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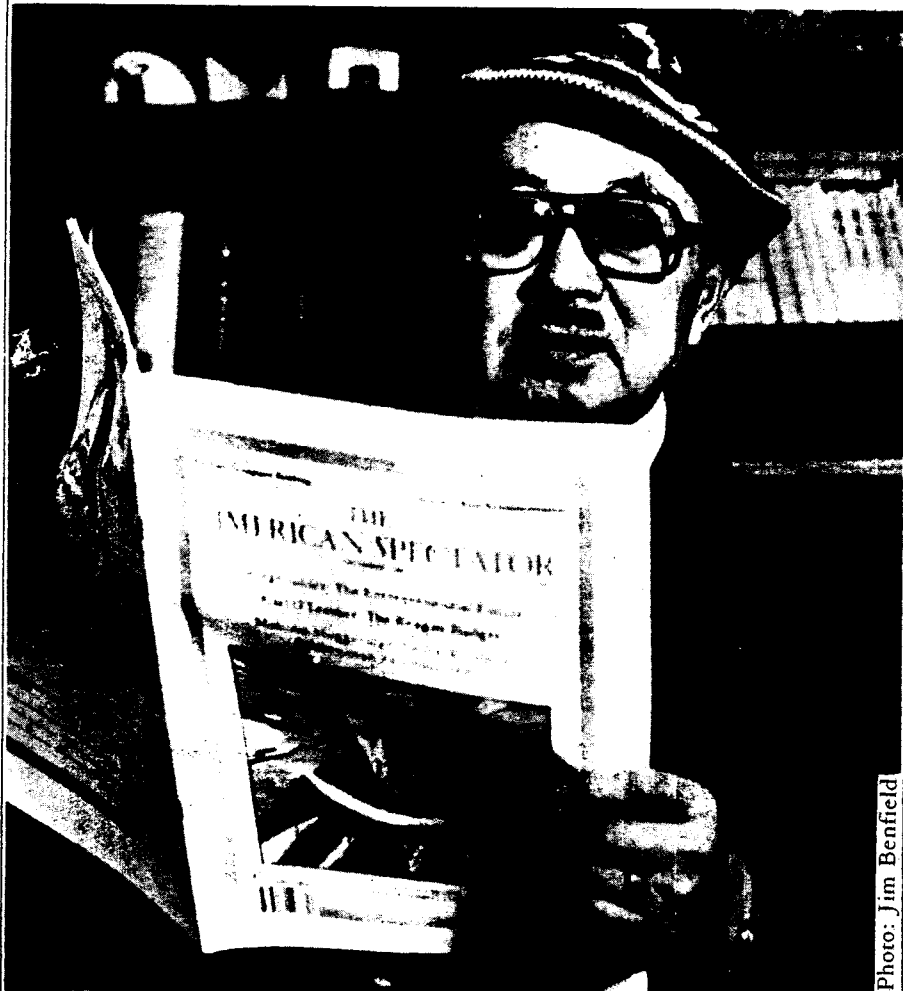


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housing, censorship, the sexual revolution, drug addiction, the environment and, above all, the Women's Liberation Movement have been unsatisfactory to say the least. Altogether he [God] is far too preoccupied with outmoded eternal matters—often tinged with elitism. . . .” It is high time, Dr. Spaceley-Trellis concludes, that God “retired and made way for a younger man.”

Sometimes Simple is simply zany, as in his report on Nerdley housewife Brenda O’Gourke, 46, of Termite Road, and her quixotic encounter with 51 pork pies at the Nadirco Fooderama, Nerdley’s premier purveyor of processed junk food, a pet hate of Simple’s. When questioned, Mrs. O’Gourke explained that “she was conducting an independent survey of the contents of Nadirco pork pies. There was no knowing what you might find in them nowadays. One friend of hers had recently found a hairnet, a part of an alarm-clock and what seemed to be the incisor-tooth of a badger; another found a long, rambling letter, possibly an appeal for help from someone who had been at one time imprisoned in the pie, for what reason she could not say. . . .”

Even in his wildest flights, however, Simple usually has a point to make, often aimed at some aspect of modern man’s loss of soul or at his blind faith in technology and social

progress. Consider this rather poignant aside following a swipe at seologists and the birth control lobby

Poor young people, who thought they were going to be free to enjoy a page world of love and pleasure where moral restraints had vanished and all might be as they pleased! It is not going to be quite like that after all! Pursued into the bedroom by experts brandishing pills at coils of ever new design, questioning them about their attitudes to each other observing their love-making like a scientific process . . . they will find that they have exchanged one system of restraint, moral, religious, instinctual, for another system, social, secular, rational.

Simple makes no bones about it: his loyalties are entirely on the side of traditional morality and values more durable than coils, contraceptive mass marketing, and self-indulgent “humanism” run amok. At times his enthusiasm carries him too far, but just when one is about to write him off as a misanthropic right-wing crank, the old humor bubbles up to the surface again. If Peter Simple sometimes seems but a hairsbreadth away from looniness, he is a great deal less deranged than the grotesque modern world around him and, to quote a characteristic Simpleism: “In the country of the bald the one-haired man is king.” An excellent book for dipping into at poolside, bedside, or deskside, and a pleasant reminder that English humor has survived even the dreariness of post-war socialism. [

THE THIRTIES

Edmund Wilson / Farrar, Straus and Giroux / \$17.50

EDMUND WILSON:

OUR NEIGHBOR FROM TALCOTTVILLE

Richard Hauer Costa / Syracuse University Press / \$11.95

William H. Nolte

Reading Edmund Wilson’s *The Thirties* is a numbing experience, a true test of the reader’s endurance. Needless to say, these journal notes would never have been published had they been written by anyone of less renown than Wilson, certainly our premier critic-at-large during the last thirty years or so of his life. Now that they have been gathered between covers, as he intended them to be, they will receive wide notice though I seriously doubt that many readers,

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even those who most admire Wilson will stay with them to the end. The thing is a bore—a lifeless and seemingly endless bore.

To begin with, the title is misleading. The book tells us very little about the thirties, about any of the distinguishing features of that decade. Indeed, we are seldom given so much as an opinion about the goings-on in politics, government literature—the matters of most concern to Wilson at that time. We have instead the finger exercises of a compulsive writer—long descriptions of various places here and abroad. At times he tries to capture the sense of

place by noting native expressions—as in New Mexico. He fails to bring any of that country to mind's eye. The description of moments, little vignettes, are self-conscious—for example, this one on "Provincetown beach life": "Little tiny girl with the legs of a little brown boy coming back from a boat ride with her parents and stepping over the thing they slid the boats down with, her head of long blond hair down her back and her little pale-green sweater pulled down over the trunks of her blue bathing suit—balancing with her little brown arms." One winces at all the *littles*. He records lengthy conversations overheard in homes of acquaintances, pieces of idle gossip, weather reports, his dreams, etc. As Leon Edel remarks in his introductory essay, the journals "served largely the function of memory and self-discipline. They were the notebooks of a chronicler, a way of tidying the mind for his craft of criticism. . . ." They also served as a repository which Wilson mined for such books as *The American Earthquake*, but here we have only what was left over—in effect, the splintered wood and shavings of his mental workshop.

The astonishing thing about these notes is, as I say, the fact that they are lifeless; they provide no semblance of shared experience. In his best books and essays Wilson conveyed his learning to the reader; his interest in ideas was infectious. But when most intimate—that is, when the emotions were called into play, as they constantly are in our everyday goings and comings—he seemed mechanistic and joyless. Indeed, he appears, whether he was or not, emotionally sterile. Professor Edel ascribes this characteristic, or deficiency, to his early years, thus agreeing that the child is father to the man: "There had been, as we know, a deaf mother and a depressed and often apathetic father. The little boy Edmund had considerable difficulty communicating with those close to him. In the process there was a short-circuiting of the common articulations and joys of childhood. The distancings were carried into adult life."

In effect, there seems to have been an imbalance between heart and head, or rather a bifurcation between feeling and thought, body and mind—the two seem never to be joined. In the painful, guilt-ridden chapter on his relations with his second wife, Margaret Canby, written after her death in 1932—she died from a fall down some steep Spanish steps in her hometown of Santa Barbara—he dutifully records her having called

him "a cold fishy leprous person." In an effort somehow to exorcise the memory of his shabby treatment of Margaret, he authenticates her remark; he was indeed a cold fish. He seemed compelled to record in detail all the worst things he had done or said during their short time together, as if in the recording there were expiation. It is not made clear how long Margaret had been in California,

or whether she intended to rejoin Wilson in the East. I find it hard to believe him when he says, "After she was dead, I loved her." What he is saying, it seems to me, is that he loved the "idea" of her once she ceased to exist. His confessions have a ghoulish quality, and the candor with which he describes their sexual relations is simply embarrassing. He would doubtless have been aston-

ished if someone had reminded him that some things are better left unsaid. He was no stranger to the twin Joys of masochism and sadism. It seems odd that a man so materialistic (in the philosophical sense of the term) should have also been so narcissistic.

Nowhere is that narcissism more evident than in the descriptions of his sexual relations. As I read about his



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couplings with this fair one or that not so fair one, except for "Anna" each one identified by a single letter, a line of verse kept running through my mind. Unable to recall the exact wording, I finally, after about the fifth or sixth whisper in my ear, looked it up. It's the opening line of a poem by Henry Reed: "Today we have naming of parts." Unfortunately Wilson failed to realize that to

nearly everyone but those immediately (intimately?) involved, sexual matters generally are comic, and when not comic they are revolting. But Wilson, that most owl-like man, was ever on the lookout for experience, not for the sake of experience, but for the opportunity to embalm the experience in the amber of his prose. It's people like Wilson who give lechery a bad name.

There are of course a few grains to be found amid all the chaff. For example this note on the late Granville Hicks, a performing seal of the far Left back in the thirties: "When the orders from Moscow for tolerance came, the comrades inaugurated the new policy nobly by at once throwing out poor Granville Hicks, who had been trying so hard to comply with what he had understood to be the

previous policy and who would undoubtedly have done his best to live up to the new one if they had only given him time." There is surprisingly little in the book about Fitzgerald and Hemingway, or, for that matter, about the other important writers of the period. Still, I am happy to report that Wilson remembered to report on F. Scott's penis—an object of no little speculation during those Hard Times. As every reader of our literature knows by now, Scott was much concerned about the dimensions of that famous organ. For anyone who is still in the dark but wishes to pursue this tiny matter, I can only recommend the full-size account in Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*. According to Wilson, who got it from John Bishop, Scott was in the habit of telling everyone he met—even "the lady who sat next to him at dinner and who might be meeting him for the first time"—that his penis was too small. Hemingway told Fitzgerald that it looked small because he viewed it from above, that he should instead look at himself in the mirror. Wilson confesses that he "did not understand this." Having thus skirted the issue he moves on to the problem of impotence: "It seemed to me that ideas of impotence were very much in people's minds at this period—on account of the Depression, I think, the difficulty of getting things going." But then he also admits that his heavy drinking may have had something to do with it. Scott had the same problem, alas. Was it the Depression, or was it liquor? Choose whichever cause seems to you the more convincing, but I have always believed that Scott's and Edmund's problem stemmed from their having attended Princeton. Of course I may be wrong. I no longer consider it a major concern.

Before leaving *The Thirties* behind I should note that the book does have one (intentional) funny remark in it. By the time I got to it, on page 694, I was neck-deep in the Slough of Despond. But this simple note, despite the fact that I seem to recall having heard it before, restored my strength and lifted my liver: "The California girl she had met at a party: her husband had said about somebody: 'He's a big shot out on the Coast!' His wife had said, 'And don't forget to dot the i!'"

Beginning in the early fifties Wilson spent his summers in the upstate New York house he inherited from his mother. In *Upstate* he gave us his warm, albeit somewhat cranky, recollections of life in that rural area.

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Now in *Edmund Wilson: Our Neighbor from Talcottville*, Richard Hauer Costa adds a few interesting items of Wilsoniana to the public domain. Because of the bad writing, especially in the preface and opening chapter, discriminating readers may leave before the main course is served. Hence this note of warning. Don't be put off by such jawbreakers as: "Perhaps my memory of the quality of the mind that, from the first, charged the hours in his company with vibrancy may have led me occasionally into over-feeling, perhaps over-writing." That prepositional disaster occurs in the preface. On the next page one encounters this hop-legged, highfalutin waywardness:

When, as was inevitable, the more compelling intellectual and social stimulations of prep school and college and travel fully rescued the teenage "Bunny" Wilson from Red Bank, they also left Talcottville and the "old stone house," for a long time, in the pale.

In an imperishable essay written in 1933, the thirty-eight-year-old newly hired staff critic on *The New Republic* writes of returning north, after many years away, on the Utica-to-Boonville milk train, seeking renewal and rebirth "up in the country." Instead, the journey he chronicles is to limbo, caught as he is between the Upstate worlds of the Bakers and the Talcotts—his maternal ancestors—and the making-it maelstrom of Manhattan and The Village which is inclining him, as it did his friend John Dos Passos, toward a vast leftward leap over his shadow.

And so on. But, as I say, things get better, or perhaps one just gets accustomed to the bouncy ride.

When he first met Wilson, in 1963, Mr. Costa was teaching at the Syracuse University branch in Utica. From then until Wilson's death nine years later they kept in touch through correspondence and visits in Wilson's home. Although Mr. Costa's memoir is generously padded and he makes rather too much of himself in the telling, he does give us a credible likeness of the crusty old man of letters. Among other things, we learn that Wilson was fond of eating sweets while drinking his daily pint of Johnny Walker Red; that he disliked the novels of Conrad, particularly *Nostromo*; that he thought E.A. Robinson a much better poet than Robert Frost; that he considered Hemingway a post-adolescent (which was already known by Wilson's readers); that he sometimes got up at four a.m. to read old reviews of his books; that he liked very much the novels of Maurice Baring; that he liked Italian and Hungarian women but had all his life been wary of Frenchwomen, and so on and so forth. Idle gossip, perhaps, but then who isn't interested in gossip? □

C O R R E S P O N D E N C E

Literary Environmentalism

Thank you for Bryan F. Griffin's superb criticism of E.L. Doctorow (January 1981). This is what *The American Spectator* does best of all: puncturing the anti-establishment establishment. There is such a nauseating concentration of Agent Pink in the atmosphere these days that literary environmentalists like Griffin with the wit and scholarship to dispel it evoke only gratitude. Thank you, Griffin, yours is the bravest and most interesting literary criticism I have read in a month of Sonnets. It's also far and away the funniest.

—John Muggeridge
Ontario, Canada

A Disinformed Review?

It's impossible, I think, to fault Mitchell Ross's review of *The Spike* (February 1981) on aesthetic grounds, but parts of his review wax a tad too

chic to jibe with my sense of proportion. From "Ross's Rundown" runs the following:

Of disinformation as a whole, we learn more or less what it involves, and we are left to suppose that it exists. Big deal.

Well, yes, damn it, I suppose Soviet disinformation is a "big deal"—unless one is prepared to join the chorus of academics who have dismissed Solzhenitsyn as an ill-mannered crank, or unless one supposes that such informed and careful journalists as Michael Ledeen and Arnaud de Borchgrave are the delirious victims of an *idée fixe*.

I realize (and rejoice) that *The American Spectator's* prime motif is to expose the artless and the imbecile in modern discourse. To that end, Mitchell Ross, characteristically, has contributed a sharp piece, with much truth and good sense in most of its

particulars. But given the *timing* of the review's appearance, I would have hoped for something more along the lines of the "final word" on *The Spike*. Instead, Mr. Ross lets fly a blistering attack on the most vulnerable aspect of the novel—its manifest artlessness; he might as well have applied high form criticism to Mickey Spillane, for Pete's sake!

Underlying Mr. Ross's brilliant salvo is a fallacy: the assumption that *The Spike* was written for a "sophisticated" audience of "highbrows." In fact, *The Spike* was written to inform bookstore rug-rats and supermarket browsers about an astonishing pattern of intellectual corruption festering among some of America's most influential "highbrow" chin-waggers and glitterati. It's a pattern that may not impress someone of Ross's depth, sophistication, and

(continued on page 46)



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