

# C H A P T E R 1

---

## Progressive-era Values and Influences (1890–1917)

Born at the end of the nineteenth century, Allan Nevins came to maturity during a period of transition in American history, a time when rugged individualism and the concept of *laissez-faire* were giving way to a new ideology based on cooperation and social concern. These values found expression in reform legislation and administrations, political realignments, and shifting economic structures and relationships. Nevins championed many of these new developments, but also voiced his concern when they threatened to upset cherished values. He appreciated the Progressive era's emphasis on organization, professionalism, and technical competence. He valued the advances of science and technology, understood the importance of a diverse society, and accepted economic concentration as a positive development. At the same time, he warned about material comfort without social unity, diversity without common purpose, and economic power without free institutions. One of those institutions was the press, and he stood steadfast against infringement of its independence. He was cosmopolitan and internationalist in his outlook, but valued the commonplace as much as he did the cultural. He admired intellect, but had high regard for character and for the human condition. He looked up to men of action, yet disparaged those figures that scattered their energies and engaged in activities beyond their capabilities. He loved the romantic literature of the Victorian era, but also countenanced the new realism of twentieth-century writers. His appreciation of both forms of literary expression accounted for his efforts to create a bridge between them. In many ways, Nevins was a nineteenth-century man living out his life in the twentieth century.

## I

Nevins's parents, his community, and the times in which he grew up influenced his character, attitudes, and intellectual interests. He was born on 20 May 1890 in the village of Camp Point, Illinois, the youngest of five children of Emma Stahl and Joseph Nevins, a hard-working family of Scotch farmers. As Nevins recalled in later life, his family was short of stature and of moderate weight, and, like most Scots, were industrious and busy people who obeyed the law and believed in "doing right to everybody."<sup>1</sup>

Nevins's heritage bore the imprint of mid- to late-nineteenth-century America and the inexorable westward migration of people in search of new land and economic opportunities. That search informed the history of the Nevinses and the Stahls. Joseph Nevins's father, a Scottish linen factor, emigrated to America in the 1840s; he settled first in the coal mining area around Allentown, Pennsylvania, but relocated a few years later to Adams County, Illinois, in the westernmost part of the state, where he took up farming. Emma Stahl's father was a Pennsylvania German cabinetmaker who, because of ill health, sought the "outdoor life of the Illinois farmlands." The citizens of Adams County were hardworking, thrifty people, fiercely individualistic and materialistic. According to Nevins, "The frontiersman and his farmer sons saw a bright future civilization for which they were laying the foundation. But it was a competitive, not a cooperative, civilization."<sup>2</sup> The townsfolk were made up mostly of Yankees, "genteel" Southerners, and immigrants from Germany and England, who found in the rich soil and excellent drainage of rural Illinois the opportunity for bountiful harvests of corn and grain. There were no Negroes there, a circumstance that, as Nevins recalled in later life, caused him to feel somewhat hampered in understanding black character and culture.<sup>3</sup>

Camp Point provided a pleasant and fairly progressive setting for raising a child during the 1890s. The citizens valued good morals and education. Large shade trees bordered well-maintained sidewalks and streets, lending an aspect of innocence to a town that shunned saloons and prohibited the sale of liquor, except by prescription for medicinal purposes. The town did not countenance rowdiness, and the police reported few such incidents. The citizens prized education and helped support one of the best high schools in the county, a place where teaching took place both in the "higher and common branches of learning."<sup>4</sup> They also valued free discussion. Adams County had earned a reputation for its liberal attitudes and charitable activities and for its willingness to permit "untrammelled discus-

sion” about slavery and states rights in the period leading up to the Civil War.<sup>5</sup> The county seat, Quincy, boasted one of the West’s pioneer daily newspapers, the *Quincy Herald*. Founded in 1850 and partial to the Democratic Party, the paper was noted for its “youthful vitality and persistency either in attack or defense”<sup>6</sup> and its influence in forming community opinion on great issues.

Though they had little interest in aesthetic concerns such as art, architecture, or music, townspeople enjoyed, like the Nevinses, standard authors and popular magazines, including *McClure’s*, *Munseys*, *Harpers*, *The Youth’s Companion*, and *Scribners*.<sup>7</sup> The journalist Ray Stannard Baker, who later wrote a biography of Woodrow Wilson, was typical of the writers who contributed stories to the *Companion* and to *McClure’s*. He observed in his autobiography that the *Companion* was representative of what “the average reading American in the latter part of the nineteenth century wanted and would pay for. . . .” It instructed its authors to deliver a story with a good plot that would entertain from beginning to end. The authors could have an ethical purpose behind what they wrote, “but the moral must be revealed by the story itself, not by any comment of the writer.” Baker recalled having written one story about the life of a railroad man for the Burlington Railroad and having ridden with the engineer in the cab of the locomotive during its night mail run through “the raining darkness of Illinois.”<sup>8</sup>

The Nevins family took a keen interest in learning. Joseph Nevins was educated at a private academy in Quincy, did well in all his subjects, particularly Latin, and went on to teach in the Quincy schools. After the death of his mother, however, he took over the family farm. Emma, one of his students, was very impressed by his learning, good looks, and military bearing, and she fell deeply in love with him.<sup>9</sup> Reading played a prominent role in the lives of both parents, and they found ample ways of communicating this interest to their children. “I well remember,” Nevins said, “the loving piety with which my father kept in a drawer of a secretary in our Camp Point home two books which we children were forbidden to touch without permission: a large brown leather-bound Bible, and a large black leather edition of Robert Burns.”<sup>10</sup> Books became the only diversion from the drudgery of farm life. Nevins’s sister Edith and her fiancé (and later husband), Lewis Omer, college educated and a teacher in a suburban Chicago high school, nurtured Nevins’s appreciation of Victorian literature. Nevins remembered their introducing him to the works of Victor Hugo. He also recalled reading Sir Walter Scott’s *Tales of a Grandfather*, a history of Scotland, which the *Edinburgh Literary Journal* suggested had only one fault: that Scott confined

himself to facts and failed to comment on the material or express an opinion.<sup>11</sup> Nevins also devoured magazines, particularly *McClure's*, which the family considered, as he later related to Ida Tarbell, one of its writers, "as something far too good to be thrown away."<sup>12</sup> Tarbell was one of several early-twentieth-century journalists (often referred to as "muckrakers"), including Ray Stannard Baker, Lincoln Steffens, and Burton Hendrick, who undertook investigations into business abuses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The magazine also had a softer side, most notably in the stories about the Midwest that William Allen White, the editor of the *Emporia Gazette*, contributed as part of a column called the "Court of Boyville."<sup>13</sup> Later published by Doubleday, *The Court of Boyville*, as White's biographer noted, was a nostalgic look at "all the pathos" of boyhood amid a "background consisting of barns, the open prairie, and virgin woods."<sup>14</sup> It is not difficult to understand why these stories impressed Nevins. Similarly, it is not difficult to understand that having been nurtured on Victorian literature, Midwestern lore, and big city journalistic exposés, Nevins would seek as an adult to unify and meld these literary influences into a new form of history and biography that reflected both nineteenth-century narrative and twentieth-century scientific investigation.

## II

The tranquility of life in Adams County, however, was marred, as was most of America in the 1890s, by the growing divisions between classes, economic interests, and geographic regions. Political battles were fought over the role of government in regulating commerce and industry, the tariff, currency, and labor organization. These issues came to a head during the presidential election of 1896, pitting William McKinley against William Jennings Bryan. Nevins remembered that for his father and other farmers the economic depression of 1893 infringed on their "old status," and "made them feel dependent [and] helpless in the grip of forces that nobody . . . understood."<sup>15</sup> Looking back at the period as an adult, Nevins concluded that it was not the so-called robber barons who were at fault, but rather local merchants. "[T]he worst monopolists," he reminisced, "were not the heads of United States Steel or Standard Oil, but the local merchants. Some of these men would make unconscionable profits on farm implements, clothing, and everything else from sealing wax to coffins; that is, if they could."<sup>16</sup> When Nevins came to write the biography of John D. Rockefeller in 1940, he would clear

Rockefeller of charges of unfair business practices by suggesting that these abuses were more often the actions of middlemen and small merchants. Despite these tensions, Nevins also witnessed ways in which the country was advancing with the growth of cities and the creation of museums, libraries, and art galleries. Like the Western prairies a generation or two earlier, the city now became the outlet for opportunity, particularly for young men and women from rural and agricultural backgrounds like Nevins.<sup>17</sup> Nevins recalled being stirred by a sense of expectation that lay ahead when, as a youngster, he traveled with his mother on the Illinois Central to Chicago, where they visited the stockyards and the Art Institute, lunched at Marshall Field's, and walked along the shore of Lake Michigan and through Lincoln Park.<sup>18</sup>

The city would figure prominently in many of his biographies as a place where a boy from a rural background could establish himself, particularly if the city's size and character matched a young person's business purposes and temperament. Rockefeller came to prominence in Cleveland, a burgeoning industrial crossroads but small enough for him to gain quickly the confidence of the city's business, commercial, and financial leaders as well as avoid the competitive environment of producers and refiners in the oil field regions of western Pennsylvania. Similarly, as a setting for establishing a law practice, slow-paced Buffalo better suited the plodding Grover Cleveland than fast-paced cities like New York and Chicago. New York, which by the early twentieth century had become the commercial, financial, and cultural center of the nation, suited the character of the energetic and ambitious Nevins. It provided an escape from the drudgery of farm life and a setting for developing his skills as a writer and journalist.

### III

Those aspirations took shape during Nevins's years in Champaign-Urbana, the site of the University of Illinois, one of several new state universities formed after the Civil War, largely to foster scientific agriculture. By the time Nevins enrolled in 1908, the university had moved beyond its more limited purpose and become a center for liberal arts education and research. But this change happened only after a fierce struggle between those who wanted the school to remain largely vocational and those who believed students should have the opportunity to select courses on trade and commerce, chemistry and natural science, and general science and literature, as well as courses in the agricultural, polytechnic, and military departments.<sup>19</sup>

The credit for this shift goes to the school's early leaders, particularly John Milton Gregory, Regent (1867–80), and Edmund James, President (1904–19). Nevins recorded his appreciation of their role in his history of the school, *Illinois* (1917), which he wrote several years after graduating. Present at its inception, Gregory became the architect of the school's administration, faculty, curriculum, and facilities. As for James, Nevins described him as “a man of sturdy democratic instincts imbued with the German ideal of scholarship” and possessed with “the dream of creating, with the aid of the common man, an institution which would not only serve his common needs but provide him with standards of intellectual excellence and justify the democratic faith.”<sup>20</sup> Rallying business and community interests to his cause, James persuaded the state legislature, fearful of losing students to schools outside the state, to increase funding.

Nevins also admired the efforts both leaders made to create an environment that would instill in students not only knowledge, but also a sense of social responsibility.<sup>21</sup> The *Urbana Courier-Herald* took note of this development by observing that graduates of Illinois could be found in China, in South Africa, in Australia, in Russia, and in any place where “high class technical or professional skill” was needed.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the *Daily Illini*, the school's paper, said in an editorial in 1910 that it found that students were emerging from the university eager to improve the life and economy of the state, the nation, and the world.<sup>23</sup> Nevins commented in *Illinois* on these developments:

Those whom the university educates provide a force for growth and change: the young lawyers, engineers and businessmen emerge from their classes expert, clear-headed, and honest, to confront the muddler, wastrel, and grafter; the farmers are scattered over the State to make lonely countryside social in the best sense, attractive to live in, and productive beyond the dreams of the older generation; the girls of the University plunge into social settlements, the work of organized charities, and rural community labors in a fashion thoroughly characteristic of the West.<sup>24</sup>

He concluded that the university was “helping teach the democracy to stand on its own feet, make its own way, and obtain whatever its enthusiasm and judgment teach it is desirable. . . .”<sup>25</sup>

In reviewing the book, Stuart Sherman, a member of the faculty of English and Nevins's mentor, commended him for emphasizing the important role that Illinois's heads had played in raising the ed-

educational standards of the school. However, Sherman viewed their efforts less as an extension of than a curb on democracy. Had the school remained largely aimed at technical training, it would have lost ground to other state schools that were building up liberal arts, graduate, and professional programs. Sherman wrote,

At every step, one is tempted to say, he shows the University imperiled by what one is disposed to call the base popular passions—the self-regarding desires of the multitude; and yet at every step he shows how these base popular passions were by skillful hands guided and directed to create something altogether good and desirable and beyond the imagination of its creator. “The people” thus appears as a hero *magre lui*; yet a hero, and the moral of all this seems to be that he only needs despair of Democracy who is ignorant of the art of managing men.<sup>26</sup>

In effect, Sherman was suggesting that democracy would exist only when there are men willing to channel it into constructive directions, an insight that would have particular meaning for Nevins. As his career unfolded, he would continually express his preference for statesmen of moderate rather than extreme persuasion, leadership that was thoughtful rather than rash, a citizenry committed to discourse rather than frenzy, and reform that was constructive and principled rather than expedient.

#### IV

Nevins believed he could contribute to a socially responsible society as a journalist. His first experience as a newspaperman was with the *Illinois State Register*, where he spent one summer between semesters at the University of Illinois. He earned six dollars a week, working from two in the afternoon to three in the morning.<sup>27</sup> At the university, he joined the school’s paper, and by the time he was a senior had risen to the position of editorial associate and was responsible for the *Daily Illini*’s editorials. He took particular interest in issues concerning cultural enrichment. He praised the university for creating new literary and forensic activities. He wrote, “The student may congratulate himself who can reflect that he has borne a part in this slow revolution, and turn his face with content upon a world where far greater problems and opportunities will be his.”<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, when he learned that ticket sales for a concert

were poor, he wrote an editorial chiding his fellow students for their failure to take music as seriously as did students at the University of Pennsylvania—where the same concert was sold out—and he praised the efforts by the university to provide cultural activities on the campus.<sup>29</sup> As much as Urbana was seeking to create an oasis of culture in the Midwest, Eastern schools impressed Nevins as better at providing the kind of education and culture he admired. (These schools also impressed Stuart Sherman, who suggested that the university should send a delegation each year to recruit their best young instructors.)<sup>30</sup> In one editorial, Nevins stretched the comparison somewhat, when he declared that students in the School of Commerce at Illinois should be required like students in the Pulitzer School of Journalism at Columbia University to be fluent in French and German. He wrote, “The results of a conscientious pursuit of either French or German becomes interwoven into the very being of the student as do those of few other studies; to their practical value in commercial correspondence they add an admirable mental discipline, the culture gained from reading foreign literary classics, a cosmopolitan view of humanity, and all the benefits accruing from ability to keep abreast of world thought.”<sup>31</sup> There is a direct line between Nevins the campus reporter, chiding his classmates about their cultural shortcomings, and Nevins the metropolitan newsman, attacking Hollywood for its permissiveness on screen, and Nevins the eminent historian, advising the producers of *Omnibus*, the 1950s television program, on the importance of using the new medium to advance American education and culture.

In Sherman, Nevins found the model of the academic and journalist he hoped to be. As an undergraduate, he gravitated toward Sherman and toward the study of literature. With only a few exceptions, he found the school’s courses in history dull. (He enjoyed a course on colonial history taught by Evarts Greene, who would later become his colleague in the history department of Columbia University. He admired Greene’s lucid presentation and meticulous scholarship. At the same time, he found the historian Solon Buck’s style pedantic.)<sup>32</sup> Though Nevins regarded Sherman as a fairly indifferent teacher who rarely excited his classes—he described him as “stern, reserved, a little sardonic in bearing”—he considered him, as did others, a profound thinker who “lifted his courses to a higher plane than any other . . . given in the university.”<sup>33</sup> Educated at Harvard, Sherman joined Illinois in 1908 after a year at Northwestern, and soon began making a name outside of the university in literary circles. He began contributing editorials and essays to the *New York Evening Post*. According to Sherman’s biographers, his editorials



were “not the product and topical demand of the newspaper office, but the leisure essays of a student built on a foundation of ideas, buttressed by substantial reading, and with fine chiseling of detail.”<sup>34</sup> The publisher Henry Holt encouraged Sherman to assemble his editorials in a book. “‘Such stuff as yours . . . is too good to be lying around loose,’” he commented.<sup>35</sup> Rollo Ogden, the *Evening Post’s* editor, admired Sherman’s work so much that he offered him a permanent position on the paper, which Sherman declined after the university, fearing it would lose one of its leading lights, promoted him to the rank of associate professor and then over the next few years to professor and department chairman. Nevertheless, he continued to contribute pieces to the *Evening Post* and to its sister publication, the *Nation*. (The *Nation*, a weekly journal, incorporated articles and editorials from the daily editions of the *Evening Post*.)

In one of his editorials for the *Evening Post*, he expressed his concern about the growing involvement of the university with the world of affairs, exemplified by faculty who undertook public assignments. He wrote, “The retiring unpractical scholar, nourishing impossible dreams, is becoming a thing of the past. The modern scholar lives in the world, inspects mines, advises corporations and Cabinet ministers, reforms spelling, improves steel rails, and perfects the breed of cattle.” Though involvement in affairs had its invigorating side, Sherman observed, the “cloistral virtues” of “old college life” provided a setting for “[simplifying] the problems of life and [compelling] reflection upon fundamentals.” Nowhere was this value better exemplified, Sherman maintained, than in the academic ceremony that made us aware of how distinctive and special the academic environment is and how set apart it is from all that is common in everyday life.<sup>36</sup> But Sherman did not exactly remove himself entirely from public view with his pieces for the *Evening Post* and later, in the 1920s, as literary editor of the *New York Herald Tribune*. As for Nevins, he had no reluctance in forging ties between the academic and real worlds.

Coming under Sherman’s tutelage not only helped shape Nevins’s intellectual and professional development, it also exposed him to a circle of academic and literary figures who, like Sherman, had one foot in academia and another in journalism. One of these people was Paul Elmer More, whom Sherman had studied with at Harvard. Nevins admired the connection that More, like Sherman, had forged between academia and what Nevins would term “journalism in its higher walks,”<sup>37</sup> referring to More’s shift from teaching classical literature at Bryn Mawr to becoming literary editor of the *Independent* (1901–3). He described him as a journalist and teacher who had combined “the

breadth of view of the one with the thoroughness of the other.”<sup>38</sup> More visited Urbana on a tour of Midwestern schools in 1911 and delivered a series of lectures on romanticism. Covering the visit for the *Daily Illini*, Nevins revealed his excitement and enthusiasm both for the man and for the subject. Nevins’s treatment of the subject of the lectures, nineteenth-century English literary romanticism, so impressed More that he encouraged him to consider joining the staff of the *Nation* after graduation.<sup>39</sup> (More was literary editor and editor-in-chief of the *Nation* from 1909 to 1914.) Following completion of a master’s degree in English from Illinois in June 1913, Nevins accepted an offer from Rollo Ogden to join the editorial staff of the *Evening Post* as substitute for members of the staff who were on vacation. Ogden was so pleased with Nevins’s work that summer that he offered him a permanent spot on the paper’s editorial staff.

## V

When he joined the paper, Ogden had been editor for about ten years and had assembled some of America’s brightest and most literate writers, academics, and journalists: Simeon Strunsky, who wrote on international affairs; Fabian Franklin, a former mathematics professor at Johns Hopkins, who wrote on economic subjects; Oswald Garrison Villard, who concerned himself with a wide range of issues, particularly those dealing with humanitarianism and race relations; Alexander Noyes, who wrote on financial issues; and Christopher Morley, who had joined the paper in 1917 and wrote solely on literary matters. Some of them, like Simeon Strunsky, became Nevins’s friends and tutors. “[W]e devoted ourselves,” Nevins recalled, “to the close study of politics, state affairs, national business and international relations—to the largest subjects of the day. We tried to make ourselves expert upon them, and wrote editorials steadily to deal with them.”<sup>40</sup> At first, however, Nevins feared that he did not have the capacity to comprehend and write intelligently on so vast an array of public affairs, let alone, as he told Sherman, of delivering snap judgments “with force and accuracy.”<sup>41</sup>

As for interpreting events, he soon adjusted, and he wrote to Sherman that “the hardest grind came at the beginning, when I had to learn what all this shouting in the political world was about. . . .”<sup>42</sup> More reported to Sherman that Nevins had shown marked intelligence and diligence. Sherman responded, “You intimate that my young friend Nevins has a certain Scottish seriousness of temper. Now that is the very temper to make a good Tory writer. He is seri-

ous, reverent, aggressive, positive, potentially dogmatic. You can put a good cutting edge on a young man like that."<sup>43</sup>

Sherman's interest in Nevins extended not only to his literary and professional career but to his personal life as well. In this service, he frequently urged Nevins, generally to no avail, to temper his ambition and try to cultivate habits of relaxation. He suggested that if he did so, he would like himself better.<sup>44</sup> On one occasion, he suggested that Nevins read James Barrie's *When a Man's Single* (1888), which he observed was "full of journalistic life." While it contained excellent advice about what it is like to be a writer, Sherman noted, it also had the additional benefit of "leaving you in a jolly frame of mind." He added, "It proves that journalism is not incompatible with gayety."<sup>45</sup> Nevins responded that he could not "see the newspaper office in the comic spirit of Barrie's sketches."<sup>46</sup> Sherman seemed somewhat more encouraged about Nevins's personal life when he learned in 1916 that he had become engaged. (His fiancée was Mary Richardson, the daughter of an editor for *Women's Home Companion* and playwright; and Nevins assured Sherman that Mary had a knowledge and appreciation of fine literature.)<sup>47</sup> Sherman took the occasion to remind Nevins of Thomas Carlyle's injunction that an author who does not leave "a wide margin in his life for domestic annotations" will make "a wretchedly poor family man."<sup>48</sup> But Sherman was incorrect in assuming that Nevins's wife would be able to change her husband, who would in today's parlance be classified as a workaholic. Several years after their marriage, Mary Nevins received a letter from John Stahl, Nevins's uncle on his mother's side. Though he expressed concern that Nevins was working too hard, he disclaimed any lineal responsibility, noting that unlike the Stahls, the Nevins tribe was "very unreasonable and stubborn." Like Sherman, he suggested introducing some gaiety, such as taking in a few shows.<sup>49</sup>

Perhaps the best insight into Nevins's character and ambition, particularly during this early period in his career, is revealed by the circumstances that led to and accompanied the writing of *Illinois*. The book was part of a series on American colleges and universities that George Krapp, an English professor at Columbia University, was editing for Oxford University Press. The series was designed to present historical, descriptive, and critical accounts of America's most prominent schools. At the time that Nevins began writing the book, there were already volumes on Columbia, Princeton, Harvard, Wisconsin, and Vassar. But several months before Nevins began the project, Illinois's president James had approached him with a similar request to prepare a history of the school. Nevins and James

agreed that the study should be critical rather than celebratory; that is, it should place the school within the larger framework of national, state, and local history rather than simply record notable events in its life. They disagreed, however, on the best way to prepare the book, since the research materials were located in Illinois and Nevins was living and working in New York City. James rejected Nevins's request that the university send the materials to him in New York, where, Nevins had said, he could complete the study within a year. Instead, James offered Nevins the position of university historian, an administrative position that would require Nevins not only to relocate to Champaign-Urbana but to be responsible for writing the school's news releases and brochures.

Nevins had no interest in such a job. Instead, he proposed that James provide him with an academic post, one that would entitle him to summers off rather than the two weeks allotted to school employees. Moreover, Nevins expressed reservations about the professional value of writing a volume on educational history, and asked James to assure him that once the book was completed, he would find him a well-paying, permanent position with room for growth, preferably an appointment in one of the departments of the university. "No young man as happily launched in his profession as I am cares to enter a blind alley,"<sup>50</sup> he wrote James. Surprised by Nevins's response, James informed him that the university could not make such a guarantee, but that with his talent and skill and a book, he should have no problem landing an excellent position. James wrote,

[I]f you will pardon the suggestion, I think a man of your age and with your brains ought not to be thinking of assurance as to a future career. If you realize the expectation of your friends, you will not have the difficulty of finding something to do, but the difficulty of choosing between good offers which will be made you from time to time. There is no such thing as a blind alley in this world to a man with brains and determination. I think the preparation of such a history as you might make of the University of Illinois would open up to many more opportunities than you could accept.<sup>51</sup>

Unable to agree on terms, James withdrew the offer. However, once he learned about Nevins's Oxford proposition, he agreed to allow copies of university records to be sent to Nevins in New York. Moreover, he reiterated his continued confidence in Nevins, remarking that he believed Nevins "could beat any volume in that series without very much difficulty."<sup>52</sup> True to his original prediction, Nevins com-

pleted the book roughly within a year. He worked feverishly—getting to his desk at the *Evening Post* before seven, not leaving until eleven at night, sacrificing practically every Saturday and Sunday. Nevins repeated this pattern throughout his career. He exhibited what his good friend, the late historian Henry Steele Commager, described as a talent for “uninterrupted application”—“a quality,” Commager added, “that disappeared with the Victorians.”<sup>53</sup>

## VI

Nevins valued the opportunity to work on the *Evening Post*, particularly given its history of appealing to an educated and professional audience. Just as he had found models of leadership in the first heads of the University of Illinois, so too he discovered in William Cullen Bryant (1826 to 1878) and E. L. Godkin (1881 to 1899), the paper’s editors for most of the nineteenth century, leaders who influenced the course of American journalism. Several years after he joined the paper, he prepared a history, *The Evening Post: A Century of Journalism* (1922), in which he described their accomplishments, beginning with Bryant’s efforts to make the paper independent of political influence—Alexander Hamilton had founded it in 1801 as an organ of the Federalist Party. Nevins admired the cosmopolitan and internationalist perspectives Bryant and Godkin brought to their work; they were qualities that Nevins would seek to emulate as a newspaperman. According to Nevins, Bryant traveled frequently to Europe, where he met with the leading political, intellectual, and civic leaders, and returned “with a constant fund of suggestions for civic and other improvements.”<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Godkin, born and raised in Ireland, cultivated social contacts both here and abroad. “The readiness with which, on coming to America, he made friends among the most distinguished men of Cambridge, Boston, and New York,” Nevins noted, “was only less remarkable than the long intimacy he enjoyed with some of the finest minds of England and this country—with Lowell and Norton, Bryce and Henry James, Gladstone and Parkman, McKim and Olmsted.”<sup>55</sup> Nevins also found in Bryant and Godkin journalists who understood how to use the editorial page to develop thoughtful essays and commentaries on political, economic, and social life. Under Godkin, Nevins wrote,

The editorial page represented work done not leisurely, but under the highest pressure. Articles of twelve hundred words, dealing informatively, thoughtfully, and in compressed style

with some subject perhaps quite unexpected until that morning, had to be completed in about an hour and three-quarters. Taken, often without change, into the *Nation*, they withstood the test of submission to the most scholarly and exacting audience in America. The page was not for the muddleheaded. But no one on the staff could hope to write quite like Mr. Godkin—with his wealth of ideas, ability to see a dozen relationships in a subject where the ordinary man saw one, and concise, pithy, and graphic style.<sup>56</sup>

But Nevins suggested that Godkin saw a weakening of the press's influence as a medium for intellectual discourse. As readers shifted their interests from politics and administration to business and industry, Nevins wrote, Godkin believed a brighter future for independent thought and criticism lay in the growth of higher education, particularly the new private and public universities, which Godkin found were both “qualitatively and quantitatively, . . . without parallel in all previous world history.”<sup>57</sup> In pointing out this development, Nevins may have been reflecting his own concern at the time he wrote the book that once again business was beginning to surpass politics and administration as topics of interest to readers, as well as his concern that for newspapermen like himself—interested in reaching a political and literary readership—a brighter future lay in a college and university post than on a metropolitan daily.

Nevins admired the positions Bryant and Godkin took on politics and the economy. Under them, the *Evening Post* supported policies associated with Jacksonian democracy; that is, it attacked grants of special privilege and favored general incorporation laws that would help broaden economic opportunities. An acolyte of John Stuart Mill and the Manchester School of Economics, Godkin opposed high tariffs and supported free trade, policies consistent with nineteenth-century liberalism. The paper discouraged government subsidies to business, advocated civil service reform, and supported the gold standard rather than bimetallism. The paper's classical liberal position, however, excluded support for class legislation or the redistribution of wealth. It was one thing to stand behind government regulation of interstate commerce and enforcement of antitrust legislation, and quite another to endorse statutes guaranteeing labor the right to organize and bargain collectively.

Nineteenth-century liberalism reached a crossroads at the beginning of the twentieth century when it incorporated into its ideology acceptance of government economic and social legislation to protect farmers, laborers, and those with little economic means. The *Evening*

*Post*, however, failed to embrace this new position, a fact that troubled the *Evening Post's* owner, Oswald Garrison Villard. Villard believed the *Evening Post's* unwillingness to support this kind of legislation alienated the very people to which it had committed itself philosophically and led to a decline in its readership. He criticized Nevins for not emphasizing this development in his history of the paper. Villard maintained that the paper lost its readership because, unlike its counterpart in England, the *Manchester Guardian*, it never established itself as an agency of liberal thought. By opposing the emerging reform movements of the eighties and nineties, Villard contended, Godkin and his successors failed to see their democracy through to the end. Moreover, having chosen to “[essay] the role of historian,” Villard argued, Nevins should have addressed this issue. Villard wrote, “The record will certainly not be complete until someone sums up from a broader viewpoint.”<sup>58</sup> Years later, Nevins explained that he had avoided dealing with the ideological conflicts taking place at the paper over progressive reform because it would have exposed other equally serious divisions, particularly between Villard, a pacifist and German sympathizer, and Ogden, who supported the Allies and America’s entrance into the First World War.<sup>59</sup> Against the background of these shifting ideological struggles, however, Nevins began to mark out his own positions on the “new” liberalism.