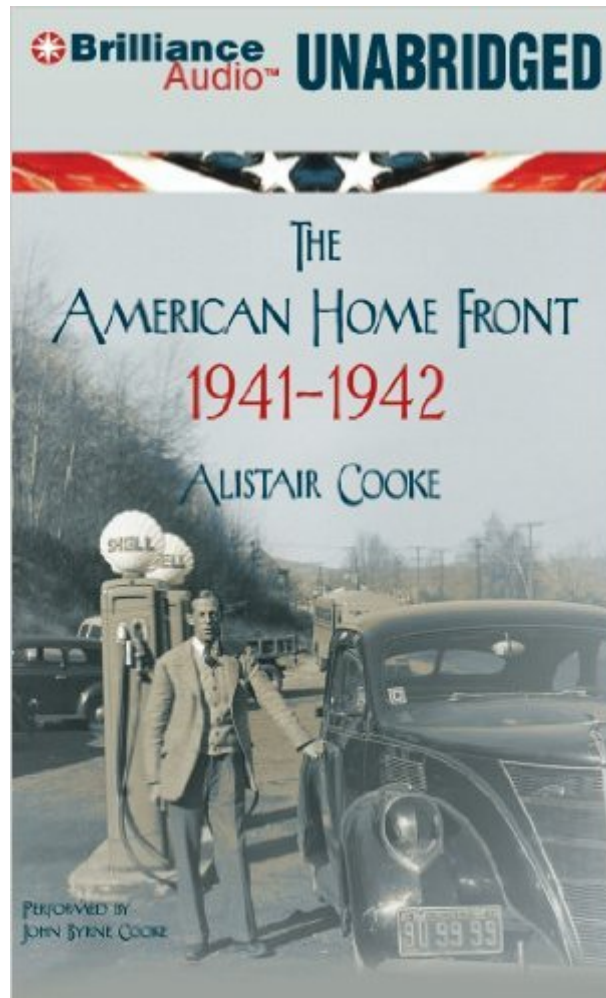


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# The American Home Front: 1941-1942



## Synopsis

In nearly three thousand BBC broadcasts over fifty-eight years, Alistair Cooke reported on America, revealing our country's complexities and idiosyncrasies to a global audience. He was one of the most widely read and widely heard chroniclers of America - the Twentieth Century's de Tocqueville. Shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, Alistair Cooke, a newly naturalized American citizen, set out to see his country as it was undergoing monumental change. He wanted to see what the war had done to people, to the towns I might go through, to some jobs and crops, to stretches of landscape I loved and had seen at peace. • Working throughout the war, Cooke finished *The American Home Front* as the atomic bomb was being dropped on Hiroshima. His publisher thought there would be little interest in books on the war, so it was stuffed in a closet. It stayed there for almost sixty years, nearly forgotten, until it was unearthed shortly before Cooke's death in 2004. *The American Home Front* is a fascinating artifact, a charming travelogue, and a sharp portrait that shows America changing from civilian pursuits to military engagement, from the production of consumer goods to materials of war. It is also a unique record of American life. Cooke travels small highways, with their advertising signs and their local typography, in an age before the interstate highway system. He chronicles the regional glories he encounters, elements of long-lost culture such as his beloved soda fountains, and the reactions of the citizens, from indifference to grief, from opportunism to resilience under military threat. Filled with touching personal stories of the effects of war, from a Japanese family facing internment that tries to sell Cooke their car, to the experiences of the unemployed relocating in hopes of jobs in a gunpowder factory, *The American Home Front* is the work of an experienced, talented journalist; it is intelligent, touching, and funny.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As one of countless Americans who remember Alistair Cooke as the voice of "Masterpiece Theatre" it's refreshing to know, professionally, from whence he came. His recollections (from his role as the BBC's originator of "Letter from America" and gathered in "The American Home Front") tell us of a younger Cooke in his quest to find out how Americans viewed the Second World War during its first year. His book is a masterpiece, indeed. In early 1942, the author set out from Washington D.C. and headed south and west. Some months later he finished his journey in New York and what he witnessed on his trip around the United States is a reader's delight. I'm struck by one thing at first....our pictorial history of the Second World War is largely viewed through black and white photos and newsreels. Alistair Cooke's commentary immediately adds color. One suspects that Cooke had not even remotely traveled around America when he set off and his trip must have been awe-inspiring for this young British reporter who had recently become an American citizen. He speaks of the extreme poverty of the south and its basic, rural distance from the war but as he moves west he encounters oil in Texas, pleasant country in Arizona and a sudden self-immersion into war efforts as he reaches California. Cooke proceeds north through Oregon and Washington, noting its beautiful, tall fir trees but also a disassociation by people of the northwest with their California cousins. He circles back east via Montana, Wyoming and Kansas and seems to be taken by the fertile fields of the American midwest. For these citizens the war is more remote, but no less significant. Cooke relates wonderful tidbits of information. Landlocked Iowa, for instance, sent more men to the U.S. Navy than any other state per capita.

Long after Alexis De Toqueville, and well before Andrei Codrescu, the one European who seemed to best understand America was Alistair Cooke. He first came to America on a student fellowship and in 1935 returned as a journalist for the BBC. The letters and commentary represented in this book cover a sponsored tour and later travels of the US during World War II. It should be understood that at least one purpose for every piece in this collection is propaganda. He was charged with explaining to Britons who were under direct bombardment by the Germans what Americans were living through as part of their contribution to the war effort. Propaganda this may be, but it is also fair to point out that Mr. Cooke's love of America was sincerely heart felt. British born Alistair Cooke would earn American Citizenship on Dec. 1, 1941. In these letters we get to see at

very close hand what the day to day life in war time America looked like. I do not think many Americans have any appreciation for how frequently American towns were re-energized, rebuilt and repopulated by the war effort. Also unknown to most American is the number of activities and work practices of American were re ordered by Government direction. From farming techniques, to mine safety government provided leadership and direction to a degree no one of any contemporary political preference would credit. What seems to be the case is that industry, agriculture and medicine was stuck in a rut based on how things had always been done. Government agents, often representing the most advanced research and often having control of money and resources could direct the adoption of more efficient and desirable practices.

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