

from the mountains of source material now available at the Truman Library. Despite the research that has gone into these books, Donovan's prose retains a reporter's sense of immediacy; there is none of the detached theorizing or blubbery viscosity that afflict most academic writing. The result is a lean, taut, but vivid narrative that combines archival revelations with a keen sense of what things were like at the time. (In discussing Joe McCarthy's famous canard that too much "bourbon and Benedictine" caused Truman to fire MacArthur, for example, Donovan wonders, with the good sense that comes from having been there, whether anyone can really imagine the embattled Chief Executive imbibing the latter beverage.)

Donovan is at his best sketching personalities. Dean Acheson, he tells us, found it difficult to get along with Franklin Roosevelt because "if any patronizing was to be done, Acheson preferred to do it." Senator Knowland was "an intense moose of a man." General Harry Vaughan "wore a general's uniform the way people nowadays wear Levi's and shirts." But it is the portrait of Truman himself that is of greatest interest: he was not always as decisive and free from anxiety as he sought to appear. Donovan describes him during his last two years in office as periodically depressed, irresolute, given to whiling away long hours in poker games with cronies, at one point too shaky and exhausted even to sign his name.

It is this sense of what things were like, I think, that leads Donovan to stress more than academic historians have the extent to which Truman was seen, at the time, as a failure. After all, he did fail, prior to the outbreak of the Korean War, to build a military force capable of honoring the political obligations his administration had taken on in the name of "containment." He failed to prepare the nation for what he knew would be the inevitable victory of Communism in China, nor did he do all he could have to minimize the resulting domestic backlash. He failed to anticipate the Korean War, failed to keep China from intervening, and failed to end it. At home, needed reforms languished while petty corruption grew; meanwhile Truman's own blunt and abrasive personal behavior, so charming to subsequent generations, struck contemporaries as undignified, demeaning, and inconsistent with what most Americans expected in a President. These are all useful correctives to a view of Truman that has become somewhat romanticized with the passage of time.

It is important to distinguish these criticisms, though, from those that were being advanced within the precincts of New Left revisionism some years back. To followers of that persuasion, Truman came across as more devious than inept, as cunning rather than clumsy. He was, in their eyes, a cynical manipulator of public opinion, smearing legitimate opposition at home with the tar brush of anti-Communism while pursuing policies abroad calculated toward the relentless aggrandizement of American power. The Russians, to the extent that they entered into these accounts at all, usually did so in the role of innocent victims.

Donovan is too good a historian—and too good a reporter, for that matter—to accept that extreme viewpoint. Rather, his account falls within what is now coming to be called the "post-revisionist" phase of Cold War historiography. This viewpoint would acknowledge some American responsibility for the escalation of the Cold War: in Washington's failure to distinguish publicly between varieties of Communism, for example, or in the overcommitment that arose from the confusion of peripheral with vital interests, or in the tendency to exaggerate the nature of the Soviet threat in order to get needed appropriations through Congress. But "post-revisionists" nevertheless assign chief responsibility for the Cold War to the Russians; they stress the moderate (and mostly non-military) nature of the early American response; and they emphasize the extent to which the American "empire," assuming there was such a thing, arose as much at the invitation of those worried about the Russians as by the impositions of rapacious capitalists and militarists in Washington.

"Post-revisionism" has not received the attention it deserves outside professional academic circles, although within those circles, it is rapidly becoming the dominant viewpoint. Robert Donovan's excellent narrative, though not as analytical as many of the more specialized "post-revisionist" accounts, is nonetheless within the spirit of that approach, and could well serve general readers as a first-rate introduction to what is going on in the field.

To the extent that revisionism is active these days, it is more in connection with the Eisenhower Administration, although here (appropriately) there is a great, bland, complacent consensus: recently opened papers at the Eisenhower Library at Abilene have caused scales to fall from the eyes of orthodox, New Left, and post-

revisionist scholars alike, and all emerge, blinking from the sunlight reflected off the grain elevators that abut that edifice, convinced that Ike was a genius. It is the kind of situation that cries out for Donovan's compensatory sense of how things actually were at the time—for he was

there, too, and in 1956 published what is still one of the best journalistic accounts of that administration, *Eisenhower: The Inside Story*. One can only hope that he will now turn his critical historian's eye—as well as his reportorial ear—to the Eisenhower years as well. □

SIEGFRIED SASSOON DIARIES, 1915-1918

Edited by Rupert Hart-Davis / Faber and Faber / \$19.95

Thomas Mallon

If you have read much of Siegfried Sassoon, you will, in opening these diaries, be letting him take you back to the Great War for the fourth time. You will have been there in his brutal and ironic poems; you will have been there with George Sherston in the only slightly fictionalized *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*; and you will have been through some of his convalescences in his actual autobiography (*Siegfried's Journey 1916-1920*). Now, you will feel, you are getting closer to the experience, the authentic heart and horror of it, than ever. Sir Rupert Hart-Davis, the editor of these journals, thrills you with their immediacy in his introduction: "Siegfried's handwriting was always firm and legible, but these diaries were written in tiny notebooks, sometimes in pencil, often by the light of a solitary candle in dug-out or billet, and some of the names of French villages and hamlets are hard to decipher."

Parts of the diaries show things as we believe they ought to be. We expect to see the indolent fox-hunter and part-time poet go off to the Front with a splendid sense of purposefulness; to see him get those illusions blasted out of him by the sound of 5.9 shells and the sight of dead men's hands sticking out of the soil; to see him turn bitter and protesting. And, indeed, we see some of that tortured movement taking place according to

the historical schedule. On December 3, 1915 he hopes to die the same death his brother did at Gallipoli: "I have lived well and truly since the war began, and have made my sacrifices; now I ask that the price be required of me. I must pay my debt. Hamo went: I must follow him"; but twelve months later "the thought of death is horrible, where last year it was a noble and inevitable dream." In 1915 the stars above the marchers' heads are "immortal diadems"; by 1917 Sassoon wants to get some "death and bitterness and anger" into his poems: he wants language not to rhapsodize, but to excoriate. Early in 1916 he can find some lines

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by Rupert Brooke "miraculously right"; a year later he is relieved to meet someone who has never heard of Rupert Brooke. It's the same thing with Robert Bridges, the Poet Laureate. In January 1916 he quotes him approvingly; when he meets him just before the Armistice he decides he's a wheezebag: "arrogant old Bridges with his reactionary war-talk."

You will note one date that can be inserted between all these contrasting attitudes: July 1, 1916. On that morning the Battle of the Somme began. Twenty-thousand British soldiers were dead before the day was over. From then on, as Sassoon's friend Edmund Blunden put it, the war had been "found out." Sassoon's diaries give an almost hour-by-hour account of his movements that morning ("I am looking at a sunlit picture of Hell"). The pages he wrote in the course of it, and which we see in this volume, are of incalculable dramatic and historical value.

And yet, even as one is tempted to see that morning as a psychological fault-line, one realizes that this would be too neat where Sassoon is concerned. He remained a remarkably indefinite spirit in many ways, even in the decades after the war (he lived until 1967), and one must not expect to see the consistently heroic giving way to the consistently revulsed. The diaries show plenty of continuing ambivalence. Part of Sas-

soon needed the war, and kept on needing it, even after he had seen friends killed and himself wounded. The war gave him much that he required, most of all an escape from the slack and prolonged childhood he led until he was nearly thirty, an "inane" life of fox-hunting and occasional poetastering. It gave his existence a certain purpose, however brutal, and "[a]fter all, becoming a military serf or trench galley-slave is a very easy way out of the difficulties of life." Sassoon is invalided back to England three times in the course of the war, only to realize he would rather be back in the "sausage machine" than listen to the bloody-minded patriotism of the fat and safe and overage left home in dear old Blighty: "They say the U-boat blockade will get worse and there will be a bad food-shortage in England in 1917. The sideboard in this Formby golf-club doesn't look like it yet; enormous cold joints and geese and turkeys and a sucking pig and God knows what, and old men with their noses in their plates guzzling for all they're worth." No wonder he preferred the carnage of the trenches to the carnage at the sideboard, even after he had made his public protest, in 1917, against "the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to

realise." It was this outcry that landed him for a time in Craiglockhart War Hospital in Scotland, for what the authorities decided to call shell-shock. One of the major disappointments of these diaries is that they contain no entries from those months, during which Sassoon had his conversations with another patient and poet, Wilfred Owen. (We do, in earlier notations, get to see Sassoon meeting Robert Graves, "a young poet, captain in Third Battalion and very much disliked. An interesting creature, overstrung and self-conscious, a defier of convention.")

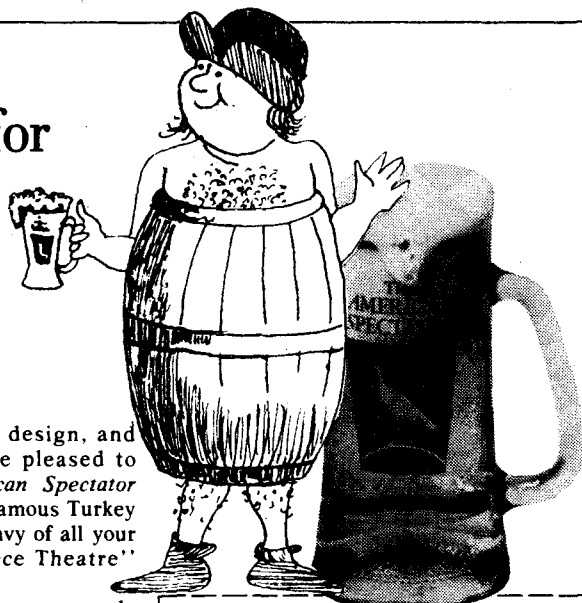
Sassoon is not sure whether it is "cussedness" or "the old spirit of martyrdom" that keeps him going when he is back at the Front. But whichever it is, he can still find himself with an appetite for playing the "happy warrior" long after he has convinced himself of heroism's fakery. One thing that certainly keeps him functioning is a sexually charged protectiveness toward the men serving in his company. On June 4, 1918, in a nervous and despairing moment, he writes: "After all, I am nothing but what the Brigadier calls 'a potential killer of Germans (Huns).' O God, why must I do it? I'm not. I am only here to look after some men." His homosexuality—fully revealed for the first time in the series of diaries now being published—magnifies both his dutifulness and his losses. When a lieutenant is killed in 1916 he is left "longing for the bodily presence that was so fair" as he goes off by himself into the woods:

"I wrote his name in chalk on the beech-tree stem, and left a rough garland of ivy there, and a yellow primrose for his yellow hair and kind grey eyes, my dear, my dear."

This is the young man in the poems "A Subaltern," "The Last Meeting," and "A Letter Home." A reader of the diaries will find the triggering incidents for many more of the poems he already knows. He will also come upon fourteen new poems, as well as many passages that would later be transferred into the Sherston memoirs. But the impact of reading this volume goes far beyond the pleasures of scholarly detection. It is, all by itself, another ticket to hell.

Sassoon's head was grazed by a bullet on July 13, 1918. (One of his own men—mistaking him for a German—fired it.) This wound brought him back once more to a hospital in England. He was in London for the Armistice celebrations on November 11, an "outburst of mob patriotism . . . a loathsome ending to the loathsome tragedy of the last four years." He would go on from there to live another half century, but nothing he would ever write would create the sensation of his protesting poems in *The Old Huntsman* (1917) and *Counter-Attack* (1918). He would continue to move, hesitatingly, between literature and sport, industry and indolence. He would make an unhappy marriage, withdraw more and more into himself, and, finally, join the Roman Catholic Church. Something about him remained forever unformed and unreachd, oddly beautiful and deeply pathetic. □

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Mark Royden Winchell

In her 1976 essay "Why I Write," Joan Didion tells us that the initial inspiration for her novel *A Book of Common Prayer* was the image of the Panama airport at 6 a.m. The image proved so vivid that she later made up a country in which to locate the airport and a menacing political environment for that country. Boca Grande was a Central American

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police state, plagued by an almost perpetual state of civil war. In her recently published book, *Salvador*, Didion takes us back to Boca Grande, even to the point of beginning her account with a description of the El Salvador International Airport.

Sooner or later, every writer with a distinctive voice risks falling into self-parody. That Joan Didion should succumb to this pitfall in a work of nonfiction suggests how predictable her view of the world has become. The turmoil in El Salvador is simply