Stephen Vincent Benet: The Spirit of Patriotism in His Poetry

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STEPHEN VINCENT BENET: THE SPIRIT OF PATRIOTISM
IN HIS POETRY

being

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate Faculty
Fort Hays Kansas State College

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science

by

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Approved
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Approved
Chairman, Graduate Council
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The American author, Stephen Vincent Benét, and the patriotism his poetry presents became an interesting topic for further and definite research after a course in Modern Poetry under Dr. Ralph V. Coder during the 1958 summer session of school at Fort Hays Kansas State College. A part of this particular course included the study of Benét’s book-length poem, John Brown’s Body. The recordings in which Raymond Massey, Tyrone Power, and Judith Anderson so magnificently read the parts of Abraham Lincoln, Jack Ellyat, Clay Wingate, Mary Lou Wingate, Sally Dupré, and Melora inspired a new interest in Benét’s work and his display of love for his country.

Materials on the author and his works in general were not particularly limited. Several were located in the Fort Hays Kansas State College library, but each reference seemed to read about the same as the one preceding it. No writer appeared especially inspired about Benét or his literary efforts. Love for his country and devotion through adversity and prosperity did not seem to interest especially biographers or contemporary writers to any marked degree. However, it was this love of his native land and the background for it on which the study was based, because it appeared an outstanding characteristic of both the man and his works.
Biographies, texts, and any references available in the Fort Hays Kansas State College library were first studied. Through the splendid cooperation of the city and school librarians in Kinsley, Kansas, references in books, periodicals, microfilms, and newspapers were located in the city libraries and in the college libraries of Yale University, University of Denver, University of Kansas City, University of Kansas, University of Wichita, the School of Mines library at Rolla, Missouri, St. Louis, Kansas City, Pratt, Larned, Wichita, Denver public libraries, and the state library at Topeka.

From Yale University, a list of photo manuscript cards was available. Mrs. Benét had given permission to the University to use and check out these materials. Many of Stephen Benét's letters written to his publishers, his friends, and his family were included. This list proved a very interesting source.

The biography of Stephen Vincent Benét, written by Charles Fenton, Professor of English at Duke University, was a most invaluable source. It was located in August, 1958, before it was actually slated to be distributed to bookstores and libraries in October, 1958.

This reference mentioned some of the sources previously studied, but gave several definite leads on where to find information. References to many of Benét's manuscripts
and his correspondence as found in the Yale University collection were often directly stated in Charles Fenton's biography.

Many sources from magazines were used. Several were repetitious or less recent than other sources and therefore they will not appear in the footnotes. It was interesting to follow through several issues of Saturday Review of Literature, especially those preceding and immediately following the death of Benét. As is typical, his contemporaries praised him much more as a writer after his death than while he lived. In some older issues of Saturday Review of Literature, particularly those published in 1943, the year of Benét's death, it seemed not enough praise could be heaped upon the man who really loved his country. One special issue, that of March 27, 1943, was purchased from a magazine service specializing in back numbers, because it contained an article, "As We Remember Him" by fourteen contemporaries, most of whom were writers or publishers. Among those who contributed were Philip Barry, Henry Seidel Canby, Carl Carmer, John Farrar, Jeremy Ingalls, Christopher La Farge, Archibald MacLeish, Christopher Morley, William Lyon Phelps, Thornton Wilder, and Benét's brother, William Rose Benét.

This thesis has been limited to the patriotism displayed in Benét's poetical efforts and will not include his short stories, although many of them have been read for background. His poetry has been stressed purposely because Benét
was more interested in writing poetry than prose. He wrote short stories only to fill the family bread basket when it became necessary. He said one time his ultimate purpose was to attempt to write good poetry.

Few terms in the title need defining as each has its simple connotation unless "patriotism" needs to be enlarged. "Patriotism" or "patriotic spirit" in this study is defined as that feeling that unconsciously develops and expresses love and interest in one's country ahead of interest in personal affairs. This is sometimes referred to as universal benevolence.

The organization of the thesis seemed to fall into natural categories which adequately answered the intended purpose of the problem.

Benét's Patriotic Background gave the needed insight into the planting of the seed of patriotism and its development.

The division, Benét's Poetry, includes specific poems chronologically arranged to exemplify the universal spirit of patriotism not only in the poem but of the author. All of Benét's poetry has been read and studied in making selections to be used in this paper.

It seems American literature, radio, newspapers, magazines, and television have given utmost credit to national and world figures for loyalty and patriotic duty in the persons of Presidents, cabinet members, committee
members on various governmental boards, military men, and even to foreign personages who have visited or worked here in the interest of their particular sovereigns and of America. Little eulogy seems to have been accorded the common citizen, with no particular government or other important position, and, if so, after completing his government service, the person is usually almost completely forgotten. Benét was the latter—just a good citizen who wrote poetry and short stories, but was not accorded much praise, or love, for his interest in his country.

After reading the background of Benét's life, the writer found it necessary to choose, study, and interpret facts that would apply to the subject of patriotism. This was not particularly difficult and far from tedious. A new approach seemed to be introduced by Benét in expressing his feeling as his country grew and developed or as his historical character or event took shape in each particular piece of his literature. It proved a most fascinating study in which to pin-point a man's point of view and to give credit to him not only for his poetry but to the expression of American loyalty.

Thus the purpose of the thesis is to show Benét's spirit of patriotism as it is brought out in much of his poetry.
CHAPTER II

STEPHEN BENÉT'S PATRIOTIC BACKGROUND

Stephen Vincent Benét was a child of three generations of army officers. His father and grandfather were well-known as first-class military officers. Stephen was named for his grandfather, termed the Brigadier. Charles Fenton in his biography of Stephen Benét says that the Brigadier was Chief of Ordnance for seventeen years prior to his retirement in 1891. He held the first appointment to West Point from Florida, when it was admitted as a new state, and graduated third high in his class. As Chief of Ordnance and during forty-two years of active service, General Stephen Vincent Benét made it a place of research, publication, and practical application in the long decades after the Civil War.¹

Stephen's father, whom Fenton terms the Colonel, finished at West Point with the class of 1880 and he was also with Ordnance almost continuously following his graduation. "The Colonel was competent and just; clearly he was a gentleman, and army to the fingertips."²

Stephen Benét's mother, Frances Neill (Rose) Benét, a quiet, understanding woman, was descended from a Kentucky

¹Charles A. Fenton, Stephen Vincent Benét, p. 4.
²Ibid., p. 3.
military family. With full understanding of what a military life involved, she followed her soldier husband about the country from post to post wherever duty called him.

Young Stephen Vincent Benét was born in Pennsylvania, on July 22, 1898, where his father supervised a government contract at Bethlehem Iron Works.

The family was a happy unit in a rental house, but . . . before young Stephen was out of his baby carriage, they moved to New York and when he was still wearing his long golden curls, they were assigned a post between Albany and Troy, New York. Army life demanded the family migrate from one part of the country to another, making it impossible to establish a geographically fixed home. The family moved to a Benicia, California, arsenal post when Stephen was eight. Here, family callers included Berkeley College instructors, poets, friends of Stephen's sister, Laura, an undergraduate at Vassar, and of Stephen's twenty-year-old brother, William.

The three Benét children were widely read since books and magazines were accessible in their father's library and the children were encouraged to read. Literary callers often came to the commandant's home to discuss history and literature.

Since the Benét family moved many times from one part of the country to another, and enjoyed visitors from

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3 Sarah Bolton, Famous American Authors, p. 236.
all parts of the nation, Stephen discovered early in life that his own home was no particular town. Literally he belonged to the United States whether that be the green Delaware valleys, the red rocks of Colorado, the expansiveness of California, the ancient mansions of the South, or the wide rolling plains. He loved to lose himself in the legends visitors discussed in his home and later to transmit those experiences, both actual and fanciful, into words. Hence, he developed a strong feeling about his nation's participation in the civil strife of war, in its settlers of new areas, and in its efforts to expand nationally and economically.

The Colonel was an enthusiastic connoisseur of poetry. The interest of his three children in literature was no accident, for with a father's ambition for history and Stephen's interest in listening to Colonel Benét's tales, stories, and poems, a delightful literary age opened all unaware and naturally to this younger son.

Colonel Benét preferred that his sons join the army for a military life. William, the eldest, enrolled in the Sheffield Scientific School at Yale University, hoping it would lead to an appointment at West Point. When such an appointment failed to materialize, the Benét family blamed Theodore Roosevelt for filling all the available places before he tried to enroll. So William enrolled at Yale University and became involved with his aspirations in the
field of literature. He became a very successful writer by the time he graduated.

At this time, eight-year-old Stephen was feasting upon printed words from such of the Colonel's books as Shakespeare and Dante. He worshipped his older brother and his sister and he was responsive to their interest in literature, particularly in the field of poetry.

Outsiders began to notice a strong resemblance between Stephen and his father in physical qualities—and it was evident he had acquired a slight reserve, a symptom of the Colonel's shyness. Biographers agree that Stephen imitated his father's self-discipline, calm poise, and inherited his love for history. Stephen experienced frequent illnesses which were not a family trait, but he was an uncomplaining child. Scarlet fever weakened his eyesight and this prevented his getting into West Point. In spite of that, he studied and carefully observed the junior officers in his father's employ, and his great imagination led him to imagine he was accomplishing some decisive military schemes with his four hundred carefully catalogued toy soldiers.

Stephen was always very proud to be a member of a military family and responded to his father's profession and the atmosphere surrounding it. He expressed this in the 1930's, a period when the military man was often
belittled. "I was born and brought up in the Army—and in an intelligent branch of the army, the Ordnance."  

Later, in one of his short stories Benét wrote to his publisher, John Farrar, that army life was an interesting world for a child to grow up in, "a world with a code and a flavor all its own." Although Stephen Benét did not particularly enjoy lecturing, he looked forward to the yearly talks he gave to the West Point cadets on John Brown's Body and on Civil War history.

In a letter to his old friend and collaborator, Douglas Moore, in 1934, he wrote, "I lectured at West Point two days last week, and as an old Army boy was filled with nostalgia."  

Stephen's father talked long with him about soldiering as he grew up, and about the Civil War in which both of his grandfathers had served. He also read much poetry to him from such works as the early ones of E. A. Robinson and Stephen Crane. Together, father and son made poetry collections. He learned of English poetry and Elizabethan lyrics from his father. In a letter written in 1940 to Carl Brandt, literary agent, Benét said his father taught

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4Charles A. Fenton, Stephen Vincent Benét, p. 7.
5Ibid., p. 8.
6Ibid.
him more than a desire for writing. He also helped his son develop tolerance, curiosity of mind, and a sense of independence. An aptitude for literature was developed because an anxiety to write was encouraged and received sympathetically. Stephen's father wrote his autobiography during his retirement. William set up a writing workshop in the summer-house while he was home one summer. Influenced by a writing family plus his personal reading of military history, Stephen began to reproduce a military atmosphere for writing.

All this was a rich heritage that contributed toward Benét's motive to write about his native America and its people. While other American writers often created their situations in an imaginative way, Benét's boyhood home was one where there was encouragement in a matter-of-fact way toward a son possessed with a desire to write poetry.

It is true the boy Stephen endured some disciplinary measures while he was growing up, but punishment was delivered swiftly, fairly, and with meaning. The period when he attended boarding school at Hitchcock Military Academy in California, at the age of twelve brought sad memories. His much cherished love of military life was made into burlesque here. The family physician had recommended Stephen needed companionship and competition, so he was sent to Hitchcock. Here he did excellent work in his academic subjects, but the doctor's illusion about Hitchcock's providing companions and
friends was a bitter experience for Benét. Savage bullying was brutal for a boy trained in fair play. Benét gave no hint of his genuine misery to his parents until his father told him near the end of the term they were being moved to the Augusta, Georgia, arsenal.

Soon after settling in Georgia, Stephen and the Colonel began to read and discuss Civil War material from the Colonel's writings. They made visits to the arsenal at Augusta and read the tombstones in the cemeteries. Stephen began to appreciate the crossroads of the South. He began to understand the Southerner as one who had helped make his American history where battle scenes were fodder for the fictional use of a past Benét loved. An observant father sharing his boyhood enthusiasm helped to make all this possible. Biographers agree that his love for his country was not an over-sentimental thing but a feeling that had taken firm hold within Stephen.

With all this background at his finger tips during his high school life in Augusta, Georgia, Benét emerged a prodigy. His classmates were impressed not only with their companion's being the son of the commanding arsenal officer, but they were struck by Stephen's poetic facility. They delighted in reading his poems and they were rather appalled at his shyness in joining their ball games. During these years, Stephen and his father enjoyed debating as opponents,
with the entire family enjoying their warfare. While Stephen was gathering his factual ammunition from his father's library, American facts were settling in his subconscious mind.

William Rose Benét in his article, "My Brother Steve," said that Stephen's adolescent poetry was mainly a patchwork of influences from a zest for classical tragedy, late Victorian material, ballads of Noyes, Masefield, and Kipling, the monologues of Browning, and the poetry of William Morris. Stephen learned to read with critical discrimination although it seemed he read everything. He and his father seemed to find some profit in all printed matter and even in the weekly Augusta movie which they faithfully attended.

By the enlisted men at the Arsenal he was remembered as a rangy, friendly boy steering a large bicycle dangerously with his right hand because he held an open book in his left. He would pedal a few feet and stop; still astride the bike, he would read several pages and then move on again.7

He spent his pocket money for books. Henry Esmond became his favorite novel and he struck up a writing correspondence with Sinclair Lewis. He wrote poems for any occasion he could invent about Augusta life. His brother, William, also encouraged him, and by 1915 Stephen happily reported to his brother his first professional sale to the New Republic.

7Charles A. Fenton, Stephen Vincent Benét, p. 33.
This piece of work, "Winged Man," was termed a respectable performance for a seventeen-year-old high school senior. The Benét family accepted his talent sanely. In July of that year came the blow--Stephen failed his entrance examinations to Yale in Latin prose and mathematics. Since it had been evident he could not attend West Point, Yale had been his chosen college. So, Colonel Benét secured a tutor--a Yale scholar of Yale ancestors--and Stephen was sufficiently tutored so he could enter Yale that fall.

Fenton makes note in his biography that Stephen Vincent Benét proved a literary student at Yale, and he was congenial with people of all interests. Several of his friends were also interested and talented in the poetic field. While the majority of them were seeking literary assurance, Benét became their literary talisman and center of the group. Stephen was everybody's favorite companion as he had read the obscure and the exotic poets with his father before he got to Yale. Thus he interested his friends in reading. He had written many poems before he got to college, while his friends were just discovering the mysticism of Shelley.

By the time Stephen was nineteen, he had published two books and his work appeared in several magazines both monthly and weekly. When he was a senior and was eligible
for the single undergraduate writing course, he was rejected on the grounds that he was too advanced for the course. Friendship with his classmates now proved very profitable.

From Charles M. Andrews, one of his history instructors, at Yale, Benét acquired a basis for historical principle. He took the position that the United States could be understood only in terms of the English and European institutions from which it derived. Andrews' insistence that "American aspirations and institutions had to be defined in terms of mother-country origins and ocean-passage refinement" was logical to Benét. His own family history verified his old world heritage and Steve's friends acknowledged his consciousness of being an American. The more he studied with Andrews, the more thoroughly he made this translation his belief. It was this birth of his American temperament that later appeared in his posthumous Western Star.

Charles Andrews' son, John, and Stephen became fast friends. Stephen enjoyed the literary surroundings in the Andrews' home just as he had enjoyed them in his home. From such pleasant associations and healthy relationships came success in writing for two magazines, the Yale Literary Magazine and The Record. Feeling success too well and youth-like, Stephen wasted too much time, and enjoyed life

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8Charles A. Fenton, Stephen Vincent Benét, p. 58.
too much. Temporarily he put his intellectual curiosity in the background. This lack of stimulation toward developing fresh ideas and being aware of reality caused a quick awakening in April, 1917, when Steve and his companions found themselves participating in a war. The solemn call of duty immediately ended any gay wastefulness this son of a military man might have collected.

While Benét was busy turning from light verse to satire with some military appeal, he was also busy trying to become a physical part of that war. He was rejected because of defective eyesight; no military unit would accept him, and his father was unable to pull any strings to get him into any division of service. As he watched the student units drilling on the campus and read the casualty lists, the reality of war really struck Benét. Biographer Charles Fenton pictures Benét's poetry changing from that expressing gratefulness for the multiple wonders of friendship; a new dimension and sobriety became a part of his writing as he began to reconcile himself to a non-combatant role in war. But even so, he could not forget that staunch patriotic appeal that involved performing a definite service for his country.

Editorially, Benét abolished the illusion of war's being a great adventure. In the Yale Literary Magazine of October, 1917, he wrote

... there remains always the adventure of staying behind (by virtue of age or some physical defect) and
having your friends killed, adventurously or otherwise. Of only one thing, out of all our muddled vision, are we truly conscious—that the War has lapped about us and is rising over us like deep water. We are all quite unprepared to make the intolerable sacrifices we must make. We shall feel pain more exquisite and rending than any we have known or shall know again. We shall fight for an end unknown to us, under a cause which we do not entirely understand. Whether the thing we get will seem worth the price we pay must rest indifferent to us. For it is by such means that men buy their freedom. 9

While he wrote more furiously than ever on varied subjects, war dominated his thinking. This story is told by several biographers. After a friend was killed in the air service, Benét decided he would avoid the indignity of holding a clerk's position. So he memorized the army's eye chart, was accepted and entered that branch of the service. The next day while he was serving his required KP duty and was peeling potatoes, a sergeant watched him nearly nick his nose, so he was called to take another eye test and was discharged after serving his country three days.

A few months later he took a much despised desk job in the state department and was promoted to Military Intelligence as a cryptographer. Here he made many friends, many of whom were in the writing field, but he resigned from his desk job six weeks after the Armistice was signed. Along with many previous college friends he sought to complete his undergraduate work. All veterans seemed more

serious about what they wanted from their college life. Benét condemned colleges and feared the greatest opportunity would be lost unless college faculties produced a new diet for its veteran enrollees.

But fortunately for Stephen, he found himself back at Yale in Professor Andrews' history class. With such a fine background, Benét began writing of his country again, and his love for it emerged naturally. Magazine critics declared his Young Adventure had every evidence of artistic maturity and friends indicated he was the most promising of the undergraduates.

Benét refused a fellowship for graduate work, although he had no work in view and his finances would not carry him for more than a few months. He gathered verse from any and all sources—poverty, skyscrapers, splendors, boredom, restlessness—and wove them into sonnets and modern ballads. He tried the career of advertising for a few months but despised it so thoroughly that when given an opportunity to recover the graduate fellowship he had refused a year previously, he accepted it. Under the admiring leadership, encouragement and kindness of Henry Canby, a Yale writing instructor, Benét's writing flourished, and he began finding a market for his material along with such literary personalities as Wilder, Luce, Thornton and MacLeish. Instead of the customary academic thesis, Yale permitted Benét to substitute a
group of poems, all of which were later published under the title, *Heaven and Earth*. He received his Master of Arts degree and a $500 Scott Hurtt Fellowship which was sufficient passage money to Paris. With an additional five hundred dollars lent him by an interested faculty member, Benét's study in Paris was assured. He set to finish a novel, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, before he left for Europe. It brought back to Stephen memories of the past as he placed it in the historic setting his parents enjoyed from 1901-1904 at an arsenal where his father had named the streets after commanding officers.

Depositing his unfinished novel with Holt and Company, and receiving an advance payment on it, Stephen Vincent Benét set out for Paris in August, 1920. He probably learned to care as much about Paris as any city in which he had ever lived. He learned to know it as a young writer, a successful suitor, and a father of two children. However, all experiences on foreign soil seemed to create and harbor within Benét a deeper feeling about his own country. "The Ballad of William Sycamore" and "King David" were written in France and it was here he launched *John Brown's Body*.

When Stephen went back to Chicago in 1921 to marry Rosemary Carr, a Chicago University graduate and Chicago Tribune employee, he learned his father, the Colonel, was not to enjoy military retirement in California's pleasant
climate as he had chosen. William Benét's wife had died and he was left with his three children to rear in New York City. The grandparents moved near the metropolis to make a home for the grandchildren and their son. Stephen too was discouraged over whether he would ever have sufficient money to marry Rosemary. He spent the summer drying dishes, splitting kindling, playing tennis, and talking with his father but by the end of July he had a literary agent.

Carl Brandt's relationship in the Benét household was the most important professional one of Benét's career as shown by letters written to Brandt. Of the firm Brandt and Kilpatrick, Brandt was devoted to Stephen Benét. He was introduced to him by John Farrar, a poet friend and later Benét's literary editor. He arranged that Brandt read Benét's novel, Jean Huguenot. Brandt was a teacher as well as an agent. He taught Benét to write serially, declaring serials were better than short stories to gain money—and money Benét definitely needed if he married his Rosemary. He succeeded in selling serials, a few short stories, and a poetry volume, Heaven and Earth. Passports for Paris were purchased, and Stephen Benét and his bride left for France in the fall of 1921.

Brandt suggested that Benét return to America at an early date because the latter's literary career was beginning to thrive on home ground. The Benéts remained in Paris
longer than they had anticipated, but American magazines were handling the writer's short stories for almost as much money as his poetry collections had brought him.

When Benét landed on American soil, his thoughts turned to Southern memories and historical material. Immediately he set to work on a pair of ballads. Magazine editors insisted Benét write contemporary material, but Benét's reaction was to alternate this burden of commercial fiction with the material he loved to place in an earlier American setting. The author sentenced himself to writing short stories for supporting his periodic poetry work. He found time to write "The Ballad of William Sycamore" which appealed to audiences who had previously valued the works of Mark Twain, Washington Irving, and Henry Longfellow. They liked the chant and beat with the robust appeal to a fertile America. The "Ballad of William Sycamore" gave the young Benét his first substantial contact with an audience that thrust his works into national literature.10

Following this ballad came "King David" in 1922 which interested America's poetically apathetic middle class. These ballads were noted as major achievements in the literary field. At the end of 1924 Benét had published six volumes of poems, three novels, several short stories, and a few plays, but he was broke financially. Domestic

10Charles A. Fenton, Stephen Vincent Benét, p. 126.
happiness however was paramount; he had a daughter, Stephanie Jane. But, he needed money, and thinking about his Southern ancestors, he set out to study them and write *Spanish Bayonet*. He worked on it until he found a new idea for the kind of writing he loved, poetry. He would turn from fiction to write a poem anytime, but always seemed to find himself writing to pay the rent, the insurance, and the grocer. This very often made short story writing necessary.

Each time he returned to his struggling with *Spanish Bayonet*, his mind returned to the America of the past and he tried to adjust the necessities of the commercial artist to his basic gifts and to his America as he sensed it. While working on it, he wrote *Rosemary* of an idea for a long poem: "I have a swell idea for a long poem. The only trouble is, it would take seven years to write and I'd have to read an entire library first."\(^{11}\) This of course was *John Brown's Body* which was conceived in 1925 while he wrote a historical eighteenth century type novel.

Stephen and his agent and friend, Carl Brandt, disagreed on the ending for his novel. While he tried to find an ending to satisfy his publisher friend and bring his family some temporary security, his mind was on the long poem and its Civil War historical setting.

\(^{11}\)Ibid., p. 158.
He was awarded the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation fellowship of $2,500 for outlining his plan for writing a long poem on an American subject which he mentioned vaguely as the Civil War one. Benét was grateful for this opportunity but he was gloomy because immediate money was needed in his household. The Benétts were expecting their second child.

Benét lost interest in magazine fiction, so he turned to where his mind roved—the American past, towns he'd known as the child of a traveling army family, and to ideas he borrowed from his reading in his father's library, plus his imagination. This material gradually helped him to gain footing into the post-Civil War America fantasy. Good fortune brought sales of material to Country Gentleman, Saturday Evening Post, Collier's and gross sales and royalties with a share of his fellowship allowed him to begin on his long production.

John Brown's Body was actually organized in France as he talked with Douglas Moore, a former Yale friend and collaborator, of American history knowledge and how to use it to the best advantage. Fenton says that he returned to the histories he had read in boyhood; he read collections of family memoirs and diaries. He reached back to original sources for portraits of John Brown, to the political and the social history of the period and to the life of Lincoln.
Stephen Benét gained recognition as one with the background of a professional specialist in the history of this era. In 1930 the historian, Samuel Eliot Morison, asked permission to quote from John Brown's Body in his The Growth of the American Republic for he believed Benét's historical narrative was accurate in detail.  

References stress that Benét enjoyed research. Librarians of the American Library in Paris remembered him as reading everything they had on Lincoln as well as the exhibition copies of new books from America. His working day seemed to be built around the motive he had in mind, that of telling the story of the Civil War and its people. He desired accuracy and he declared in letters to his wife that if ever he finished the poem, he would make corrections up to publication date.

He was often questioned about going to France to write an epic poem about a war in which only his country was involved. His only reply was that living was cheaper there than at home. This was a comfortable state of mind for writing to celebrate solidarity and permanence of the Union and in 1927 Benét wrote John Farrar, "I hope it has in it some of the landscapes, sights, the sounds of the people which are American."  

12Charles A. Fenton, Stephen Vincent Benét, p. 182. 
13Ibid., p. 189.
Paris removed various stresses of poverty and the offense of fiction. His intellectual and emotional attachments to his native land were cultivated by the separation from it and by the version of America he was living and reading about in Paris. "Living abroad," he wrote his editor friend, Harry Salpeter of the New York World, in 1928, "has intensified my Americanism."¹⁴

Charles Fenton interestingly tells the story that when *John Brown's Body* was completed in 1928, Farrar, then a publisher with Brandt, called Benét in France to announce it was the Book-of-the-Month choice for August. The publisher received a two-word reply—"Swell, Benét," but Benét worried because his best poetic work with American background had some very prosy sections in it. When Farrar urged him to come home for publication day, Benét was reluctant—as far as the reception of his work was concerned. But he was interested in finding a suitable home in America for his family near good American schools for his children.

He was proud of the many comments of approval about his epic. The accomplished writer, Allen Tate, whose approval was somewhat restrained by offense to his regionalism of the portrait of Lincoln, conceded nevertheless

¹⁴Ibid.
that the poem was "the most ambitious poem ever undertaken by an American on an American theme."¹⁵

If professional historians, [declared Tate] particularly those of the Northern tradition, will follow Mr. Benét, a distorted perspective in American history will soon be straightened out. No where else has Lee been so ably presented.¹⁶

This was the kind of assessment Benét regarded meaningful as it was not so extravagant as that of friends and of some of the reviewers.

Letters to his family and to his publishers indicate that relatives of some of the figures of history presented by the author in the poem praised descriptions of their relation and verified some of his details. Southern friends expressed gratitude for the element of fairness used in his presentation of Southern values and portraits. Historians as well as novelists acknowledged the typical background he presented.

The Benét family returned to America after his epic received the Pulitzer Prize award and the author invested most of his money in stocks only to find the stock market in America had collapsed. This plus the requirements of two active children and migration from rented houses and apartments instead of having the home he envisioned, made Stephen Benét bitter.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 214.
¹⁶Ibid.
He came to despise Hollywood where he was under contract for twelve weeks when it was staggering under the unstable era of conversion to sound. To him it had an extravagant phony social life where money men misused their time and their talents. Letters to his wife, Rosemary, and his agent, Carl Brandt, indicate Benét was bitter because Hollywood took the freshness from his *Abraham Lincoln* to inflate it with superfluous bit parts and take away the real character. He was sad because he could not prevent vulgarity that required Mary Todd to appear in a low-cut ballroom gown.

With Longwell, promotion manager at Doubleday, Doran and Company, Benét discussed the history of western America. Longwell placed a detailed map in Benét's hands, and from this came research on westward routes and trails. As a result of this he wrote a number of short poems for magazines. Chief among them was "The Island and the Fire." During this time, Benét was suffering from attacks of arthritis which crippled him for the rest of his life. Along with the writing of short stories and poems, meeting doctor bills, greeting the birth of a third child in 1931, experiencing a bank holiday, and doing lectures which he detested, Benét wrote his brother toward the end of 1932,

... This is all perfectly mad and I have faith in the United States and art, but if present conditions
keep on, I'm afraid I'm going to be in a hole. I should say a rather long one, too.\footnote{17}

Better fortune beset him in 1933 as he sold American tales. Among them was "Young Lochinvar," consisting of a lively sketch of the meetings between the Oldest Inhabitant and aviation. Benét, as most American liberals, had accumulated an early mistrust of the man, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Through the national bank closing episode, he and others firmly declared themselves in favor of the President. It was encouraging to have national decisions as positive as the closing of the banks.

Now he turned again to reading material on westward expansion. He and Rosemary did A Book of Americans together which sold surprisingly well; it was later done in braille and some of its stanzas were set to music. This book and a novel, James Shore's Daughter, helped finance research but left little time for his poetry. He could not feel satisfied with anything less than something with the luster of his John Brown's Body, or a piece of literature that would illustrate the devoted love of his country and the horror of totalitarianism.

Although as a young man Benét was seemingly indifferent to pure politics and national elections, friendship with figures who seemed well informed on the national scene

\footnote{17}Charles A. Fenton, Stephen Vincent Benét, p. 252.
helped Stephen to become considerate of another side of
America. Some of his Yale professors said that he probably
was better informed on the true history of America than any
of the major contemporary authors. In its heritage and the
spirit of its people, Benét had a confidence that mustered
within him a creed as a liberal which was essential to his
true American principles. He refused to argue with his
friends, nearly all of whom, except a handful, were hostile
to the New Deal. His major interest lay in the state of
his nation--one which would produce an America of more
genuine opportunity, one that would make her strong on the
political, the economic, and the social scenes.

Stephen Benét's "A Man from Fort Necessity" drew a
parallel between the hatred toward Roosevelt and Washington.
He followed this with "Silver Jemmy" which paralleled
Jefferson and Aaron Burr--and Roosevelt and Huey Long.
Now in 1935 many Americans were questioning democracy and
threatening to leave the continent if Roosevelt should be
elected in 1936. Benét listened to such threats and was
irate when readers termed his efforts of writing histor-
ically perspective material as "too intellectual." He
declared to his agent, Carl Brandt, "when patriotism is
intellectual, so is the banking system."18 He continued

18Letter from Stephen Vincent Benét to Carl Brandt,
May, 1936.
roaming through one hundred years of past American history and was compared with Washington Irving as a national story teller.

From his research on Daniel Webster, and because he had desperate need for cash, Benét did "The Devil and Daniel Webster." This received the O. Henry Memorial Award as the best short story of 1937. Benét declared the yarns and tales of these folk tales were as much a part of the real history of his native country as were its amendments to its constitution and proclamations. This established him as a nationally recognized story teller, and with his financial status leveling between twelve and fifteen thousand dollars each year, he increased his contributions to charity, to antifascist organizations and to his mother.¹⁹ He reviewed novels for Farrar and Rinehart, served as editor for the Yale series, was hospitable to young writers, and gave lectures, but each year found him more weary and less active.

Grief over his mother's death in 1940 brought a new creative energy more productive and at a higher level of accomplishment. From it came "Nightmare at Noon" and "Minor Litany." Now for the first time in his career his prose and his poetry were functioning simultaneously.

He declined public offices so he could devote his time to Western Star, for which he had carried notes since 1928. Charles Fenton writes that his original idea, as he

explained it to George Doran, one of his publishers, was to tell the American story from the time of Columbus' landing in the fifteenth century through the driving of the golden spike in the Central Pacific Railroad in the nineteenth century. The theme—the continual westward movement of the American people—was to follow the theme of John Brown's Body—the preservation of the Union. While his original plan was to contain ten books, Columbus' role ended with half a dozen lines in the prelude, but he never lost track of the westward movement and his basic history research. He had caught the frontier movement from the frontiersman's viewpoint rather than the Easterner's. Western Star's greatness lay in Benét's ability to dramatize what he had read in history and historical fiction against America's past. He tried to picture 150 years of local and national history.  

In his numerous trips to the Yale library for background material, Benét had difficulty in finding a connected history for the period between 1745 and 1815. His continuous notes revealed a staunch affirmation in the Pilgrims, but gave little notice to the Puritans or Massachusetts Bay group. As he read, studied, and wrote, he found that material which he could almost monopolize was being sought and

20Charles A. Fenton, Stephen Vincent Benét, p. 344.
used by his contemporaries. Benét, although often too ill to work, realized he must work rapidly if he was to claim first stake. He had no doubt in 1940 that Western Star had to be his best piece of work.

As he listened to a broadcast of the news, and read the newspaper headlines, one October morning in 1941 he suddenly wondered why he should write "about early history of Pennsylvania with the world blowing up." Thus in 1941 Benét put away his Western Star manuscript and intended to use all the energy he could spare from the absolute necessity of earning a living to give whatever services his country needed him to perform.

He was asked to comment on some war papers read before a conference on Science, Philosophy, and Religion, in 1941. Of this, Fenton remarks that Benét reported that neither freedom of speech nor man's liberty of action would ever preserve themselves automatically. While he believed great artists could write suitable propaganda pointing out a definite moral, he expressed the need for belief inside. Often the assignments he undertook proved trivial, sometimes momentous, always difficult and wearing, but he always gave up his work and income to do the tasks; sometimes they were undertaken at the sacrifice of his own well-being. No

results were forthcoming for many of the tasks he so conscientiously performed. Radio scripts produced on a single broadcast made his writing perishable. He spent days working on speeches in the interest of his nation's welfare. His scripts for the Council of Democracy in 1941 and 1942 had a definite patriotic purpose—to unite all loyal Americans—and Benét believed thoroughly in that great purpose.

His war poem, "Listen to the People," which was broadcast preceding an address by President Roosevelt in 1941, is estimated to have been heard by more Americans than any other serious writer's work in United States' history.22

*Western Star* was still incomplete when Benét was forty-three years of age and he realized his health was rapidly failing. Yet he could discuss world events with amazing assurance and knowledge and he continued to serve his government in the war effort. A script, "This is War," occupied a month of hard work; radio rehearsals, cut lines, and a lengthy radio program, "Dear Adolf" which was so splendidly executed in six broadcasts, put such pressure on him for additional scripts of like nature that his doctor forbade some necessary official travel for assignments.

Later, he prepared a Thanksgiving script, a Lincoln birthday program, and a Christmas radio program to be

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followed with "A Prayer for the United Nations." He wrote one of the declarations for President Roosevelt's Four Freedoms. His 40,000-word chronicles of the United States, America, which he wrote during the early part of the winter in 1943 for the Office of War Information was translated in 1944 into nearly every language in use by man in the present century. A new two-volume collection of his poetry and fiction was chosen as Book-of-the Month Club selection in 1942. This was an unexpected bonanza, and critics explained it in large part as a result of his new status as America's most widely heard poetic voice. Benét was never aware just how far this last work traveled nor was he aware of what this American interpretation meant to the freed citizens of Europe.

Benét's last lines in his diary did not concern himself but with his America and all its people. "FDR sends social-security plan to Congress," he wrote on March 11, 1943, "which immediately brought a storm of hate from the inept and the reactionary."

Thus, Stephen Vincent Benét's last thoughts were for the interests of the inhabitants of a great country--the one he loved, read about and tramped over from childhood, one whose shortcomings and attributes he discussed with

24 Ibid., p. 373.
associates and debated with his father; and he lived to advance its progress and preserve its history through symbols of words, sentences, phrases, poetical and otherwise, but always displaying the spirit of a deep devotion and an abiding patriotism for this--your America and mine.
CHAPTER III

STEPHEN BENÉT’S PATRIOTIC POEMS

The poems used in this section have been specifically chosen because in some way they are a part of that spirit of patriotism that was definitely Benét. Each illustrates not only devotion to his country but to the particular cause about which Benét was writing.

The poems have been arranged in chronological order. It is believed this best interprets the author’s development in writing, his belief in the cause that in all cases favored his country, his fellowmen, his government, and the American way of life in his day. In many instances these might well be translated into the present era.

"Return--1917"

Benét very aptly revealed his reaction to his country’s entrance into war in "Return--1917." And well it might be his feeling. Biographer Charles Fenton described Benét besieging recruiting offices only to find himself repeatedly refused. So, he decided to spend the summer of 1917 on a New Haven farm where he might not be forced to endure the sight of the Colonel’s (Benét’s father) thousands of officer candidates in Augusta, Georgia. When he returned to the fall term of school he was sharply reminded of war as the student units drilled on the campus. All this brought
a radical change from happy and perhaps some nonsensical collegiate experiences to the grim and bleak sobriety of war.  

In "Return--1917" Benét dreamed he had been bombed and had retreated into a trench where he lay beside an elm tree looking upward to the blue sky and feeling "clean again, and young, and whole." Awakening from this dream when his friend Bill came along to join him in going to the next class, he greeted another pal, Fred, who sat down and listened to his dream--"I dreamed I . . . am I . . . wounded?" "You are dead."  

Acceptance of "Return--1917" brought a solemn reconciliation to Benét in playing a non-combatant role in war. But, in serving as an inspirational trumpeter to warriors, he found it difficult to disguise his bitterness.

Thus his grim, bleak "Return--1917" came forth with the ironic quote from the university catalogue: "The College will reopen September ____," and ended more ironically, "Lord, what a dream that was! And what a daze/Waiting for Bill to come along to class!"  

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1Charles A. Fenton, Stephen Vincent Benét, p. 69.
2Stephen Vincent Benét, Young Adventure, p. 50.
3Ibid., p. 51.
4Rica Brenner, Poets of Our Time, p. 11.
These two vigorous American literary ballads attracted both the literary and the non-literary groups of readers. In examining various anthologies the writer found these ballads have become standard entries. People enjoy reading them aloud, chanting them, or singing them.

Fenton terms "The Ballad of William Sycamore" a bridge between modern poetry and "slick" fiction. The ballad made America seem robust, brawling and rich with fertility but at the same time its episodes were unashamedly familiar. He made the pioneer describing his ancestry, his rearing, the social life of pioneers, and the skill of woodsmen. He described a marriage thus:

A girl like a Salem clipper!
A woman straight as a hunting knife
With eyes as bright as the Dipper!

The poet pictured the pioneer sons who followed the trail of the western wagons and of one dying at the Alamo, "the youngest fell with Custer." As man began to fence his land, the pioneer rode on westward and when he was thrown from his horse, city men came to save his life.

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5 Charles A. Fenton, Stephen Vincent Benét, p. 126.
7 Ibid.
Pioneer William Sycamore died in his boots on the prairie.

In closing Benét's old pioneer urged man:

Go play with the towns you built of blocks,
The towns where you would have bound me!
I sleep in my earth like a tired fox,
And my buffalo have found me.\(^8\)

Thus Sycamore was the scout and the Indian fighter constantly lured on westward until civilization caught up with him.

"The Mountain Whippoorwill" was a vigorous ballad of America properly sub-titled "A Georgia Romance" as it echoed a boyhood summer Benét had spent in North Carolina.

His true love for the South was well illustrated by his own words,

I was trying to adapt the strict ballad form to a contemporary American subject, vary it as I chose, and use colloquial speech--get the note of the boxwood fiddle into it, if it could be done. I had heard the mountain fiddlers in the North Carolinas, and their tunes stuck in my head.\(^9\)

Both ballads expressed an intensity for the author's land. After writing them and sending them to his publisher, John Farrar, Benét wrote him,

I am tired not of criticism of America, for no country can be healthy without self-criticism, but of the small-railers, conventional rebels. We also have a heritage and not all of it is wooden money.\(^10\)

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\(^8\)Ibid., p. 370.


\(^10\)Ibid., p. 189.
From the beginning of the study of Benét it has been evident that no one ever wanted more to tell his country's history through verse which became almost a musical composition than did Stephen Vincent Benét. And, there is evidence that probably no one had prepared himself more ably to tell the important Civil War incident than had Benét.

Benét enjoyed historical research and concerning it, he said, "Good source books make the most fascinating sort of reading." His research preceded many Civil War Book Clubs and magazines devoted to the era of history depicted in *John Brown's Body*.

For his portrait of John Brown, Benét relied on biography and for the political and social history of the period he used many histories from his father's collection. He read avidly of the various armies engaged in battles. He compared references carefully for authenticity and accuracy.

Benét was driven to track down a large part of his material himself. He ran into some difficulties; he could not find a first-class life of Robert E. Lee in 1927. There were scattered memoirs of both Lee and Grant, but they were insufficient, until his editor, John Farrar, was contacted.

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in America while Benét was living outside Paris. Material on Lincoln was plentiful in Paris libraries, but some of this seemed inaccurate and Benét demanded as much accuracy as possible in his epic. Fenton says he often made history corrections right up to publication time on John Brown's Body. This slowed his progress, but few friends were enthusiastic enough to inquire about his progress for in 1927 most of Benét's generation were not engaged in exploring America's past. They were busier experimenting with French poetry. Some few attempted to steer Benét from his Civil War theme.¹²

Encouraged by his wife, Rosemary, he struggled on and when questioned why he had gone to France to write an epic on the Civil War, Benét truthfully answered that living was cheaper there and then always answered, "It takes more than traveling to make a man an ex-patriate."¹³

When Benét began writing John Brown's Body, he called the work Horses of Anger and planned doing twelve units. When he had completed the fourth section of it, he could visualize the final structure more clearly. As a result he revised the Invocation, retitled the poem John Brown's Body and settled on eight books. When the Saturday Review of Literature wanted to print the first three parts, Benét

¹³Ibid., p. 187.
refused on the ground that the poem was a mass effect. However, with one year of work completed by June, 1927, he mailed the Invocation for printing, promising to complete it by August, but asking that publication be no earlier than fall because he wanted to make necessary revisions and to check its historical accuracy in detail.

When the epic was completed in late August, and one copy sent to his publisher and a carbon to his parents, Stephen wrote his brother, William:

I am very anxious to see what you think of the whole bloody thing. I am still too close to the damn thing to see the wood, if any, for the interminable array of trees. The bulk of it looks fairly impressive, as bulk, but I don’t know it will strike an evening’s reading.14

His publishers, Brandt and Farrar, and his brother Bill sent an enthusiastic cable that pleased and relieved the author who replied, "Thanks inordinately for your letter. Only I wish the book were that good."15 Benet was especially pleased with Farrar’s judgment that his book had unity. To Farrar, Benet was more communicative about his work and told him how he tried to put some of the America he knew into his book.

Personally Benet believed this was his best piece of work to the date he completed it, but he felt it was more detached from him than former efforts. Farrar suggested

14 Ibid., p. 194. 15 Ibid., p. 198.
this would make him a genius, but Benét was skeptical and begged his publisher allow him to read the galleys so he might again check the actual facts and make revisions.

Soon after John Brown's Body was sent to the publisher, news of Colonel Benét's death came. When publisher Brandt suggested how much Benét's wife had influenced his work, Stephen replied to Brandt, "I'm afraid the person who influenced me most is still my father." Stephen was somewhat comforted with the knowledge that the Colonel had read his poem in manuscript and had approved it.

When the final galley was mailed, Stephen's gloominess stemmed not only from his father's death, but he felt the deadening sense of anticlimax. "It's a shame to have wasted the Guggenheim money that way," he wrote his friend and agent Farrar. "No one will read it." John Brown's Body was the chosen Book-of-the-Month selection for August, 1927. Publishers urged Benét to come home for publication day. He accepted, but planned to arrive after the publication date so that it might not seem planned. He probably made the trip largely because it gave him an opportunity to visit his mother and Rosemary's

16Letter from Stephen Vincent Benét to Carl Brandt, March 6, 1940.
17Charles A. Fenton, Stephen Vincent Benét, p. 204.
18Ibid., p. 207.
family and secure a home in America. When he learned 52,000 copies had sold in eight days after publication date, he was most surprised. He enjoyed reviews of the critics, but discouraged its presentation as an epic as commentators referred to it. Later Benét in acknowledging it as such said, "A long poem without a flaw has never been written."¹⁹

Charles Fenton in his biography of the author tells that relatives of Benét's historical figures in the masterpiece wrote him in appreciation of his description and verified facts he had mentioned. Southern people often expressed gratitude for the fairness of his presentation of the portraits and the southern values. Students wrote him marveling at his accuracy in research. A few quarreled at his picture of the Confederate prison in Andersonville. His basis for this had been an official report by a Confederate medical officer.²⁰

Fellow poets, Yale professors, historians, and colleagues sent notes of appreciation. Family letters placed in Yale University reveal that as late as World War II, Benét received letters from servicemen who had read the poem overseas, thus expressing another generation's Americanism.²¹

¹⁹ Charles A. Fenton, Stephen Vincent Benét, p. 212.
²⁰ Ibid., pp. 216-17.
²¹ Letters from Servicemen to Stephen Vincent Benét.
Charles Fenton states that *John Brown's Body* became required reading at some universities in the United States and in Canada. Term papers with the topic, "*John Brown's Body as a National Epic*" were introduced. This impact extended to radio, readings, and birthday addresses in both England and America.\(^{22}\) Benét was a national figure at thirty years of age and he found it difficult to get back to France because of lectures and program appearances.

As his book continued to hit the best seller list month after month, life was economically easier—but there were new responsibilities. This new talent would set the pace for his future writing and he realized it. When news of his work's winning the Pulitzer prize came, Benét was deeply affected.\(^{23}\)

*John Brown's Body* was truly a succinct history of the Civil War days told through fellow spokesmen who were carefully chosen to represent both sides at various social levels. Benét successfully compressed generations of western expansion into the span of human life. American poets previously had been aware of places and people, but never seemed concerned with the nation. The Civil War seemed to have waited for its poet—and its rich possibilities for a theme


were circumscribed in a conflict between two civilizations bound together in a trap of their own making.

John Brown's Body, a romantic poem, moves its readers to emotional enthusiasm; it contains pathos, excitement, and sentiment as well as an intellectual analysis, but it remains realistic, for Benet never seemed to lose his grip on the importance of the whole. His Jake Diefers, Shippys, Baileys, rough-necks of war, business, and small-town emotions, fit into the whole scheme.

The poem represents good history, and critics agree there is art in its national theme that moves readers through the great events of their own people. One cannot help feeling the author's interest in the thing he wrote about. His Civil War is so close to us. The tragedy, the humor, and the sordidness of it are mingled.

John Brown's Body is non-partisan politically but spiritually it seems Northern. The fanaticism and commercialism of the North seem irrevocable. Southern romance is brittle; charm and sadness seem haunting and most persuasive even in time of struggle. The Connecticut Jack Ellyat and the rough boys from Illinois and Pennsylvania are very convincing; Wingate and the Black Horse troop are also convinced of their beliefs though much of their action is bluff and make-believe.

Henry Seidel Canby, who wrote an introduction to the college edition of the poem in 1929 said it could not have
been successfully done any other way and he accorded immense credit to Benét that one could recreate the rough and tumble, the sweet and sour of an epoch with a modern imagination and yet confine it in one large theme.24

Although Stephen Vincent Benét used the historical background in John Brown's Body, he did not treat the Civil War as merely a military adventure. He presented in a gigantic struggle two kinds of civilization and successfully he revealed dramatic action in battle and conflict through the minds of the antagonists. Benét maintained his poem was not a war poem, but simply one more experiment attempting to express the essence of American life. This was his outstanding motive in writing.

The Invocation to John Brown's Body represented the author's knowledge and his delight in the ever changing aspects of his native land. He seemed to love the names of its localities, he responded to the feel of the winds and the sweep of the plains.

Stephen Benét's theme was the effects of civil strife and John Brown, the fierce, liberty-loving abolitionist was its symbol. It glorified no hero as do traditional epics. He portrayed the devastation of war by the use of swiftly shifting episodes. He mingled his historical and

fictitious characters as he found them from all walks of life in various localities. While he wove memorable pictures of people who control different situations, he tried to maintain fidelity to events and to chronology. Benét presented his many individuals, whose hopes, fears, suffering, bravery, cowardice, and moments of greatness were so portrayed that his readers could share them. Readers cannot forget the word pictures of John Brown, Lee, Lincoln, and Stonewall Jackson nor can they forget his story characters, such as Sally Dupré, and his portrait of Clay Wingate, who had to pass from his shining boots and bringing up as a "Southern gentleman" to become a man. There was Jack Ellyat with his years in and out of prison, Melora who kept womanhood in strange surroundings, and Cudjo, the loyal slave. Nothing happens to his fictional characters that could not have happened to real people living then.

The pictures of plantation life, the season's change and the battle scenes are dramatic. Philosphic bits are often vividly introduced.

The change of meter with the change of mood just as Benét exercised his freedom to change from rhyme to prose and vice versa, add to the interest and description.

To us, the present generation of Americans, we realize the America we know is built on that decision whether we were to live as two nations or as one. But Stephen Benét led us
to realize the Civil War produced men and deeds of the heroic kind on both sides.

Benét maintained to his friends and literary agent that he did not regard *John Brown's Body* as primarily a poem about war. He tried to set down certain realities, legends, landscapes and ways of living no other country could lay claim to. He tried to show Americans their nation was not made up of mere proclamations, names, and dates, but of millions of ordinary people who struggled through war and peace, failed, succeeded and built together. He tried to make Americans see their country's history not as something to be merely learned by rote, but that American pioneers were real with real problems to face and decisions to make that have affected all Americans.

Concerning the slavery question in the Civil War days, as Benét pictured Jack Ellyat and his dog on a hunt in the Connecticut woods in 1859 and Clay Wingate of Georgia riding home after a day of hunting, he seems to put premonition in each man's mind concerning the bitter question between the North and the South. At the same time in a parallel situation John Brown, an abolitionist from Kansas, and his followers, who took possession of a Maryland bridge, were brought into the picture and John Brown was vanquished, put on trial, sentenced, and hanged. Fire was kindled between the two sections of America. Furthermore, Benét never let
his reading public forget that as John Brown's body lay in the grave, the cause of freedom for which he sacrificed his life became a common cause. Thus it appeared in the chronicles of history.

The phantom drum diminishes—the year rolls back. It is only winter still, not spring, the snow still flings its white on the new grave, nothing is changed, John Brown, nothing is changed. When Jefferson Davis and his cabinet took over the Confederacy at Richmond and Lincoln and his cabinet called for volunteers, the picture of young men answering the call to service was so well developed that readers of today may look upon like situations in their own homes. Again this historically true episode was presented by Jack Ellyat following the slogan, "On to Richmond," and the feeling that the war would end in a few months.

North and South they assembled, one cry and the other cry, And both are ghosts to us now, old drums hung on a wall, But they were the first hot wave of youth too-ready to die, And they went to war with an air, as if they went to a ball.

In the Bull Run Battle ending in a Confederate victory, Benét pictured, as history had established, both sides completely confused. Readers may easily follow Johnston, Jackson, Burnside, McDowell, Beauregard and see the description of the tumult in Washington with all the bitterness and

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26 Ibid., p. 74.
scorn that were showered on Lincoln and his maintenance of that stubborn determination to protect the Union. The poet aptly introduced the rumors about Robert E. Lee, the mighty man of the South.

With these true characters, Benét did not hesitate to remind readers of their true patriotic stand and then weave into the saga his fictional soldiers of both sides.

When he introduced Greeley's hysterical letter to Lincoln recounted in history, he was most careful to show Lincoln's endurance

... confused by a thousand counsels, is neither overwhelmed nor touched to folly by the madness that runs along the streets like a dog in August scared of itself, scaring everyone who crossed its path.27

Benét introduced new characters as the war progressed—McClellan, Sherman, and Grant. Surprise attacks occurred, Ellyat was taken prisoner and draft dodgers escaped. Benét pictured these as real as they were, his men as loyal to their cause as they were, his women falling in love with strange soldiers as they did and then being left to mourn and pray. He made the gentle population of the South experience the pinch of poverty that history corroborated and they found it necessary to decrease their number of slaves.

As new campaigns were introduced, Washington was placed under guard and three years after John Brown was

killed the new armies of the Potomac and Northern Virginia emerged.

The story of the run-away slave, Spade, portrayed the history of that trade as did the story of the young soldier boys' homesickness, the illness in hospitals, and Walt Whitman's role as a male nurse.

The author displayed the progress of the struggle through the eyes of Lincoln—flashes of hope, despair, victory, defeat—and his desire to save his Union by any means his hands could find under the Constitution—the proclamation to free the slaves.

The runaway slave was sympathetically portrayed as was Melora waiting for her child. Benét seemed to sense human traits very keenly under such circumstances—and never once was there any utterance of betrayal to his belief for the love of his country.

In the Battle of Gettysburg, historians as well as literary readers could follow the progress of furious fighting for three days. Leaders advanced on both sides, they retreated, General Lee watched the remnants of his army return across the fields while General Meade's victorious troops returned rejoicing and the tide of war turned.

Benét gathered the threads that brought strife to a close as Grant and Lee formally closed hostilities and President Lincoln found his dream fulfilled only to die at the
hands of an assassin. The Civil War ended, John Brown’s soul was at rest and Benét’s readers found themselves led through the aftermath.

Occasionally when an experience has deeply moved the author, readers feel sure he has caught the spirit of what America and the American way really are. The poet then beautifully recreates these typically American scenes for his fellowmen. Since Benét was so completely familiar with the various sections of his native land, as we have learned from a review of his life, he could recreate his story with a richness in suspense and in action. His characters drawn from various sections and walks of life express many moods.

But, through it all, the author’s patriotism never swerved either to the Union or to the Confederate side. Both were his heritage—America, and as such he portrayed the epic.

"American Names"

Charles Fenton agrees with a group of Benét’s friends that the pressure of poverty and an offensive feeling toward his fiction often concealed Stephen Benét’s passionate regard for his America. Living in Paris seemed to intensify his Americanism and it was during this time that "American Names"

appeared and became another national ode that publicly identified its author. 29

"American Names" served as leisure time writing since Benét was also working on his epic, John Brown's Body, at this time. Many of the names that appear in "American Names" came from his long poem.

Benét had lived in many parts of America and he read about and studied many more, thus knowledge of his countrymen had not come by accident. Each locality became home to him and all of them held a passionate meaning as he expressed in his "American Names":

I have fallen in love with American names,  
The sharp names that never get fat,  
The snakeskin-titles of mining-claims,  
The plumed war-bonnet of Medicine Hat,  
Tucson and Deadwood and Lost Mule Flat. 30

Some Patriotic Poems from A Book of Americans

In this book of fifty-five poems, the Benét's, husband and wife, have written poetry dedicated to warriors, to settlers, to pirate leaders, to leaders of nationalities outside America, to a traitor, a President's wife, ships, Negroes, women prominent in American history, a circus man, and to the inventors of the airplane. The interesting book begins with "Apology."

29 Ibid.
30 Stephen Vincent Benét, Selected Works, p. 367.
We couldn't put in all the great
Or even all the small,
And many names with sterling claims
We haven't used at all.

But here's a rather varied lot,
As anyone can see,
And all and each by deed and speed
Adorned our history.  

Among those who had "adorned" American history in
some way or another and won a place in Benét's collection
included Pocahontas, Miles Standish, Jefferson, Buchanan,
Monroe, Lincoln, Grant, Lee, Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson,
the Wright brothers, Walter Peary, and Robert Reed. Some
of these will be referred to more specifically later.

To conclude "Apology" the Benés wrote:

Some got the medals and the plums,
Some got their fingers burnt,
But every one's a native son,
Except for those who weren't.

So praise and blame judiciously
Their foibles and their worth.
The skies they knew were our skies, too,
The earth they found, our earth.

Poems pertaining to such groups as the Indians,
Southern settlers, the French pioneers and the Western
movement illustrate very adequately "The skies they knew
were our skies, too,/The earth they found, our earth."

31 Rosemary and Stephen Benét, A Book of Americans,
Introduction.

32 Ibid.
"Indian"
"French Pioneers"
"Southern Ships and Settlers"
"Western Wagons"

In this group of short selections the Benets depicted some of the people who founded our earth as they expressed it in "Apology." They called attention to the fact that the white man's coming, killing his deer, taking his fish, and then telling the Indians "They're the mighty tribe, And no one else is much." Benet's conclusion well reminded the white tribe he was not first in settling the nation.

Just remember this about
Our ancestors so dear.
They didn't find an empty land.
The Indians were here.

In "French Pioneers" Benet gave patriotic reverence to the French settlers, Marquette, LaSalle, Cartier, and other Frenchmen who came here and labored to win the new land in competition with the English and the Spanish. Finally, he said, they named

Lake and river, stream and wood,
Seigneurs and dames--
They lived here, they died here,
They left singing names.

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33 Rosemary and Stephen Vincent Benet, A Book of Americans, p. 5.
34 Ibid.
"Southern Ships and Settlers"

Benét developed "Southern Ships and Settlers" by use of the question and answer manner. Questions pertained to the clipper ships and the answers developed new settlements for the passengers, and the settling Virginia for the purpose of adventure and finding gold is aptly described.

Yet, the authors revealed true background of starvation, short rations, fever, and death. Steadfast in his spirit he says, "But a nation begins with the voyage we sail." Nor did they forget to bring in Protestant and Catholic, nor to stress that the South was Virginia and the North was New England. South Carolina and its planters, North Carolina and its Scotch Irish element, and the poor English debtors all made a vital part. Each group had a general purpose: to leave persecution and threats; the poet's specific purpose: to settle in a new land.

I'll settle them pleasantly on the Savannah, With Germans and Highlanders, thrifty and strong. They shall eat Georgia peaches in huts of palmetto, And their land shall be fertile, their days shall be long.

In the poem, "Western Wagons," one can almost hear the roll of the prairie schooners as they wended toward California, where they were determined to make a fortune and establish homes.

36 Stephen Vincent Benét, Selected Works, p. 395.
37 Ibid., p. 396.
Along the way readers were allowed to pause in Iowa and view the rich black farm land, in Wyoming to look for gold, and the authors remarked that Nebraska's land was to be cleared and broken.

We've broken land and cleared it, but we're tired of where we are. They say that wild Nebraska is a better place by far. There's gold in far Wyoming, there's black earth in Iowa. So pack up the kids and blankets, for we're moving out today!\[38\]

The Benét's carefully brought in national feeling that only strong men stayed in the West where promises can't fail. Although starvation threatened, Benét's "Western Wagons" kept moving. Tomorrow they were always ready to set forth believing fortune was in their hands. "But we're going West tomorrow, with our fortune in our hands."\[39\] Of such was America built and Benét would have it no less.

"Peregrin White and Virginia Dare"
"Pocahontas"
"Miles Standish"
"Pilgrims and Puritans"

This group of poems from the Benét's A Book of Americans illustrates rather accurately and most vividly depicts that period in history about which every loyal American wants to feel he is informed.

\[38\] Rosemary and Stephen Benét, Selected Works, p. 402.

\[39\] Ibid.
The Americans emphasized as the real first Americans anywhere were Peregrin White and Virginia Dare. "They were pioneers, but they never knew it." In "Pocahontas" Benét presented the maid, Pocahontas, as the protector of Captain John Smith and maintained all this influenced acclaiming her America's princess. Likewise in "Miles Standish," the brave warrior was depicted as one who lived and fought for the Puritans though he was not their sort.

"The Puritans and Pilgrims" very clearly described struggle for religious freedom, coming to a new land, the hardships, suffering, and death these groups experienced. This appeals to Americans today who can make a personal application to life in this period as well as to Benét's era.

"James Monroe"
"Thomas Jefferson"
"James Buchanan"
"Abraham Lincoln"
"Ulysses S. Grant"
"Robert E. Lee"

In this group of short poems written for A Book of Americans, the Benéts described strong leaders in war time, leaders who had the direct responsibility of making decisions, and in the case of Buchanan, they seem to make an

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example of him which would appeal to the need of strong leaders.

In "James Monroe" readers are especially made aware of the author's appreciation of the proclamation termed the Monroe Doctrine. The meaning the Benét's attached to the document, "These countries are settled. No Parking here," expresses present century tactics quite well. It leads one to wonder what Benét's stand in American affairs might be today. Of the Monroe era they wrote,

With what you have, we have no quarrel.
We only draw one simple moral
From Labrador to Darien
And South to Horn and back again,
These gates are shut. Respect these gates!
Yours truly,
The United States.
That's what he did! Why, James Monroe!
Yes, he did it all right, and we still say so.41

Poetically, "Thomas Jefferson" presents the statesman by that name as a molder, a builder, a maker of empires, one trustful of people, one eager to help a new nation learn to rule itself, but possibly as a leader who is jealous of interference, and although he was not pictured as a very candid leader at times, he carried a huge vision. Jefferson died a poor man, but a free-hearted one.

The Benét's poems constantly reminded their readers that Jefferson and Monroe were true statesmen.

The authors pictured Buchanan as the abolitionists' go-between with the Southerners. They inferred that Buchanan was one who "fiddled and fussed" until the Southern states left the Union and Buchanan had "twiddled his four years through and left the mess for somebody else/As weak men always do."\textsuperscript{42}

It was not Benét's custom to chastise, but in this poem the authors attempted to bring out America's need for leaders who were strong, and they chastised one who seemed to hesitate when he was confronted with making up his mind in the interest of his country.

Biographers have well established the fact that Lincoln's period of history represented Benét's favorite reading. Besides historical records that complimented the sixteenth President in the poem, "Abraham Lincoln," the Benéts physically pictured the gaunt awkward man while they gave readers pictures of Lincoln that included his marriage, family, life as a lawyer, as a Congressman and as the ideal man for handling the nation in troubled times.

Benét's splendid and enduring compliment, "Lincoln was the green pine. Lincoln kept on growing,"\textsuperscript{43} portrays genuine love for Abraham Lincoln.

\textsuperscript{42}Rosemary and Stephen Benét, \textit{A Book of Americans}, p. 77.

\textsuperscript{43}Ibid., p. 84.
The Civil War is well presented from the standpoint of patriotism of two outstanding leaders in two poems about them.

Benét willingly admitted that although Grant, the Northern leader, was a great soldier, a gentleman, and an honest man, he wasn't a very good President. He marked the South's Lee as a dauntless leader, chivalrous, and one who plead with his South when the war had ended to "forget the old rancors/And work for your land. The war days are over, We're one country now." The Southerner's answer, "If Marse Robert does it, I reckon we can," expressed their love for their leader, Robert E. Lee.

"Jesse James"
"P. T. Barnum"
"Walter Reed"
"Robert Peary"
"Wilbur and Orville Wright"
"Theodore Roosevelt"
"Woodrow Wilson"

In completing the Book of Americans Benét presented pictures of men in various walks of life that have made the country's history—not all good, certainly, but all representative of the panorama of America.

Although Jesse James' occupation was not one to praise, Benét reviewed the James' boys' escapades and punishments while he maintained Jesse earned his outlaw fame.

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44 Ibid., p. 89. 45 Ibid.
P. T. Barnum was emulated as one who made the freaks important on the days of his parade. This too was a phase of America's early entertainment features.

Reed and Lazear are praised for combatting yellow fever. As heroes to remember one needs look no farther, according to Benét's poem, "Walter Reed."

The Wright brothers received well-earned praise as their story of inventing the airplane was told in poetical style. Devotion of brothers who did not give in to adversities was noted as a major part of their life. Benét concluded "But, not till Man forgets his wings/Will men forget the Wrights."46

"Theodore Roosevelt" and "Woodrow Wilson" well described the accomplishments of the two leaders while each served in the Presidential chair of America. Life in the United States was pictured as never dull when Teddy Roosevelt ruled the land—and Benét believed no one ever enjoyed the job with the gusto of Theodore Roosevelt.

Although Benét's poem ridiculed Woodrow Wilson for changing his name from Tommy to the weighty and tiring Woodrow, he vowed that Wilson rowed the storm-tossed ship of state as well as any could row it at the time he was the pilot.

"U.S.A."

To conclude the Book of Americans the Benéts have used "U.S.A." His love for America as displayed by its past and his hope for its future well portrayed his feeling for his country. Although this book of poems came out several years before Benét achieved his best literary talents, they are currently appropriate as we review our past and reveal our hopes for America.

So we march into the present
And it's always rather pleasant
To speculate on what the years ahead of us will see,
For our words and thoughts and attitudes,
Will be rather Ancient History in 2033.

Will they find us wise—or silly?
Looking backwards, willy-nilly,
At our queer old-fashioned costumes and our quaint old-fashioned ways?
When our doings face the ages,
Printed down on textbook pages,
Will they cry, "This Savage Era"? Will they sigh, "Those were the days!"

I don't know—you may be wiser,
Time's a curious capsizer
Of a lot of reputations that seemed certain to endure,
While he'll sometimes make his heroes
Out of people, once though zeroes,
For the most well-grounded reasons, by the solemnly cocksure.

So, instead of prophesying
(Which is fun, but rather trying)
Who they'll pick to be our great ones when the books are on the shelves,
Here's the marching panorama
Of our past and present drama
And we shan't know all the answers till we're history ourselves.47

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These particular poems expressed the disappointment of the author in the citizenship of America which seemed to have too little concern for what was happening in the nation.

Benét looked back on a war in "Short Ode" in which he made it clear that warriors did not give their lives for praise but died heroically. He told mankind that although it had done a good deed in freeing its country from the undesirable, "Yet there are still tyrants and the kings." 48

In "1936" Benét looked ahead to a war. He pictured America in a new war unless its economy, its industrial, and its political scenes were not improved. Probably he was prophesying World War II, as he watched his countrymen sow the seeds for another war as they did in War I.

"Litany for Dictatorships" was an examination of political freedom principally but personal freedom was involved too. These three poems hark back to the source of his concern since about 1915—America. Fenton tells that in Benét's diary he called the above poems his "angry

48 Stephen Vincent Benét, Selected Works, p. 428.
poems." He was enraged about acts committed not only by intruders but by his own countrymen against their own citizens.

For those betrayed by the neighbors they shook hands with And for the traitors, sitting in the hard chair With the loose sweat crawling their hair and their fingers restless As they tell us the street and the house and the man's name.

The author's concern is powerfully expressed through the pronouncing of a litany for prisoners who failed to survive the punishments inflicted on them by war. He poignantly expressed it for those men who "carry the scars, who walk lame" who are swiftly shot down or who live and endure as they watch in prison camps only to find themselves killed like rodents.

"Litany for Dictatorships" truly portrayed from the beginning—"The ghosts in the burning city of our times" to "our fathers and ourselves who sowed the dragon's teeth" and "our children know and suffer the armed men." Benét derides hatred of outrages man brings upon himself because he will not defend his good American beliefs politically and personally.

With the Nightmare series and "Litany to Dictatorships," "Do You Remember, Springfield?" was said to have

50 Stephen Vincent Benét, Selected Works, p. 430.
51 Ibid., p. 429.  52 Ibid.
given Benét a new status as a national writer. Writer friends said of him he had become "as nearly the national poet as any has been since Whitman."  

Benét reviewed the Illinois people's praise for their state's fertility, its gift to the artistic, its buying and selling of votes and its expended efforts to bring trade and pride to its cities. The poet resented that Lincoln's death only netted a marble memory and Vachel Lindsay's only a notice, because Illinoians went back to praising the fertility of the soil and endeavors for increasing prosperity. Man's duty for his people and his nation as a whole was forgotten.

A man is another affair.
We understand that, in Springfield.
If he sings, why, let him sing
As long as we need not hear.

He came with singing leaves;
It was really most unfortunate.
The Lindsays and the Frazees
Are sturdy pioneer stock.

Let us give the Arts their due
And Lincoln a marble courthouse.
Both are respectfully dead.
They need not trouble us, now.

"Ode to the Austrian Socialists" was an effort to explain some of the meaningless things mankind did to each other in the name of liberty and freedom. "They shot the

53 Charles A. Fenton, Stephen Vincent Benét, p. 287.
Socialists at half-past five/In the name of victorious Austria."

They built homes in which to rear children rather than to quarter bombs and killing equipment. These people too believed in building parks, holding legitimate elections but there came the day when their families had to be hidden in cellars for protection and their men were forced to use unfamiliar weapons to fight mankind rather than to build humanity.

When death struck, many were sent into exile remembering once they had a free city and they plead,

Bring no flowers here,
Neither of mountain nor valley,
Nor even the common flowers of the waste field
That still are free to the poor;
No wreaths upon these graves, these houseless graves;
But bring alone the powder-blackened brass
Of the shell-case, the slag of bullets, the ripped steel
And the bone-spattering lead,
Infertile, smelling acridly of death,
And heap them here, till the rusting of guns, for remembrance."

As Benét talked to Walt Whitman in his grave, recalling Civil War days, Whitman's services as a male nurse, and notified him the wounds of war were healed and America was one nation with its land linked with industry and trade, it always brought from Whitman this question, "Is it well with these States?"

55Stephen Vincent Benét, Selected Works, p. 432.
56Ibid., p. 435. 57Ibid., p. 442.
Since Benét wrote this in the days of depression and he was poverty stricken, he described the skilled workers of America walking the streets with holes in their shoes. He called these Whitman's "tan-faced children." But when Whitman asked, "Was the blood spilt for nothing then?" and "But the gains of the years, who got them?", Benét's patriotic spirit recalled Civil War settlement but made a plea and hopes for the future and finally concluded that he could give Walt no high hearted courage as he pictured

The slum, the sharecropper's cabin, the senseless tower,
The factory town with the dirty stoops of twilight,
The yelling cheapness, the bitter want among plenty,
But never Monticello, never again.
And there are many years in America
And they are not ended yet.

"Nightmare at Noon"
"Nightmare for Future Reference"
"Tuesday, November 5, 1940"

These poems deride the typical free American who believed time was plentiful and guarding one's country primarily meant taking advantage of its opportunities in 1940.

In "Nightmare for Future Reference" he pictured a third war between "Us and Them." He referred to his own son growing up in the interval that seemed to grow shorter

58 Stephen Vincent Benét, Selected Works, p. 442.
59 Ibid., pp. 446-47.
60 Ibid., pp. 446-47.
between wars. He reminded readers that the decreasing birth rate left no men to defend their country after while and he told his son of reverence for glorious days that ended strife. While he looked upon the third war as including even the Eskimos, he predicted its result,

We keep the toys in the stores, and the comic books, And people marry and plan the rest of it. But, you see, there aren't any children. They aren't born. 61

While one Nightmare poem harked to a future war which was the second conflict, "Nightmare at Noon" described the same group of pleasure loving people with little thought of warning issued concerning freedom, and finding that very thing suddenly ended when bombs exploded over Finland, Greece, and London. He said of his own American citizens:

We are slow to wake, good-natured as a country. (It is our fault and our virtue.) . . .

Liberty, equality, fraternity.
To none will we sell, refuse or deny, right or justice. We hold these truths to be self-evident. 62

He appealed to the typical American whom he said thought fires burned only in some other land; ours was the wrong address for bombers. His awakening expression, "The bell has rung in the night and the air quakes with it," 63 tells readers Benét's feeling.

61Stephen Vincent Benét, Selected Works, p. 461.
62Ibid., p. 466.
63Ibid., p. 468.
Both poems according to the biographer, Fenton, excited the reading public in 1940 more than the prophesies and warnings set forth by two of Benét's staunch friends Millay and MacLeish at this time. 64 Benét was asked to read "Nightmare at Noon" on a radio program because the timely subject matter carried a stirring quality that the nation needed to hear.

A third poem of this period, "Tuesday, November 5, 1940," aptly reviewed the conditions of the jobless Americans who seemed friendless and expressed that the country was a broken down merry-go-round when Franklin D. Roosevelt took over the reins. He enumerated Roosevelt's contributions including the CCC, TVA, electricity on the farms, and contour plowing in the dust lands. Benét compared Roosevelt as a leader who knew the ways of his people to Lincoln who knew and believed in his prairies.

"Listen to the People"

Stephen Benét was conscientious, responsible, and thoughtful in an all out effort to use his talents for his country during World War II. He met almost impossible deadliness.

Benét sacrificed his own work, he refused to take any income, although he always seemed to need money. He

gave little attention to his personal needs and certainly did not take care of his health which failed rapidly.

Much of his war work was in the area of radio scripts in free verse, each suitable for a single broadcast. This was difficult.

The Council of Democracy included men from various American professions. Benét was known as the most genuinely unselfish contributor of the group.

Fenton says in his biography of Stephen Vincent Benét that besides having creative ability Benét also had the capacity to understand and work with all levels of Americans. When this Council was called upon to do a Fourth of July broadcast in 1940, Benét was chosen to prepare the script. Benét worked day and night, cut his script time after time, rewrote it and cut again only to learn the final rehearsal was two minutes too long. Again it was cut and "Listen to the People" was heard by more Americans than any other serious writer's script in the history of the United States.

"Listen to the People" was constructed with a Narrator, Voices of Radicals, Conservatives, Totalitarians, a Questioner, and a Man and a Woman.

It gave a most patriotic appeal to Americans everywhere. The Narrator pictured a typical Independence Day parade and narrated the stories of proud American characters in any community from the Fire Department, the Legion, the ice cream man, and the local lodge. There are scenes that represent the history of America from the story of the thirteen colonies and the signing of the Declaration of Independence, in which they told how liberty was paid for.

The Young Radical Voice depicted America being run by bosses "who got all the gravy,"67 and called upon the celebrants to forget democracy. An Older Voice of a Conservative accused the nation of having a dead Constitution, a system of labor that didn't know its place, and of course unnecessary taxes. It opposed everything including peace and war and gave the belief, "Democracy's a nasty word, invented by the Reds."68

The Persuasive Totalitarian Voice tried to influence strong hearted believers in a Fourth of July celebration that America's need was new leadership—the kind Totalitarians had sent to fourteen nations in the form of a bomb. This included giving orders that were never questioned, but merely obeyed, new concentration camps, and people as peaceable as Poland, as happy as France who succumb to an appeal that "Democracy is finished. We are the Future."69

67 Stephen Vincent Benét, Selected Works, p. 473.
68 Ibid., p. 474. 69 Ibid.
Again the Narrator added praise of those who fought for liberty with Lincoln and Thomas Paine. He pictured support from housewives and the men moving westward, relief rolls, laboring men and the old man who testified men always despained of the Republic because of tax or depression and a lost election. But, when morning broke, yesterday was forgotten and the breaking day brought good loyal citizens.

"Listen to the People" obviously came from the very heart of Stephen Benét at a time when a man's love for his America was needed for just such a demonstration before his fellow countrymen.

The money received from "Listen to the People" went to American U.S.O. and Army funds. English royalties likewise were given to the Spitfire Fund in that country. Letters and telegrams poured into NBC, to Life magazine, and to Benét with expressions of praise typical to one sent by Arthur Train, an associate officer in National Institute of Arts and Letters, "Your poem thrilled me. It is superb and inspiring and will have a tremendous effect throughout the nation. Congratulations!"70

Benét's original conception for his long poem, Western Star, the last poetry he was to write often referred to as

70 Charles A. Fenton, Stephen Vincent Benét, p. 364.
his "hack" work, was to tell the story of his America from the time Columbus landed in the fifteenth century to the driving of the golden spike for the Central Pacific Railroad in the nineteenth century according to notes in Fenton's possession.\footnote{Charles A. Fenton, \textit{Stephen Vincent Benét}, p. 343.}

Benét's natural love for his country might be said to lay in two continuous phases--one, the preservation of the Union and the second, the continual movement of its people. While \textit{John Brown's Body} dealt with the first phase, Benét intended that \textit{Western Star} include the second one.

When he first designed the poem, he intended that the Columbus role should consist of several scenes but in the end, it shrank to a half dozen well designed lines in the Prelude that developed very fittingly the spirit and the beginnings of America.\footnote{\textit{Tbid.}, p. 345.}

His theme not only held constant in his feelings but in the section which he completed in the last year of his life. He was able to keep a clear sense of that westward progress--as his songs and lyrics of the poem illustrate.

By 1937 Benét had begun to work in earnest on the frontier history of America from those early settlements along the Atlantic seaboard until the closing of the open...
land in the nineteenth century. So great was Benét's respect for the frontier man, he told a student newspaper friend at Phillips Exeter Academy, "I worried about catching the frontiersman's point of view rather than that of the Eastern settler." But his development of the true picture of such as John Smith and some added fictional characters which resolved from his reading and study gave an honest study of the frontiersmen.

His experience with fictional characters in John Brown's Body led him to develop superior individuals in Western Star. His knights, secretaries, Puritans, and merchants seemed more fresh, vigorous, and very possible. His political and social issues in this final writing were of contemporary immediacy and Benét seems to have matured in such issues through the same potentials in 1926 and 1927 as he worked on John Brown's Body.

Through his wide reading of history and fiction he undoubtedly had gained deep reverence for the past and therefore could dramatize it more strongly and keeping it authentically true among people, events, and terrain. His burden lay in sorting the research of a century and a half of complicated local and national history.

He was forced to put this manuscript from which he was deriving personal pleasure aside as the world war began

73 Ibid., p. 346.
in 1941 and he committed himself solely to war propaganda for the duration. He wanted to serve the government of the land he was writing about—and he told his publisher, Brandt, in October, 1941, "Every time I try to go back to my long poem, I think why write about the early history of Pennsylvania with the world blowing up. And yet, work ought to be done."\(^{74}\)

Finally in July, 1943, when \textit{Western Star} was published, it was pronounced "the work of an older, more serious, more subtle and more profound mind, and of an older, less exuberant more disciplined poet."\(^{75}\) \textit{Western Star} was distributed by the Book-of-the-Month Club and it was awarded a Pulitzer Prize, just as \textit{John Brown's Body} had.

\textit{Western Star} represented the spirit and the beginning of America. The birth of the American temperament might be its fundamental theme. In its opening line, "Americans are always moving on,"\(^{76}\) is the essence of what Benét's America was and is and probably the sure knowledge of what Benét felt it would always be. Benét believed this, he not only wrote it. He too was always moving on from one pressing duty for his country to another. Benét gave his life for the very thing he wrote about—the country he loved.


\(^{75}\)Ibid., p. 354.

\(^{76}\)Stephen Vincent Benét, \textit{Western Star}, p. 7.
Hercically he told in alternate episodes of the Virginia and the New England settlements. He vividly depicted the adventures of Dick Heron, the mercer's apprentice who ran away from London and readers follow him as he boarded the Chesapeake. They meet the Puritan Lanyard family on the Mayflower and realize that no matter how many of these tried to remain in England, Benét lead them to become members of a new race—and often they were unaware of this happening.

Just as Benét's epic *Western Star* was unfinished, its readers feel the same spirit—neither was America and Benét's purpose seems well accomplished. The poem was published in July, 1943, after his death in March.

Benét's respect for mankind regardless of race, color, creed, or heritage is well summed in the ending of *Western Star*.

End the song, end the song,
For now the flood goes west, the rushing tide,
The rushing flood of men,
Hundred on hundred, crowding the narrow ships,
Massachusetts begins, and Providence Plantations,
Connecticut begins, Virginia spreads out.
There are Swedes by the Delaware, Scotchmen after Dunbar,
They whip the first Quaker bloodily through the street.
Exile, rebel, men against fortune, all
Who are driven forth, who seek new life and new hope.
As the wheel of England turns, they are coming now
To the exile's country, the land beyond the star.
(Remember that till you die. Remember that.
Remember the name of the outcast and the stranger.
Remember that when you say
"I will have none of this exile and this stranger
For his face is not like my face and his speech is strange."
You have denied America with that word
Though your fathers were the first to settle the land.)
A rolling, restless wave of seeking men,
Settling and planning, creeping along the coast,
Pushing up river-valleys to the new ground,
Winthrop and Hooker and Williams--Father John White
Who prayed to all the angels of the Americas,
(For they must be there) as they settled Maryland.
There was a wind over England and it blew.
There was a wind through the nations, and it blew.
Strong, resistless, the wind of the western star,
The wind from the coasts of hope, from the barely-known,
And, under its blowing, Plymouth and Jamestown sink
To the small, old towns, the towns of the oldest graves,
Notable, remembered, but not the same.
This was where one planted--aye--but the corn has grown,
The corn has brown to a rustling yellow field,
And a trembling hand writes down,
"This year, thirty persons still living of the old stock."
Standish--Brewster--the names fade out with the wind--
The names ring fainter, the names of the first, the bold,
"This year twelve persons still living of the old stock."
They have gotten their children. They sleep in Burial Hill.
They sleep by the Jamestown church. They sleep well and
long.
Though their seed be increased, they know their seed no
more.
This last, this seventieth year,
"Two persons living that came in the first ships,"
Of the old stock . . . the old stock . . .
There are two . . . there are none at last . . .
Of the old stock . . . the old stock . . .
And the west wind blew in the faces of Dickon's sons
And they looked to the West and searched it with their
eyes,
And there was the endless forest and the sharp star.77

"Prayer"

On United Nations Flag Day, June 14, 1942, there was
a broadcast over NBC Network, Toward the Century of the
Common Man, a script especially written for the occasion by
George Faulkner. Benét was asked to write the closing speech

77Stephen Vincent Benét, Western Star, pp. 180-81.
for this script. President Roosevelt read the Prayer following his Flag Day speech that day also, at the request of Archibald MacLeish, Librarian of Congress and personal friend of Stephen Benét. It is truly a résumé of Benét's true loyalty.

"Prayer"--Stephen Vincent Benét

God of the free, we pledge our hearts and lives today to the cause of all free mankind.

Grant us victory over the tyrants who would enslave all free men and nations. Grant us faith and understanding to cherish all those who fight for freedom as if they were our brothers. Grant us brotherhood in hope and union not only for the space of this bitter war, but for the days to come which shall and must unite all the children of the earth.

Our earth is but a small star in the great universe. Yet of it we can make, if we choose, a planet unvexed by war, untroubled by hunger or fear, undivided by senseless distinctions of race, color or theory. Grant us that courage and foreseeing to begin this task today that our children and our children's children may be proud of the name of man.

The spirit of man has awakened and the soul of man has gone forth. Grant us the wisdom and the vision to comprehend the greatness of man's spirit, that suffers and endures so hugely for a goal beyond his own brief span. Grant us honor for our dead who died in the faith, redemption and security for all captive lands and peoples. Grant us patience with the deluded and pity for the betrayed. And grant us the skill and valor that shall cleanse the world of oppression and the old base doctrine that the strong must eat the weak because they are strong.

Yet most of all grant us brotherhood, not only for this day but for all our years—a brotherhood not of words but of acts and deeds. We are all of us children of earth—grant us that simple knowledge. If our brothers are oppressed, then we are oppressed. If they hunger, we hunger. If their freedom is taken away, our freedom is not secure. Grant us a common
faith that man shall know bread and peace—security, an equal opportunity and an equal chance to do his best, not only in our own lands, but throughout the world. And in that faith let us march toward the clean world our hands can make. Amen.  

78 Stephen Vincent Benét, We Stand United, p. 204.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

After reading and following the life of Stephen Benét and that of his family, and then turning to the poetry he wrote, the writer feels his family and his military environment from childhood instilled a patriotic appeal in his personality. All this seems to have become an integral part of the man and his work whether he wrote in periods of peace or on the approach of war. From this idea a feeling developed toward the author that patriotism was a natural element in his life. He could not avoid writing with a patriotic spirit for he was a patriotic individual from youth until death. Benét could not have discarded this attitude had he tried. It grew with him, it became a part of him that he could not help utilizing in his livelihood. The wonderful opportunities he enjoyed in his father's household as a child set the tempo for such a life. All this seemed to happen so naturally that the boy was unaware of such a personality being developed.

His interest in poetry was stimulated by his childhood experiences also and this literary interest combined with a knowledge of history engendered in his home, certainly led the way to a wonderful heritage from which the young Benét emerged thoroughly American and unassumingly appreciative of it from its very founding.
Travel helped Stephen Vincent Benét to be appreciative of his nation. He seemed to develop no single point of view, but found something for which each part of his country was proud. Through books, travel, observation of his father's work, neighboring military camps, and family discussions, naturally there developed and grew a feeling about his nation, its decisions, its wars, its expansion, its economic and its social status.

Perhaps Stephen's many illnesses and the sorrow of his life, the physical disability which caused him to be rejected by the armed forces, strengthened his patriotic love for his country. This intense feeling for America could be expressed only in words, his best and most likely medium. What better tribute could he have given America?

But, much of his feeling toward his native land was an element that came upon him unaware, settled in his complete personality and there grew, developed, and came forth in the product of his work as unassuming and as naturally as did nourishment from food. All this led to an aptitude for expression that included an anxiety to tell others of his nation and to express an appreciation for its varied contributions.

Benét seemed tolerant and considerate in his literary effort but it had an appeal to his countrymen everywhere. The large number of friends in his home left their mark on
Stephen in that he was observing. Readers learned he developed something in France also conducive to American freedom. There he firmly established a love for his American heritage and some of his finest approaches toward his poetry began in France. *John Brown's Body* was a fine example.

The result of the study of Benét and his works and the expressed desire to write about subjects he did not get to suggest an outstanding characteristic—his sincere, unassuming but powerfully present love for America. Thus, looking directly into a group of his poems that might bear proof of his innermost feeling, it was not difficult to find the spirit of patriotism present in almost all of his works.

Many of his poems though quite simple in subject matter, illustrate the simple feeling of love for his people and his surroundings. Several directly express appreciation for freedom, life, and liberty. Many are devoted to wartime effort and propaganda but always emerge with the same idea, being true to one's country and loyal to its beliefs and standing steadfast even in adverse periods.

Many short poems were written about American personages who contributed to growth, development, and the keeping of America free. Some few were pleas to the population for maintaining principles. The long one, *John Brown's Body*, presents the history of Civil War times illustrating Benét's knowledge of his country's history and the Civil War era
interest. Western Star illustrates his love for America in its expanding westward. In both poems his knowledge of history is well illustrated.

In conclusion, Benét's poetry is a picture of Benét. He could not write without showing patriotism, love, and appreciation for his native land, its inhabitants, and the things for which they stand because of such was the man, Stephen Vincent Benét.

One can hardly read and study his young life, his family background, his married life, his writing attempts, and his poetry without emerging with a deeper appreciation for the early settlers of America and feeling just a bit more patriotic and closer to that country one is privileged to call home.
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