

The Blue-Collar Montaigne

"Eric Hoffer Revisited" by Stephen Miller, in *The Republic of Letters* (2000: No. 9), www.bu.edu/trl.

A self-educated longshoreman who loved Montaigne, Eric Hoffer (1902–83) was already a well-known author when he appeared on national television in 1967. But his one-hour conversation with CBS commentator Eric Severeid made him a star: "the lowbrow's highbrow," as one friendly reviewer put it. Today, though, Hoffer is little remembered and less read—and that's a shame, says Miller, author of the forthcoming *Three Deaths and Enlightenment Thought: Hume, Johnson, Marat*.

The blue-collar philosopher's early life made him seem "like a character out of a

de Tocqueville's reflections on the uniqueness of the new American nation."

Hoffer's first, and best-known, book was *The True Believer* (1951), "a study of the mentality of those who subscribe to radical ideologies," in Miller's words. It later gained widespread attention when the *New York Times* reported that President Dwight D. Eisenhower kept pressing it on cabinet members and friends.

Hoffer's life changed dramatically in the mid-1960s. In 1964, he was appointed a senior research political scientist at the University of California, Berkeley. From that perch, he watched the student revolution, feeling "that

I was witnessing the Latin-Americanization of an American university." He was contemptuous of the student radicals who "haven't raised a blade of grass . . . haven't laid a brick . . . don't know a god-damned thing, and here they sit in judgment!" Three years later came the Severeid program.

This champion of the common man, disdainful of the counterculture and anti-anti-communist intellectuals, made educated elites, not the masses, his main subject. Intellectuals disliked bourgeois, market-oriented societies, he believed, because

such societies were driven by self-interest and offered no major role for intellectuals. "At the core of Hoffer's thought," Miller says, "is the notion that one should be wary of idealists" who want to transform man or create a future free of conflict.

Though his books—which include *The Passionate State of Mind* (1955), a collection of aphorisms; *The Ordeal of Change* (1963), a collection of essays; and two diaries—would have been better had he "constructed his arguments more carefully," they all remain worth reading, says Miller. "Many of his aphorisms about the mentality of true believers hold up well; and he offers a better guide to the landscape of 20th-century politics than many more weighty tomes by academic historians and political theorists."



Hoffer often quoted Montaigne to his fellow workers.

Steinbeck novel," Miller notes. Born into a German immigrant family in New York City, Hoffer went blind at age seven, the same year his mother died, and as a result never attended school. He recovered his sight at age 15, however, and became a voracious reader. After his father died in 1920, he went west to California, living a rough-and-tumble existence until finally settling into the relative stability of work as a San Francisco longshoreman in 1942.

Through all this, "Hoffer never stopped reading," notes Miller. "He discovered Pascal in a library in Monterey, and he picked up Montaigne by chance in a second-hand bookstore in San Francisco. . . . Pascal's dark sense of the self and Montaigne's playful exploration of ideas shaped Hoffer's thinking. So did Alexis