

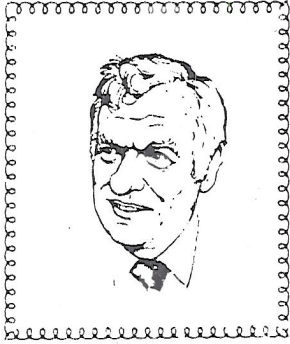
Charles McCabe Himself

Past Is Present

THE PAST is not here. That is its great charm.

The past, as we remember it, is a laundered thing. The pain, which is the thing that really made it memorable, and not those great pleasures we incessantly dwell upon, is most carefully excised.

For most of us, the past is an antidote to the present. The 1930s are fetching because they do not contain a President who is a booby, a rate of inflation which threatens to reach the level of the Weimar Republic, and a shade residing in San Clemente who is a constant reproach to our ideal of the greatest good for the greatest number.



Not to speak of the uranium and other bombs, which can reduce all civilization to nihility far more quickly than any "population bomb" and which are increasingly in the control of politicians who are no better than they should be.

For all these concerns, Humphrey Bogart and the other cult figures of our recently invented past are balm indeed. Santayana, in a famous epigram, said that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. We would revise that to substitute "delighted" for "condemned." And to put the word pain-killer at the end of the sentence.

I knew that past, and it was miserable. There was no period of my life when I was lower. I was at the height of my powers, in the prime of my youth; with, as the valedictorians like to say, everything before me.

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THERE WAS nothing before me. There was literally no way open to me to use whatever capacities I had in order to get enough money for myself and my mother to eat. At the worst point of the depression, we went for a considerable period on the charity of St. Vincent de Paul, a Catholic outfit.

Looking for work was a charade, understood by all concerned. You left the house in the morning. You read the want ads in papers, which were as sparse as a beggar's dole, and usually involved expertise with a threshing machine on some farm at least 300 miles distant.

You went down to Wall Street, just because you vaguely knew it stood for money, or at least such money as still existed, and you talked idly with boys just as unemployable as yourself.

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WHEN YOU put it straight to yourself, it came to this: You had no future. There was literally nothing you could do but join the Navy or rob a bank, and neither of these escapes from ennui was as easy as it sounds. The man who could get in the Navy in those days needed an I.Q. of 180 and the physical skills of Jesse Owens.

Our leader then was a charming egomaniac called FDR, whom we had caught on to about 1936. He was all charm and a yard wide, but the only results he produced were those in his own speeches. We didn't know it; but the man who was going to lead us out of the woods (get us some bread, that is) was a slightly crazed Bavarian ex-corporal called Hitler. He gave us a war.

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OF COURSE I don't think any of these dark thoughts when I see Bogart on the screen doing his marvelous thing with Mme. Bergman in Casablanca, or Fred Astaire making beautiful little drawings on the floor with his feet, or Eddie Robinson putting out a contract.

The past isn't around any more and I wouldn't have it any other way, Mr. George Santayana or anyone else to the contrary. I never again want to feel like that kid standing in front of 120 Broadway, just under the brokerage firm of McDonnell and Co., wondering what were the purposes of God in putting me there, muttering and cursing my impotency.