

## Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

### Motel California

Folks keep asking me when I'm going to write about California. (They generally lick their chops when they ask it. They seem to think I'm going to trash the place. I wonder why?) Anyway, yeah, it's true that I've been living in the Golden State for several months now, and I haven't said much about it. There's a reason for that.

You see, I came here intending just to lie low, do my work, and try to be unobtrusive. I took up volleyball and even bought some Birkenstock sandals (what my students back home call "Air Jesus"). I resolved to keep an open mind and a closed mouth. Guests don't criticize their hosts. It's only polite.

But Californians keep asking what I think about their state, and saying that I haven't been here long enough to have an opinion usually won't do. These people like their state a lot—folks in the Bay Area, especially, love it where they are—and they want to hear you agree with them.

Well, no Southerner should criticize folks for liking their state. It's right that Californians should like California. But elsewhere people don't always expect or even want outsiders to agree with them. Your average New Yorker, for instance, couldn't care less whether you like his state; in fact, if he thinks you're complaining about it, he'll try to top you with some horror story of his own. Southerners do get angry at outsiders' criticism, but we tend to believe you can't expect much else from Yankees. (Besides, without ignorant criticism to defend the South against, being a Southerner wouldn't be half so much fun.)

Anyway, when Californians insist that I tell them what I think, sometimes I can get off the hook by raving about the restaurants, the climate, and the scenery—all of which are truly won-

derful. But I don't like to lie outright, so when someone asks me point-blank about the people and their folkways, I have to tell them that I find California a strange place. I've told enough of them by now that I might as well tell you, too. Besides, I should be safely back home by the time this sees print.

Regular readers of this letter will know, of course, that California has no monopoly on strangeness, and also that I have nothing against strangeness, as such. But California is strange in strange ways. Almost every day brings some bizarre new observation: an aged coot roller-skating in the shopping mall, a photograph in the *Stanford Daily* of a coed shower in a Stanford residence hall, a flying squad of San Jose evangelists trying to exorcise San Francisco on Halloween, Ron Dellums's political opinions being taken seriously—I could go on and on.

What really lets me know I'm in a different culture, though, is that my otherwise normal California friends don't find these things remarkable. It's not that they've lost their capacity for wonder or shock—I can produce either with stories about the South. It's just that my friends and I are *used to* different things.

Beyond that, I think there really are differences in what we could call regional character. It's hard to write about this without gross generalizing. Sure, there are all kinds of exceptions, and I may be wrong, anyway—I did say that I just got here. It's also hard to write about this without taking cheap shots—I mean, coming to California and writing about rootlessness and narcissism is like going to England and writing about the food and the weather—but that's what I notice.

And it's not just me. R.W.B. Lewis tells about William James's impressions of the Bay Area. James got here in 1906, just in time for the great earthquake, which impressed him considerably. He was getting five thousand dollars for a short series of lectures at Stanford (on, among other things, the moral equivalent of war), and he had every reason to be happy. Like me, he

found the climate ideal, and the landscape stunning. In fact, Professor Lewis reports, James found everything pleasing, except the "social insipidity" and the "terrible 'historic vacuum and silence.'"

Well, I don't share James's stern New England view of insipidity (Southerners do their best to be pleasant, too), but I do know what he meant. California is, after all, a state where "judgmental" is a bad word. My buddy Don, visiting from Michigan, jokes that the license plates here ought to say "I'm OK, you're OK." (New York plates, he suggests, could say, "I'm OK, You Can Go F--- Yourself.") I haven't actually heard the word "mellow" since I got here, but those Doonesbury cartoons a few years ago were right on the money.

Take the way Californians deal with hostility. It's not what I'm used to. Where a Southerner would respond with counter-hostility, a Californian may want to help you *work through* it. In any case, the object of your hostility is likely to see it as *your* problem. (An essay in the *American Spectator* a while back talked about a good example, the passive-aggressive response of California salesclerks to irate customers.) What this means is that hostility does no good at all. It doesn't even make you feel better.

In any case, and for whatever reason, give credit where it's due: the level of civility in casual public interaction is the highest I've ever experienced outside the South. It's remarkable how seldom you hear voices raised in anger, at least at strangers, in public—at other drivers, say. When you do, it's likely to be some out-of-stater who doesn't care about bad karma.

James's "historic vacuum and silence" is real enough, too. Any building from before the First World War is ancient. When images of the mythic past turn up—say, in advertising—they're from the Gold Rush days. The Spanish era seems to survive only in place names, their original meanings long since forgotten. How else to explain "Los Altos Hills" or "Lake

Lagunita"? Who seriously thinks of Our Lady of the Angels in connection with El Lay, or of Santa Cruz as having anything to do with the cross of Christ?

The result, for some of us anyway, is reflected in one of my favorite California stories. When some professor (maybe Hugh Kenner?) who had taught out here for many years left to take a job back east, someone asked him how it felt to be leaving after all that time. He said, "Like checking out of a motel."

California, what I've seen of it, is like that: very pleasant, a good place to spend some time, but not somewhere you could actually get attached to. I'll leave with fond memories, but I won't miss it, exactly—not like I miss the South.

Most Californians seem to feel the same way. Many, in fact, don't even recognize that there's any other way to feel. So many came to California in the first place because they liked what it had to offer; if somewhere else offers more, they'll move on (as many now seem to be doing to Oregon). Location is just another consumer decision, a utilitarian, cost-benefit calculation—a different proposition from liking a place because it's your home. When Californians ask you to admire their state, they're asking you to compliment their discernment and good taste, just as they'd like you to admire their choice of automobile or wine.

Some people like to argue that the South is the most American part of America—usually as a compliment, though sometimes (as in a trashy book called *The Southern Mystique*) not. But John Crowe Ransom claimed in *I'll Take My Stand* that, no, the South

is the most *European* part of the nation. I now think Ransom was right. The South is different from the rest of the country, but especially from California, in many of the same ways Europe is different from America as a whole.

Two of my friends out here are Englishmen. Both grew up loving American music (jazz for one, rock and roll for the other); both came here straight out of university, became citizens, and haven't looked back. Both despise England; both love America. Both told me, in almost exactly the same words, "If you like America, you should like California."

I can see that. It's easy for a Southerner to make fun of California as a sort of New Age Florida, just as it's easy for Europeans to make fun of bumptious, naive, self-absorbed America. But the place can be exhilarating. The liberation from the past, from attachment to a social and even physical "place," the freedom to pursue happiness any way you can afford, the sheer newness and flux and sense of unending *possibility*—that's what America used to offer, and California still does. And that can be powerfully alluring, particularly to someone unhappy with a more rigid or traditional place—a place, that is, like England, or the South.

Yeah, I can see it. But it doesn't appeal to me. Frankly, I feel about California the way some of my Baptist friends feel about Bob Jones University, that it's a caricature of their tradition, an exaggeration of some of its features to the point of ugliness. No doubt if California were a separate country, I'd find its culture as charmingly exotic as its landscape and cuisine. But I don't like the idea that one American congressman in eight comes from here: those guys make laws that I have to obey. I don't like being held responsible as an American for what Californians do (no more, I presume, than they like being held accountable for what Southerners do). Most of all, though, I don't like being made to feel like the kind of anti-American European I've always despised.

*John Shelton Reed should have returned by now to his home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, after a year in the Bay Area.*

## Letter From Scotland

by Katherine Dalton

### Beyond the Fringe



Our Scottish friends were trying to explain the phenomenon of the television police, and we were trying to understand. Television sets are taxed yearly in Britain and require an annual sticker. But since the sticker buying is done on the honor system, the citizens of Great Britain enjoy an occasional visit from the television police, who come into the house to make sure the stickers are current. This year the postman had come up the glen sounding a warning that the sticker checker was just behind him. Our friends were in the clear but there was a lady up the glen, said Margaret, who'd had to make a quick run to the post office for a sticker for her black-and-white, and who'd simply hid her three color sets.

With a few exceptions the Scots seem resigned to the television tax, but the same cannot be said of the poll tax, which, they will remind you, Scotland had a year before the rest of the union. In Edinburgh, whose beauty is not generally marred by graffiti, what graffiti we did see was opposing that tax. In general the level of Scottish resentment against England goes largely unreported here, but the Scots National Party has a fair amount of sentimental support in Scotland, even among those who do not really want to break with England. (One strongly nationalistic lady of my friends' acquaintance persists in calling the land below the Tweed "Englandshire.")

We were in Perthshire to see our friends, but the main purpose of our trip had been to attend all we could at the Edinburgh Festival and its accompanying Fringe. By my count there were this past August sixteen Festival theater productions—the bigger, more ornate shows, where the companies have been invited—and something like 700 on the Fringe, where the quality ranges from good to awful, and where anyone who can rent a venue and snake his way through the British labor laws can mount a production. Given the sheer number of offerings and our limited

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