

MR. INDEPENDENT

By Martin Morse Wooster

The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy
By Christopher Lasch
(Norton: New York) 246 pages, \$22

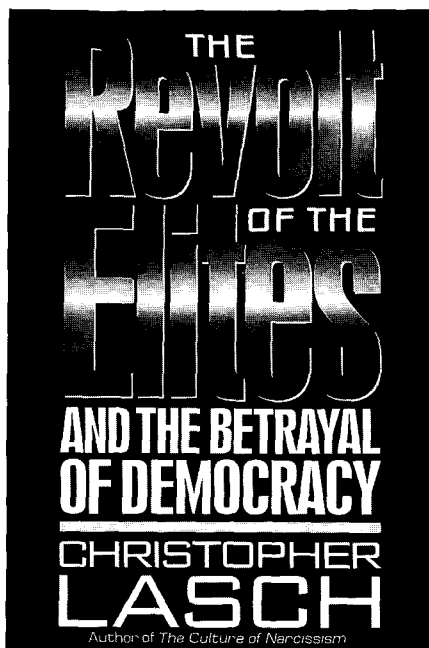
The late Christopher Lasch, for most of his life a historian at the University of Rochester, thought himself a man of the Left. But as he aged, he developed a strong traditionalist streak. In the end, he became a man who, with his stalwart defense of traditional values and his distrust of capitalism, was far closer philosophically to some cultural conservatives than he was to most of his fellow leftists.

The Revolt of the Elites, Lasch's last book, is a collection of essays, not a full-length treatise. Moreover, many of the essays are extended book reviews, and some are on such technical subjects as the ideas of nineteenth-century education reformer Horace Mann. Nonetheless, Lasch's lucid prose and fierce independence ensure that his book is worth reading.

Lasch called himself a "populist," and his political philosophy was based on a belief that the primary goal of politics should be to help ordinary people lead better lives. He had little use for a view of politics that suggested that people live just to acquire more income or to climb the status ladder.

In Lasch's view, the wealthiest 20 percent of American society was trying to secede from the masses. These elites were not like traditional aristocrats, who, though wealthy, were rooted by tradition and heritage to a particular place. Nor did they resemble the heroic entrepreneurs of the nineteenth century, who accumulated capital but felt it appropriate to share the wealth they created through philanthropic enterprises.

Instead, Lasch argued, today's elite use their wealth and skill to build barriers between themselves and the masses. They send their children to private schools, while demanding that the public schools they do not use be integrated. As America declines economically, they move jobs to low-wage areas overseas. They sneer at people who work hard making things, while they sit in front of



computers all day and spend their "leisure" hours engaging in exercise in order to appear perpetually youthful. "In effect, they have removed themselves from the common life," Lasch wrote. "Many of them have ceased to think of themselves as Americans in any important sense, implicated in America's destiny for better or worse."

This analysis is partially true. Certainly it is wrong to put down people just because their jobs involve a great deal of strenuous labor. An excellent plumber or tailor probably does more good for our country than a typical "symbolic analyst at a university." But the people who are withdrawing from government-run institutions largely do so not because of snootiness but because private alternatives are cheaper or better. Faxes and electronic mail are far less expensive and faster than the Postal Service. The tens of thousands of low- and middle-income parents who choose to educate their children at home or send them to Catholic schools do so not because they wish to insulate themselves from the plebeians, but because they see public schools as immoral and corrupt.

Because Lasch aimed to help average people improve themselves, he disdained the academic airiness of most contemporary leftists. He had little use for political correctness, and in one essay denounces

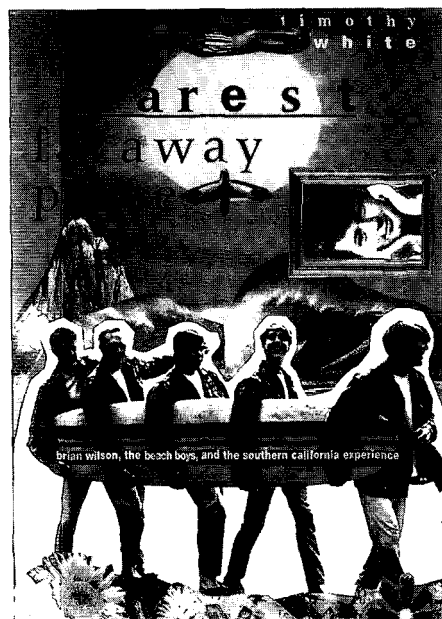
academic radicals as people who "are more interested in the defense of their professional privileges against criticism from outside" than they are in teaching students the skills they need to succeed in life.

Nor was Lasch an ally of those leftists who saw themselves as helpless victims of fate, heritage, or class. His populism prescribed self-reliance and discouraged dependence on government or corporate protectors. The reason Martin Luther King was a successful social reformer, Lasch argued, was that he "refused to claim a privileged moral position for victims of oppression" and that he praised "the petty bourgeois virtues: hard work, sobriety, self-improvement." In another essay, Lasch critiqued the self-esteem movement, seeing it as yet another reason why "public policies based on a therapeutic model of the state have failed over and over again."

Some of *The Revolt of the Elites* is dated, and some of it needs expansion. One wishes, for example, that Lasch had explained at greater length exactly how his proposed populist society would differ from the existing order. But nonetheless, *The Revolt of the Elites* contains a great many interesting and important insights, and is written in clear, lucid, and forceful English—a prose style many of Lasch's fellow academicians would do well to emulate.

In addition, both conservatives and liberals should admire Lasch for his independence. Far too many writers on public policy say whatever they feel their editors, patrons, or bosses desire instead of what they truly believe. The result is that there are far too many courtiers and too few people—like Robert Coles, Eugene Genovese, Robert Nisbet, John Lukacs, or Russell Jacoby—who say what is on their minds without regard to whether or not their arguments might offend someone or challenge accepted wisdom. Christopher Lasch was one of the few truly independent social critics in America. He will be missed.

Associate Editor Martin Morse Wooster is the author of *Angry Classrooms*, *Vacant Minds* and *The Great Philanthropists and the Problem of 'Donor Intent.'*



ENDLESS SUMMER

By Brian Doherty

*The Nearest Faraway Place:
Brian Wilson, The Beach Boys, and the
Southern California Experience*
By Timothy White
(New York, Henry Holt) 416 pages, \$25

The ambitions of this book, like all three of its subtitular subjects, overshoot its achievement. The effects of this are not as dire for the book, however, as they proved to be for Brian Wilson, the tortured-genius founder of the Beach Boys, or for Southern California, which sometimes now seems to be sinking beneath the weight of its own dream.

Author Timothy White has many sto-

ries to tell. First is the story of two families, the Wilsons and the Scholes, what brought them to America, and some of what happened to them here. These compressed histories exemplify the strange epic of the American Experience.

White also tells the story of Southern California, mostly through the various enthusiasms in popular culture that the area incubated: aviation, surfing, hot rodding, car detailing, the hula hoop, the electric guitar, and a fantasy of joyous youthful living.

Third, and primarily, this book is the story of a rock band. The Beach Boys have become a fixture on the state fair nostalgia circuit: balding, thickening, rehashing a set that they've been dependent on for over 30 years. Yet Brian Wilson is still adored and honored by pop music critics.

White is a long-time music journalist who is now editor of *Billboard*, the popular music industry's leading trade journal, but he never captures the brilliance of the Beach Boys' music. Like most pop music writers he is more comfortable writing about lyrics than music. This is a fatal shortcoming in covering the Beach Boys, whose power lies in the sonic glory of their voices and arrangement. White goes on for pages about the Beach Boys' masterpiece, the 1966 LP *Pet Sounds*, mostly emphasizing the glum romantic disturbance that typifies the lyrics, but he fails to get across what a crushing, maddeningly beautiful musical work the album is.

The torture and loss in Brian Wilson's life has many more levels than White wants to discuss; he glosses over the personal degradation, drug abuse, crazed indul-

gence, and unproductiveness that marked Wilson's life after he failed to finish his planned magnum opus *Smile* in 1967. (The Beach Boys' biggest hit, and one of their most stunning pieces of music, *Good Vibrations*, was salvaged from it, however.)

But though White's specifics aren't grand enough for his frame, he could hardly have chosen a more appropriate pop cultural prism than the Beach Boys to view Southern California history through. Some of the ironies are so obvious White doesn't have to belabor them. Ads from the Sunkist company helped sell Wilson's grandparents on the Southern California dream, summoning them across the country from Hutchinson, Kansas. Two generations later, songs performed by the Wilson brothers would be used by the same company to sell others on the same illusion.

The Beach Boys' sad lives embodied many of the strange spiritual and psychological fads synonymous with Southern California. The various obsessions pursued by the Boys included Transcendental Meditation and the Maharishi, John Rogers, Charlie Manson, total-control psychotherapy, numerous lawsuits, and debilitating drug abuse. The James Watt controversy over the Beach Boys playing the Washington Memorial in 1983 was strange in that both Watt and his opponents were right: The Boys are emblematic of loathsome and horrid influences, and they are also America's Band.

Brian Doherty is an assistant editor of Reason magazine and runs Cherry Smash Records, an independent record label.



A REGULAR
REVIEW OF
CLASSIC,

OVER-LOOKED, NEWLY RELEVANT OR
OTHERWISE DESERVING OLDER BOOKS

THE FUGITIVE

Madison Jones

Donald Davidson's *Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States: The Attack on Leviathan* was first published 57 years ago, to small notice and less applause. Despite two subsequent editions and recent signs of awakening interest among some notables, the book

remains little known. The same is true of its author, whose distinction as political thinker, poet, historian, and teacher fairly cries out for just recognition.

Early in his career as a teacher at Vanderbilt University, Davidson was a principal participant in that remarkable group that came to be known as the Fugitive Poets, which included also John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and