

Making Middletown

STAUGHTON LYND

My Parents

We are told in the introduction to *Middletown* that “two streams of colonists” met in the Midwest: “the Yankees from New England and New York,” and the “southern stream” who, “having passed through the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky, went down the Ohio River.”¹ My parents exemplified the two kinds of colonists.

My mother Helen Merrell Lynd came from a libertarian New England background suggested by the blue sky, evergreens, and granite rock of that part of the world. A Merrell, she once told me, had fought in the American Revolution. As the Merrells moved west they founded colleges: Ripon College in Wisconsin, and Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington, attended by the future Justice of the United States Supreme Court, William Douglas. My mother’s mother, my maternal grandmother, was a small and unassuming woman who taught school in Illinois. But my grandmother refused to lead her students in saluting the flag, because, she said, it isn’t true that there is justice for all.²

My father was quite different. His people were from the upper South. My dad was his own unique combination of a former student at Union

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¹Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown* (New York, 1929), 8.

²Helen Merrell Lynd with Staughton Lynd, *Possibilities*, rev. ed. (1978; Bronxville, N.Y., 1983), 16, 19.

Theological Seminary and a believer in central planning in the tradition of Teddy Roosevelt Republicans and the New Deal.

It seems that between the first and second years at Union, students were expected to volunteer for summer preaching assignments.³ Somehow my father wound up at a Rockefeller oil camp in Elk Basin, Wyoming, where he arrived by stagecoach. He located a boarding house, but at dinner the first evening he sensed a chill around the table. He concluded that men who worked six days a week for Mr. Rockefeller were not excited about a handsome young man from the East spending his days visiting their wives.

So my father got a job as a pick and shovel laborer, and preached in the school house Sunday nights. It is the single thing about him of which I am most proud. When I was growing up stories were told. One was about the man who stood at the school house door as the hat was passed for the collection and shouted, "Lucky to get the hat back!" And songs were sung, especially a song that I have never heard elsewhere which begins:

When the Good Lord made the copper ore
 He said, "I'll put you away to store
 Where man won't find you any more
 Unless he's a human mole."
 But he reckoned without the miner man,
 Who isn't built on the regular plan,
 So ever since the world began
 It's the miner who digs the hole.

Chorus:
 Colonel, another bowl!
 My throat's as black as coal
 But if you listen well,
 You can hear me tell,
 If there's mines up in Heaven
 I'm a-going to Hell,
 I'm a poor old busted son of a gun
 The miner that digs the hole.

When I was a teenager, I thought I saw a momentary reappearance of the pick and shovel laborer of the early 1920s when my father was invited to

³See chapter 1, "Father and Son: Intellectual Work Outside the University," in Staughton Lynd, *Living Inside Our Hope: A Steadfast Radical's Thoughts on Rebuilding the Movement* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1997).

address a UAW educational conference in 1949. The speech was printed as a pamphlet because, according to Victor Reuther's preface, "reports of it have circulated through the union with the result that there has been an insistent demand for its publication."⁴ I remember my father's face as he came in the door of our family apartment after giving that speech. I had never seen him so happy.

But there was a second side to my dad's ability to relate to working-class folk. He did not romanticize them. He had not found a union upsurge in Muncie even in the 1930s. I remember a fragment of conversation in which he said that what workers like to do is sit in the sun and drink beer.

And so I was somehow prepared by my father for a two-sided experience in approaching the poor and oppressed. On the one hand, I recognized their oppression and their persistence in combating it, and sought to be helpful. On the other hand, I was prepared to understand that for persons battered by economic necessity there was inevitably an overriding concern with short-term material security.

Making Middletown

So far as the wide world was concerned, my parents Robert and Helen Lynd have always been the people who wrote those books about Muncie. I remember very little about the making of the Middletown books. I was born after the publication of the first book. I have a memory of the writing of *Middletown in Transition*, but it may be one of those quasi-memories that actually derives from what others tell you that they remember.

For years the Lynd family rented a summer home called Innisfeld in the New Hampshire lake district during the break between academic semesters. My mother has said about the Muncie project, "At first it was his study. Then when we came to the writing [of *Middletown*] it was decided that we were sharing the book." Just down the road from Innisfeld was the summer home of Lawrence Frank, a friend of the family, in whose garage my dad wrote the first draft. My mother relates that "[t]hen we came back to New York and worked on it together for another year. . . . We did a lot of revision. The manuscript was 900 typed pages and we cut it to 600. We worked terribly hard, and revised and revised and revised. I can remember even after it was in page proof sitting in Harcourt's office and changing this and that."⁵ My mother adds:

⁴Robert Lynd, *You Can Do It Better Democratically: A Comment on the Operation of Politics and Government as They Affect the Lives of Most People* (Detroit, 1979).

⁵Helen Merrell Lynd, *Possibilities*, 38, 40.

what we did as we actually wrote it was that we would each write a chapter and then we would exchange and rewrite. The one absolutely unbreakable rule was that no matter how silly either of us felt to be something that the other had written, it couldn't be thrown away. We had to consult.⁶

The second book, *Middletown In Transition*, was written in the Innisfeld study. The room had patterned brown and white wallpaper showing some sort of English hunting scene. As one entered the study from the living room, there were two desks placed against the walls which met to form a corner at the far side of the room. Each of my parents sat at one of the desks. And my memory, for what it's worth, is of one day coming into that study with a glass of orange juice for each of my parents.

Why My Father?

Why was my father asked to do the Muncie study? After his summer at the Rockefeller oil camp in Wyoming, he and John D. Rockefeller, Jr., exchanged views in the pages of a periodical named *The Survey Graphic*.⁷ My dad was quite critical of Mr. Rockefeller's operation. Moreover, there was an oft-repeated story at the family kitchen table that after his summer in Elk Basin, my father asked John D. Rockefeller for a contribution to the community center there, and Mr. Rockefeller declined on the ground that it had been a bad year for Standard Oil.

All of this being so, why did the Institute of Social and Religious Research of the Rockefeller Foundation ask Robert Lynd to do a study of the religious life of a typical American city?

An adequate answer would require more knowledge than I possess about Rockefeller family history. I have the impression that after the notorious massacre of the wives and children of striking miners in Ludlow, Colorado, just before World War I, the Rockefellers began to espouse a more benign form of capitalism. If I am not mistaken, Rockefellers helped to fund, through the Interchurch World Commission, a somewhat sympathetic study of the 1919 steel strike. Perhaps hiring my father was a part of this same course of conduct. As I put it ten years ago, perhaps "the boss was

⁶Ibid., 38.

⁷Robert S. Lynd, "Done in Oil," and John D. Rockefeller, Jr., "A Promise of Better Days," *The Survey: Graphic Number*, 49 (November 1, 1922), 137-148, 175.



Helen Lynd on the porch at Innisfield. *Middletown in Transition* was written in the study of this home.

Courtesy Staughton Lynd

dealing with an outspoken shop-floor militant by making the man a foreman.”⁸

There is an interesting echo of my father’s relationship to the Rockefellers in my parents’ relationship to the Ball family of Muncie. According to my mother, when my dad selected Muncie as the city he would study “he did not know that Muncie was dominated as much as it was by the Ball family.”⁹ *Middletown* placed heavy emphasis on economics, as in the chapter on “The Long Arm of the Job.” My mother comments, “It became very clear that there were two classes in the community, which we called the business and working classes.”¹⁰ She herself came from a very meager

⁸Staughton Lynd, *Living Inside Our Hope*, 24.

⁹Helen Merrell Lynd, *Possibilities*, 34.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 35.

economic background. The family took in boarders to make it possible for the three girls to attend college, and my mother, as a student at Wellesley, made sure not to take a nickel with her when she went downtown for fear that she would use it to buy an apple.

But the first *Middletown* book, for all its emphasis on economics, placed less stress on what my father later in life called business as a system of power. By contrast, *Middletown in Transition* contained an equally well-known chapter entitled "The X Family: A Pattern of Business-Class Control." The X family was the Ball family, makers of glass jars for preserving fruit and vegetables. Once more according to the lore dispensed at the Lynd kitchen table, after the appearance of the second book my parents no longer received Christmas cards from the Balls.

Whose Book?

A few years ago I corresponded with a Dutch student of *Middletown* about how the book came to be published. He was convinced that there was a harmonious relationship between my parents and the committee sponsoring the study. My mother said the opposite, and as I explained as politely as I could to my overseas correspondent, she was there and I believe her.

According to my mom, the project that resulted in *Middletown*

went through various vicissitudes. At times the Institute wanted to drop it. One reason they disliked the manuscript so much at the end was that they said it was savage on religion. There is an account of a Methodist revival that they particularly disliked. Later, the Methodists in Muncie built a new church, and felt Bob's was the best account there had ever been of a revival service, and in the cornerstone of the church placed a copy of the Bible, and of the Methodist creed, and of *Middletown*.¹¹

What underlay the dispute between the Lynds and the committee sponsoring their study was not religion, but anthropology. My parents were convinced that any single facet of a community's life, such as religion, could only be understood in the context of the total life of the community. That is why the foreword to *Middletown* was written by the well-known anthropologist Clark Wissler, who called the book "a pioneer attempt to deal with a

¹¹Ibid., 34.

sample American community after the manner of social anthropology.”¹² My mother says, “We were very much interested in what it would look like for an anthropological technique to be applied to an American city. We were fascinated with whether this would work.”¹³

The anthropological approach struck the sponsoring committee as formlessness, according to my mother.

After eight or nine months, the people at the Institute were discontented because they didn't know where the study was going. And neither did we. Something would come up, and that would lead to something else, which wasn't on any chart. . . .

But the Institute people saw what they thought was a formlessness with no schedule being followed. I think it was true that what we were doing didn't fit into any category.¹⁴

My mother states that after she and my father completed the second draft of *Middletown*,

it sat around for a year because the Rockefeller committee didn't want to publish it. They told Bob that they had read it and they thought it wasn't any good, it was unpublishable. They thought it didn't cohere. They'd never seen that kind of a book before. They didn't think it was interesting, and they thought it was irreligious.

It was a grim period. We didn't know the manuscript was good. I was about 26, Bob was under 30. It was getting on for four years then, and we had worked long hours and long days. . . .

We kept hoping that something would happen that would change their minds. Somewhere along the line Bob showed the manuscript to Clark Whistler [sic] and he said he liked it and would do an introduction. And then, after about a year, Bob asked the Institute people if they would allow him to publish the manuscript if he could find a publisher. They owned it. It was

¹²Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, vi.

¹³Helen Merrell Lynd, *Possibilities*, 36.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 37.

their property. I think the only reason that they said he could was because they were sure he couldn't. They told him so. They said they didn't think he could possibly get it published, but they wouldn't forbid him trying, and if he could get a publisher they wouldn't forbid its publication.¹⁵

The rest is history.

An All-White Town And An All-White Book

There is, however, a gigantic qualification one must make to the suggestion that my parents' approach was "anthropological." In a nation scarred and significantly defined by the experience of chattel slavery, they chose to study a community that was almost all white.

Here I must mention a matter that gives me pain and shame. My father grew up in New Albany, Indiana, just north of the Ohio River, and in Louisville, Kentucky, on the other side. Both settings were saturated with racism, as are geographically comparable communities like Cincinnati, Ohio, and Cairo, Illinois. My dad, although kindhearted to any African American he encountered, was imperfectly aware of what was implied by jokes and songs that he repeated endlessly. Such a joke concerned the African American soldier who confronted a German soldier during World War I. Each took a pass at the other. The German said, "Missed me." The black man, armed with a razor, replied, "Just wait till you wiggle your haid." Such a song at Princeton contained the lyric, "It takes a long, tall, brown-skinned gal, To make a preacher lay his good book down." Much later, a certain chapter in DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* brought home to me the full horror of those lines.¹⁶

In truth, I became conscious of these matters slowly and awkwardly. At Harvard, I once left a note at the room of a high-school classmate in which I said that I had not seen him in "a coon's age" (another of my father's expressions). My friend had to explain to me that the word "coon" did not refer to a four-footed animal.

How does *Middletown* justify the decision deliberately to study a city with a "small Negro and foreign-born population"? The introduction states forthrightly:

¹⁵Ibid., 38.

¹⁶W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago, 1904).

In a difficult study of this sort it seemed a distinct advantage to deal with a homogeneous, native-born population, even though such a population is unusual in an American industrial city. Thus, instead of being forced to handle two major variables, racial change and cultural change, the field staff was enabled to concentrate upon cultural change. The study thus became one of the interplay of a relatively constant native American stock and its changing environment. As such it may possibly afford a baseline group against which the process of social change in the type of community that includes different racial backgrounds may be studied by future workers.¹⁷

Some of my parents' own findings call this baseline methodology into question. The most recent census at the time the first book was written reported that 2 per cent of Muncie's population was foreign-born, a little less than 6 per cent were African American, and "nearly 85 per cent. in 1920 was native white of native parentage."¹⁸ In the Muncie of the mid-1920s:

The small group of foreign-born mingle little with the rest of the community. Negroes are . . . [not allowed] in the larger motion picture houses or in Y.M.C.A. or Y.W.C.A.; they are not to be found in "white" churches; Negro children must play in their own restricted corner of the Park.¹⁹

A decade later the percentages of foreign-born and African American families in Muncie remained 2 and 5.5 percent, respectively.²⁰ But the second book has 14 index entries under "Negroes" as compared to 3 in the first. And the authors indicate that when the number of African Americans increases, or when they compete directly with whites for jobs, white hostility escalates. A few Negroes or Jews may be tolerated, "but as the number increases they may become a 'problem' and mild antipathies may crystallize into antagonism."²¹ Similarly:

¹⁷Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 8.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 479.

²⁰Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York, 1937), 165n.

²¹*Ibid.*, 425.

It may have been true in the past that, as a Middletown employer remarked, "Our Negroes work for the most part at jobs where there is little or no competition from whites. They apply for certain jobs and whites apply for the others"; but in a world of too few jobs such tentative color lines will tend to vanish. And the Negro, always suspect to the whites in a crisis, will tend to receive the full brunt of white resentment as the whites seek to wrest their jobs from them.²²

Thus the baseline concept of the first Muncie study seems questionable in light of the second study. The attitudes of whites when the number of African Americans is small do not tell us much about what their attitudes will be when the numbers are more nearly equal. Likewise the benign tolerance of suburban whites who do not compete with African Americans economically²³ does not throw much light on what will be felt by white workers who compete for the same unskilled jobs that African Americans hold or aspire to.

I think the baseline rationale should be set aside. A simpler way of accounting for my parents' decision to study a community that was almost all white is that this was what their life experience qualified them to do. I often heard my father speak of what "religion" meant to him growing up in New Albany, Indiana, and Louisville, Kentucky: it was the experience of standing up to sing hymns with his family in the oak pews of the local Presbyterian church, in the midst of a community to which they belonged. Mother relates that while Dad always said that he could have lived happily in Muncie, she could not have. Yet she shared with my father the experience of growing up in an all-white community centered on the Protestant church. She wrote about it to a friend after her mother died.

. . . The nurse who came in for night care was a stranger to me but said she was in Mother's "circle" at the Church and told of letters Mother had written her when she was ill. I asked her if she had known Father and she said, "Oh, yes, I joined Grace Church under Deacon Merrell."

²²Ibid., 465.

²³Ibid., 464.



Robert Lynd in 1941.

Richard Greene Collection, Ball State Archives & Special Collections

The man who has done painting and odd jobs for Mother for years came in and looked at her, tears streaming down his face. He said that the first anniversary of Father's death he had turned down a ticket to the World Series so that he could be painting at the house as he knew it would be a hard day for Mother.

Before the funeral service began as we were sitting in an alcove apart from the "friends" a woman came over, put her arms around us and kissed us—the woman who had done cleaning for

Mother my first years in college when Adela and Margaret were in high school. And two of the people whom Mother took in to board to help on expenses when we were going through college.

The new minister was a well-meaning, banal, boy scout hard to bear. . . . But he, too, took on stature when he read with quiet dignity the passages we selected for the service . . . I'm glad I grew up with that, and that sort of affirmation of "the length and breadth and depth and height" of love "beyond all that we ask or know" is in whatever world I am trying to work for.²⁴

I am convinced that what my parents were trying to do in Muncie was to excavate this experience of genuine religiously based community from the provincialism and crass materialism with which that experience was encrusted.

Fetishism And Misplaced Concreteness

A fetish is a material object that has been invested with the powers of the spiritual reality it represents. Thus a mask is a fetish when it is believed to possess the potency of the person or God depicted. Idols are fetishes, and a great deal of the Old Testament is devoted to discussing and occasionally destroying idols.

Words can also be fetishes. The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead coined the term "misplaced concreteness" to indicate what happens when we attribute to an abstraction like a word the concrete particularity of something real. My mother, as a teacher, would sometimes say to her students when they seemed to be caught up in a discussion of words and labels, "Let's just call what we are talking about X, and proceed."

I say all this pursuant to a plea that we not make fetishes of the Middletown books, the city of Muncie, or Robert and Helen Lynd. Assume for the moment that what I have just suggested is true: that my parents' experience of African Americans and the foreign-born was limited, and they chose for this reason to study a community consisting almost entirely of persons who were white and born in the United States. Let's not make a fetish of this decision or of the community thus chosen. Instead let's ask: What would my parents say if they could comment on this decision now? What would they do if they were 25 years old again in the first years of the 21st century, and were once again asked to make a study of the religious life

²⁴Helen Merrell Lynd, *Possibilities*, 36, 22-23.

of a typical American community? What would they perceive to be the next step in the anthropological methodology that they pioneered? I am convinced that, if they had to do it again in the 21st century, they would find a way to put the transcendence of racial, ethnic, and national boundaries at the center of their project.

I remember two movies I attended with my parents as a child. One was a Soviet documentary portraying the surrender of German troops after the battle of Stalingrad in 1943. The Germans were shown in rags, their feet bound in huge clumps of cloth against the cold. Derisive music played as they surrendered. My mother was furious. You don't humiliate a defeated enemy. You don't contemptuously caricature any other human being.

The other movie was a French film of the 1930s, *Grand Illusion*. Two soldiers captured during World War I, an auto mechanic and a middle-class Jew, escape from a German prison. Rosenthal twists his ankle and Marechal becomes increasingly angry with his companion's slow progress. They quarrel and decide to separate. Marechal says, "I never liked your kind anyway." Rosenthal responds, "It's a little late for that." Marechal strides off, singing. Rosenthal calls after him that he is so happy to be rid of Marechal that he, too, can sing, and starts to do so. The moment Marechal is out of earshot Rosenthal, sitting on a rock, begins to cry. Then Marechal's overcoat comes into view at the edge of the movie frame. Marechal takes his friend under the arm, helps him to his feet, and they go on together.

This movie (which I have watched literally dozens of times) displayed the ethic that my parents acted out at Christmas, when they invited to our home persons who were alone for the holiday and had nowhere else to go.

As T. S. Eliot says:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time. . . .²⁵



²⁵T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," *Four Quartets* (New York, 1943), 29.