

**Blue Collar Intellectuals:
When the Enlightened and the
Everyman Elevated America,**
by Daniel J. Flynn. Wilmington,
DE: ISI Books, 2011, 200 pp.,
\$27.95 hardbound.

Great Books for Plain Folks

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Published online: 23 October 2012
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Each of the five chapters that follow the introduction of *Blue Collar Intellectuals: When the Enlightened and the Everyman Elevated America* contains a biographical sketch and appreciation of either an individual or a married couple author Daniel Flynn deems worthy of being classified among the enlightened with blue-collar roots, some of whose intellectual endeavors have succeeded in popularizing or making available important ideas to the average Joe and Jane. Will and Ariel Durant head the list, primarily for their eleven-volume *The Story of Civilization* (1935–1975), as well as Will’s eleven

Little Blue Books distributed by E. Haldeman-Julius. I remember reading Will’s *The Story of Philosophy* (1926) in high school, and the mixture of biographical anecdotes about the lives of the philosophers together with accessible paraphrases of some of their ideas got me started upon the path of life I followed for the next sixty years.

Next comes Mortimer Adler, best known today for the creation of the unwieldy fifty or so volumes of the *Great Books of the Western World* (1952). Flynn describes him as having a “supersized ego” as well as being “a difficult man.” I would think you would need quite an energetic ego to persuade wealthy individuals to support the Great Books project with the intention “of spreading the wisdom of elite minds to the masses.” It turned out the masses were either not very interested or could not afford the series. Flynn quotes a consumer research firm that concluded that “owners actually use the Great Books infrequently”—not a surprise considering their format and their contents.

When I was about ten years old, my father purchased Charles Eliot’s *Harvard Classics* (1909) for my brother and me. Not only did I come into possession of fifty dark blue volumes of classics, but also of

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the twenty or so purplish-blue volumes of great fiction. I spent many a rainy afternoon browsing within and among these worthy volumes, and if I understood little of what I was reading, I was smitten with the ambition to understand them sooner or later. I owe a lot to the *Harvard Classics* and thus I was offended by Flynn's inclusion of words from a memo that denigrated Eliot's achievement in comparison to the *Great Books of the Western World*.

The *Great Books* series was said to contain more than three times the number of words contained in the *Harvard Classics*, as if the 8,100,000 words of the latter were not enough for a ten-year-old boy. Even worse, Eliot's series is said to contain abridged texts whereas the Adler series did not. Mistake, mistake. Most of the texts the *Harvard Classics* included were complete, although they did not include as large a number of works by a single author as did the *Great Books*. This is not abridgment, but a relief to this ten-year-old, even though he failed to realize it at the time.

Moreover, Eliot's volumes were accessible books; you could even read them in bed. At this very moment, I am holding in my hand the *Great Books* Montesquieu-Rousseau volume with its double-column pages of small print and forbidding weight

in terms of content as well as pounds, a particularly discouraging reading format for ten-year-old boys, not to mention busy adults just getting home from work, mixing a martini, and turning on the nightly news. "Someday I shall read them, perhaps after I retire," I can hear the owner of the *Great Books* muttering under his breath as he reflects upon how many payments remain before he can boast to his guests that he really owns them.

Next comes Milton Friedman along with his wife Rose. Although Friedman was one of the major economists of the twentieth century, he shows up in this volume for his popular *Capitalism and Freedom*, written with Rose Friedman's assistance (1962), as well as for his *Newsweek* columns, which did enlighten readers of that once successful magazine with elementary truths of economics that should, but often did not, guide the decisions of policy makers in their will to intervene in the market economy.

I think Flynn admires Friedman more than any of the other figures he includes in *Blue Collar Intellectuals*, and so do I. I remember that my study of the paperback edition of *Capitalism and Freedom* (eleventh impression, 1971, well-underlined and still containing the five index cards listing important ideas to be kept in mind for

reflection and persuasion) dissuaded me from thinking that bureaucrats entrenched in Washington knew the interests of the working people in this country better than they knew them themselves.

Next comes Eric Hoffer, to whom Flynn dedicates a chapter titled “The Longshoreman Philosopher: How an Unschooled Hobo Became a Favorite of Presidents and Prime Time.” Flynn displays a bit of skepticism about the accuracy of Hoffer’s account of his early life, but we do know that he worked as a stevedore on the San Francisco docks, educated himself, and wrote *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (1951), a book much admired by President Eisenhower. He also supported the Vietnam War and criticized the violent peace protests during the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Hoffer’s importance as a thinker is due to the readable and still important *True Believer*. I was disappointed with Flynn’s extremely brief account of that work, but to make up for it I shall quote a passage from its preface explaining what it is about: “This book concerns itself chiefly with the active, revivalist phase of mass movements. This phase is dominated by the true believer—the man of fanatical faith who is ready to sacrifice his life for a

holy cause—and an attempt is made to trace his genesis and to outline his nature.”¹ *The True Believer* is concerned with the psychology of the participants of mass movements and belongs on your shelf next to Freud’s *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* and Gustav Le Bon’s *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*.

The book ends with a chapter on Ray Bradbury, a prolific writer of fiction, best known for his science fiction and fantasy and for the novel *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). Flynn explains why he included Bradbury by saying: “Bradbury’s oeuvre is a massive, shameless advertisement for further reading. Reading Ray Bradbury is its own encouragement for further reading. Alas, those needing that message most are not generally Ray Bradbury readers.” What seems to have impressed Flynn the most is the enormous body of Ray Bradbury’s work, but he did not say enough about its importance to convince me to join his club of Ray Bradbury readers.

As I come to the end of this review, you might wonder what makes these five writers (along with the two wives who were important collaborators) blue-collar intellectuals. It is the “blue-collar” I worry about. Flynn

¹Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (Harper & Row, 1951; New York: Perennial, 2002), xii.

tells us: “A blue-collar intellectual is a thinker who hails from a working-class background, and whose intellectual work targets, in part or whole, a mass audience.” Do the thinkers whose story is told in this book come from working-class backgrounds? I do not know the truth of the matter, but I am not convinced by what Flynn writes about them.

Not enough is said about the parents of the Durants to justify labeling them as working-class. Mortimer Adler is described as being “born to Jewish immigrant parents.” Is that sufficient to classify them as blue-collar? We are told that Milton Friedman was also the son of immigrants. I have the same question. Although his father

was in an ambiguous category as a “cabinetmaker-intellectual,” Hoffer’s family employed a German maid, something that would seem to put them well above the working class. But Hoffer himself did work at blue-collar jobs, so perhaps he makes the grade. Flynn provides evidence that Ray Bradbury’s family was poor, but poor is not the same as working-class, not in my book.

I think that Flynn could have spent more time defining his terms. And why did he choose these five figures rather than a different five? Perhaps what ties them together is that Flynn happens to find their lives and achievements of sufficient interest for him to write about. That is okay by me, but he might have chosen a different title.