

The Lion in Winter

George Plimpton, 1927–2003

By Matthew G. Alexander

IN 1922, EMILY POST wrote that “Best Society” was “not a fellowship of the wealthy, nor does it seek to exclude those who are not of exalted birth; but it *is* an association of gentle-folk, of which good form in speech, charm of manner, knowledge of the social amenities, and instinctive consideration for the feelings of others, are the credentials by which society the world over recognizes its chosen members.” This noble but, alas, antiquated standard of etiquette has known few better exemplars than the writer George Plimpton, who died unexpectedly last month. The obituaries and remembrances teem with words like “charm” and “wit” and “grace,” adjectives so often overused that one fears them inadequate to describe a man to whom they rightly belong.

Of Plimpton’s qualities, the most exceptional had to be his humility, for his background and attainments were formidable. A Mayflower patrician, he was educated at Exeter, Harvard, and Cambridge. He counted Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer, and the Kennedys among his friends. *Newsweek* once compared his writing style to E.B. White’s—high praise indeed, but justified.

One might therefore have expected him to display the ego and ennui that one often associates with artistic celebrity. Not for him, though, was the Byronic, ash-flicking *hauteur* of a Martin Amis. Neither did he strike the impressive presence of the typical literary editor. On the contrary. By all accounts, his appearance at a party would set every-

one at ease, and his own celebrations often resembled Jay Gatsby’s midsummer soirees.

It is, in fact, extraordinary that he cheerfully put his considerable gifts to work recounting pursuits that exposed his weaknesses. George Plimpton was best known as an aristocratic dilettante with a common touch, a rare combination made possible by his characteristically self-effacing humor and his populist tastes: Plato, to be sure, but also football, baseball, and boxing. He quarterbacked the Detroit Lions, took a cinematic bullet from John Wayne, and traded blows with Archie Moore; sporting success frequently eluded him, but he wrote elegantly about the attempts. (He was, it should be pointed out, a good athlete, with a particular knack for tennis and the racket sports.)

In his fashion, he acted out the quixotic yearnings known to many ordinary

One disapproving glance from the great conductor Leonard Bernstein, however, could excite more fear in Plimpton than even the prospect of a linebacker charging at his head. One time, the author joined the New York Philharmonic’s percussion section for a Canadian tour, having had only the most rudimentary musical training. The experience veered from the dismal (“ruining” Mahler’s Fourth Symphony) to the triumphant (a mighty gong blast—born of nervous energy—to conclude Tchaikovsky’s Second). Afterwards, he shrank from Bernstein’s company: “Part of it,” he later explained, “was having been in the presence of such genius.” Herewith, an important distinction between the good and the mediocre: while the mediocre concedes nothing superior to itself, the good acknowledges greatness and gives it its due.

This captures exactly the accomplish-

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men, if only in their bedrooms and backyards. NPR sports commentator Frank Deford has said, “Since nobody else can ever be George Plimpton, simply watching football and action movies substitutes for some primeval instincts of masculine derring-do.” Many will mourn him who have never dined at Elaine’s or subscribed to *Harper’s*.

ment of his participatory journalism, or “professional amateurism.” His clumsy sojourns in the exalted temples where human greatness dwells brought them to life for other mortals in a way that no formulaic “backstage tour” ever could. Above all, for Plimpton and for us, books like *Paper Lion* are as fun to read as the events themselves must have

been to live. Proud, tough professional football players welcomed him because of his sincerity and good will, his modesty and evident respect.

George Plimpton was not given to partisan polemics, although it can be surmised that his political views fell rather Left of center. He volunteered on Robert Kennedy's 1968 presidential campaign, later choking up as he told the Associated Press how he helped tackle Sirhan Sirhan after the assassination. Just before his death it transpired that Plimpton had long ago been exiled from two clubs in the Hamptons for playing host to the radical Berrigan brothers in the 1970s. Even so, he also pitched horseshoes—in cowboy hat—with the two presidents Bush, losing painfully to the younger and burning for redemption to the end. Elsewhere, he recalls asking his Carter-supporting nine-year-old daughter what was wrong with President Reagan. Answer: "He laughs too much. He thinks everything is funny."

The critic who ventures into Plimpton's natural milieu—English prose—to assess his career experiences something of the anxiety Plimpton himself knew beneath Leonard Bernstein's baton. Plimpton was the classic man of letters,

attached weather balloons to a lawn chair and, flying up to a height of 16,000 feet, went arm-to-wing with jetliners, incurring the sanctions of a bemused FAA. He chronicled the odd but rarely the disturbing; his tales are consistently light-hearted and whimsical, highlighting the unserious side of human experience.

Though too young to have been of their generation, George Plimpton seemed a link to the Jazz Age of Fitzgerald and Hemingway. Hemingway he knew; Fitzgerald he played on stage, in a show he adapted from the letters of "Zelda, Scott, and Ernest." It is a shame he did not live to write his memoirs: Norman Mailer challenging all comers to thumb-wrestling contests; John and Caroline Kennedy playing in the sands of Newport. Oh the stories he would tell!



ZUMA PRESS

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the erudite generalist now disappearing in this age of academic hyperspecialization. In both his fiction and nonfiction, he had an eye for the eccentric. His most famous short story concerned Sidd Finch, the enigmatic Buddhist who, *en route* to enlightenment, had learned to throw a 168 MPH fastball. Five years ago in the *New Yorker*, he related the true story of a Los Angeles veteran who

Plimpton's journal, the *Paris Review*—which proved that quality does not depend on budget and circulation—gained fame for its iconic interviews of such literary gods as Faulkner, Nabokov, and Pound, as well as for publishing new fiction by the likes of Philip Roth and Jack Kerouac. Plimpton's paternal benevolence extended even to the unknown, and he has inspired many oth-

ers he would never meet. Once an aspiring author named Jerry Spinelli bought "A Night on the Town with George Plimpton" from a PBS charity auction. Plimpton, apprehensive that he was insufficiently interesting to support such a prize, nonetheless introduced Spinelli to Woody Allen and others as "the writer from Philadelphia."

Mrs. Post speaks of "gentle-folk," and in his manner George Plimpton was nothing if not gentle, in both connotations of the word. He wore *noblesse oblige* lightly, in a fashion that was natural, unaffected, and, it seemed, unconscious. Especially in this time of juvenile transatlantic recriminations, it is touching at last to recall how fondly Europeans—in Paris, after the war—embraced him as their favorite kind of American: like a Gary Cooper character, he was tall, handsome, well mannered, and naïve. ■

General Discontent

The lackluster Wesley Clark confronts the insurgent Howard Dean.

By Martin Sieff

CAN GEN. WESLEY CLARK beat Howard Dean? Even if he can, can he beat George W. Bush? Probably not in both cases, but it's too soon to count him out either.

It should be easy to dismiss Clark. Here is a general of no particularly impressive command record and no prior experience in electoral politics, whose knowledge of economics and industrial affairs and, for that matter, just about every other significant domestic issue leaves Arnold Schwarzenegger looking like an *Almanac of American Politics*. He is the incarnate symbol of nation building to the Right and is backed by the Clintonite wing of the Democratic Party, at the very time the grassroots of that party are seeking a new champion.

Unlike Dwight D. Eisenhower, to whom his admirers are already comparing him, Clark did not liberate Europe and destroy a continent-spanning regime that became a synonym for the embodiment of evil. He "liberated" Kosovo and used only air power to do so. Unlike the charismatic and genuinely lovable Ike, Clark has been unable to pull a single army buddy out to campaign for him.

Now, many of the most brilliant generals in American—and world—history have been arrogant egomaniacs loathed throughout the army for their narcissism. Winfield Scott and Douglas MacArthur come to mind. But of course, when "Ol' Fuss and Feathers" in 1852

and "Mac" in 1948 and '52 sought the presidency, it was a fiasco all the way.

Nor does Clark have any prior record of trust on which to build with the entrenched interest groups—environmentalists, blacks, Hispanics, feminists, gays—that wield immense power in the Democrats' internal political processes. He is even on videotape endorsing President Bush, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and the Iraq war before it all turned sour. He ought to be toast. But he isn't. At least not yet.

Clark hit the race at exactly the right time, with a powerful coalition already behind him. This was no accident. In his long involvement in Bosnia and Kosovo through the 1990s, he learned to build and hold together impressive coalitions, and he didn't jump into this race until he had a formidable one behind him.

The Clinton Family backs Clark—at least for the moment—and they remain as formidable a force in Democratic politics as the Corleones ever were in the Mob politics of *The Godfather*. He entered the race at the moment Dean had routed the rest of the field. He is clearly the candidate of Terry McAuliffe and the Democratic Leadership Council as much as he is of the Clintons, and he jumped straight to the top of the polls. He has plenty of opportunity ahead to self-destruct, but a start like that should not be underestimated.

In terms of the centuries-old cycles of American politics, Clark has a lot going

for him—and a lot going against him. His admirers have been trumpeting him as a Democratic Eisenhower. But it's better to see him as a would-be Zachary Taylor who carries the potential of fizzling out like a George McClellan.

Taylor was the heroic general of the Mexican War who won the presidency for the minority Whig Party in 1848. Like the Dems today, the Whigs had a "manliness" problem against Andrew Jackson's macho, land-conquering Democrats. The only two times they ever managed to win the presidency was by running victorious generals, Taylor in '48 and William Henry Harrison eight years earlier. The untidy but attractive Taylor and even Harrison, however, had—or in Harrison's case, at least could simulate—attractive personalities. Clark does not.

Conventional wisdom teaches that Clark can win the South while Dean cannot and therefore the Democrats must embrace him if they want to avoid a humiliating flameout next year. In fact, there is very good reason to believe that Dean can do surprisingly well in the South and Southwest: he has impeccable anti-gun-control credentials and is something of a fiscal conservative with a strong track record as a five-term governor. He is also more reassuring on civil liberties to conservatives appalled by the Patriot Act(s) than any Clinton general, and he has been feeding the Democratic grassroots Bush-bashing raw