

INTRODUCTION

BY KENNETH B. MURDOCK

Nature's Nation is much more than a collection of essays by a great scholar. It is, I think, an indispensable guide to full understanding of Perry Miller's achievement, in effect a summary of the basic elements of his thought. The essays it contains, some of them published before but not given the attention they deserved and others now printed for the first time, reveal the variety of his interests, the wide range of his knowledge, his literary taste and stylistic skill, and his brilliance as a teacher.

I know of no other volume of his which so clearly and succinctly discloses his central ideas and his scholarly principles. In it one can trace the development of his thinking from the day when, still a young student in college, he worked his way on a freighter to the banks of the Congo and there dedicated himself to the task of expounding "the innermost propulsion of the United States"—a task he devoted himself to for the rest of his life. In 1933 in *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts*, his first book, he wrote facetiously that he was "so very naive as to believe that the way men think has some influence upon their actions." Twenty-three years later in *Errand into the Wilderness* he declared: "I have difficulty imagining that anyone can be a historian without realizing that history itself is part of the life of the mind; hence I have been compelled to insist that the mind of man is the basic factor in human history."

The "new historians" of the 1920's and 30's, who insisted that men's economic motives and material successes and failures accounted for all their actions, seemed to Miller to be on the wrong track. "They were not getting at . . . the fundamental theme, assuming that such a theme even exists." He continued: "I am the last to decry monographs on stoves or bathtubs, or tax laws, banks, the conduct of presidential elections, or even inventories of artifacts. All this is the warp and woof of American history . . . It is true that the outside world cannot judge America unless it knows about the Wilmot Proviso and the chain store." But, he said, "I was condemned to another (I do not say a better) sort of quest."

This quest he felt must "begin at the beginning," and he chose to concentrate first on the Puritan migration to New England. He recognized the priority of the settlement of Virginia but he wanted "a coherence with which" he "could coherently begin." This he found in the ideas of the settlers in the northern colonies, ideas which, for a time at least, dominated their political and social as well as their ecclesiastical organization. In so doing, of course, he ran afoul of the "new historians." They in general