transformed as a favor to the usurping Wizard. Glinda, the Good Witch of the South, put the screws to Mombi and made her reverse the spell. On one page there was Tip, the tow-headed orphan, a resourceful urchin with frogs and stones in his pockets, and, BOOM!, on the next page, like a lush butterfly emerging from a dull cocoon, there was the new Queen Ozma, a voluptuous vision with pouty red lips and streams of blond hair, her ample bosom partly revealed behind cascades of crinoline! I feverishly reread the preceding pages to see if I had somehow misinterpreted this very troubling development, which had left me stunned and gasping for breath. I always felt an queasy, illicit excitement whenever I would bump into Ozma in sequels...

Apparently, worrying about whether I was female or male didn’t last long. By third grade, I was racing through the Cayuga Heights Elementary School library’s 126-book series on the Hardy Boys and their courageous detective work, and the scores of

hagiographies of the childhoods of famous American men, all of whom apparently emerged from the womb as little adults, strong and silent, obedient to their saintly parents but standing boldly against the small-minded in society, child-men of few but meaningful words, with reasoned judgments and firm convictions. I would fall asleep imagining a noble death somewhere between that of diseased baseball star Lou Gehrig and executed Revolutionary War spy Nathan Hale, regretting that I had but one game to give to my country. Then in fourth grade, which we spent in England while my father taught at Cambridge University, my mother and I became partners in the world of the Greeks and Romans, reading and writing about their wars and their gods as if they were all around us.

All that remains of my labors are a rhymed paean to battles from Marathon to Thermopylae and heroes from Menelaus to Alexander, and an ode to Apollo, which I composed with tears streaming down my cheeks after reading of his friend Hyacinth's untimely death during a game of quoits. The first and last verses of the ode show the gallant state of my mind:

Said Lord Apollo on the earth so green
 "I would rather here than on Olympus be seen,
 So with merry Hyacinthus I may roam,
 For unlike women he has no home"....

My heart is with you my Lord Apollo
 For at Hyacinthus death thou didst moan
 And thy tears thou did not swallow
 Upon thy purple flowered throne

I returned to America carrying the old world in my head and on my back, dreaming of Horatio at the bridge and Leonidas at the pass and wearing my St. Faith's school uniform — red and black striped kneesocks, jacket, beanie and tie, and flannel shorts and sandals — to Cayuga Heights school, which caused first mockery and then imitation in my fifth grade class. Both my heroes and my dress were soon updated. My friends and I became aficionados of the dozen James Bond thrillers that, according to our Secret Agent's code of conduct, had to be shop-lifted in order to be legitimate. The discovery that both my father and President Kennedy kept the complete set of this man's adventures at their bedside made my study them all the more assiduous. I knew what Mr. Bond wore, drank, smoked, drove, and said to life's inevitable

assholes, and I assumed that any other type of behavior was too tacky for words.

My parents had laudably resolved not to have a television, but that resolution became untenable when I was still in nursery school. I would frequently run away from home in protest, pulling my red wagon loaded with stuffed animals and sports equipment behind me to my best friend Dougy Pritchard's house. Mrs. Pritchard not only let you watch all the TV you wanted, but even brought out milk and cookies to you while you sat there watching! The TV soon entered our house, but viewing was limited to one hour a day. Despite this restriction, in elementary school I watched years' worth of western movies and shows at friends' houses or surreptitiously at home, snapping off the TV, which lived in my room, and placing a sticky black square over the tell-tale, fading white dot when I'd hear my parents coming upstairs. By dint of repetition, I absorbed the lessons of Zorro, the Lone Ranger, Bat Masterson, Marshall Dillon, General Custer, Kit Carson, and all the rest of the dashing, upright heroes at whose feet loose and proper women alike would fall unrequited, as easily as all those stupid hordes of grunting Indians and dirty Mexicans would fall from their guns. I was part of the few, the proud, the settlers and the cavalry, hooked by the surging music and thundering hooves in these free antecedents of today's paid advertisements for the Marines.

For better or worse, I revered these heroes, and I think now that it might just have turned out to be for the better. As the reader can see from my treatment of General Sullivan and Ezra Cornell, I've more than learned to compensate for my childhood indoctrination. By the time I was in junior high school, I would read the Ithaca Journal cynically each afternoon, trading the sections with my father while I lay on the floor at one end of the sun-drenched living room and he sat in his chair at the other, and hurling at him my disgust with the horrible state of the world and the way he and the media accepted it. My attitude toward the media can be seen in an excerpt from a letter I wrote to the Journal at 13 after a story appeared about firefighters rescuing "a lad about 11" who had himself been trying to rescue a dog from a gorge. I clearly didn't like being portrayed as young or in need of rescue: "The reporter covering the story used beautiful adjectives and had his commas in the right places, but his completely false statements proved true the old saying, 'The news doesn't happen, it is made.'"

I started to take this contrary approach to the conventional wisdom as part of my necessary rebellion against my parents as a

teenager — long before I read my father's books and found out that he was a leading practitioner of the celebratory, optimistic treatment of American government and history I so mistrusted. My belligerent attitude quickly canceled out the specifics of the myths I had imbibed, leaving behind just the spirit of heroism, a belief that people can be special, can make a difference, and should always try to do so. There was, however, one hangover that faded too slowly. I was well into my twenties (well, O.K., thirties) before I realized that I didn't have to act toward women or have women act toward me as if I were James Bond or Wyatt Earp.

The cultural conspiracy detailed in this chapter can not by itself explain the ease with which the myth of heroism took root in my heart. Why did the thrilling books and stirring songs seem to resonate so much more strongly in me than in my friends? I think that my fantasy world seemed particularly plausible because in my real world I was also surrounded by heroes. These were real heroes of flesh and blood, my father and his friends, the intellectual stars who sparkled so brightly over the Cornell campus.

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