

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.")

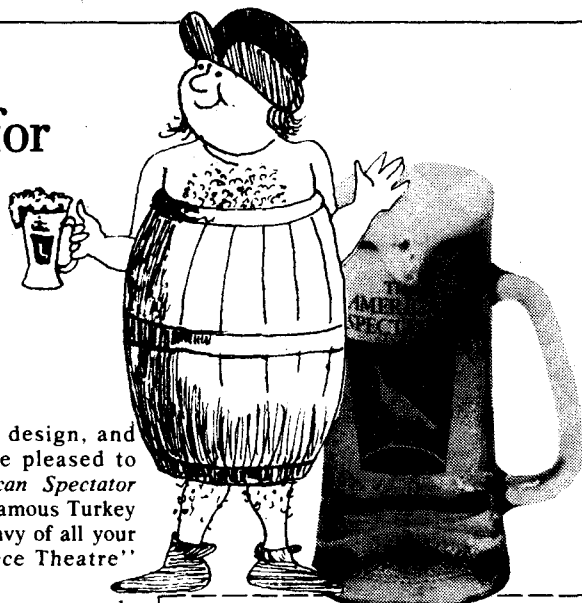
Sassoon is not sure whether it is "cussedness" or "the old spirit of martyrdom" that keeps him going when he is back at the Front. But whichever it is, he can still find himself with an appetite for playing the "happy warrior" long after he has convinced himself of heroism's fakery. One thing that certainly 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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SALVADOR

Joan Didion / Simon and Schuster / \$12.95

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

one more graphic instance of the center's not holding, of things' falling apart. Indeed, one suspects that this slim, overpriced book of reportage would not have had an appreciably different message had its author stayed home and relied for her information on the network news.

Still, *Salvador* contains some passages which could have been written only by one of our finest prose stylists. Consider, for example, the following description of the Metropolitan Cathedral in San Salvador:

This is the cathedral that the late Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero refused to finish, on the premise that the work of the Church took precedence over its display, and the high walls of raw concrete bristle with structural rods, rusting now, staining the concrete, sticking out at wrenched and violent angles. The wiring is exposed. Fluorescent tubes hang askew. The great high altar is backed by warped plywood. The cross on the altar is of bare incandescent bulbs, but the bulbs, that afternoon, were unlit: there was in fact no light at all on the main altar, no light on the cross, no light on the globe of the world that showed the northern American continent in gray and the southern in white; no light on the dove above the globe, *Salvador del Mundo*.

Didion writes her best journalism when she is able to establish a personal connection with a place (as in her elegiac essays about the Northern California of her childhood) or when she is discovering the inherent literary qualities of a public phenomenon (as in her rendering of the Lucille Miller story in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and her deflation of the buffoonish Bishop Pike in *The White Album*). Here neither is the case. Because her stay in El Salvador was brief and exclusively professional, Didion has no personal stake in that embattled land. And the closest she comes to "found literature" is her short characterization of American ambassador Deane Hinton, who—as a cosmopolitan man with western American roots—seems to be Didion's kind of guy. Much of the rest of this book is posturing.

If there is any political message here, it is that El Salvador is a Third-World backwater which cannot be salvaged for U.S. interests and that to take one side or the other there is to fall prey to the sort of self-delusion which afflicted Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Predictably, President Reagan emerges as Didion's Kurtz. Early in the book, we watch Reagan and Doris Day cavort on Salvadoran television in *The Winning Team*, a 1952 Warner Brothers movie about the baseball pitcher Grover Cleveland Alexander.

Then, at the end of Didion's narrative, the Great Communicator is seen "certifying" El Salvador's progress toward political stability and human rights, even as the carnage and repression continue. The first of these scenes is simply a variation on all the tired Bonzo jokes that have plagued Reagan for most of his political career. The second, however, merits further comment.

The "certification" charade is required by an ancient liberal superstition, the Wilsonian notion that strategic self-interest is an insufficiently moral basis for a nation's foreign policy. This superstition informed the Carter Administration's disastrous stance on human rights and occasionally crops up in right-wing talk about linkage. Although we ought not to be too eager to embrace jackbooted thugs of either the Left or the Right, no nation can survive in today's world by allying itself only with those leaders whom we would want to invite home to Sunday dinner. After all, the United States joined forces with Stalin in World War II without insisting on his "certifying" human rights progress in the Gulag.

The salient question which El Salvador raises for U.S. policy is not whether we can impose *norteamericana* democracy on that troubled nation, but whether we can afford to allow a strategically located Central American country to fall into Dr. Castro's hands. Didion rather cavalierly dismisses that consideration by observing: "no one could doubt that Cuba and Nicaragua had at various points supported the armed opposition to the Salvadoran government, but neither could anyone be surprised by this . . ." What she does not say is that the reason no one could be surprised by this is that the Left produces its own Kurtzes. Fidel may never have played Grover Cleveland Alexander, but he was a mediocre minor-league pitcher before becoming the Robespierre of Cuba.

In *A Book of Common Prayer*, Didion's protagonist Charlotte Douglas is a *norteamericana* who lives in Boca Grande, lists her occupation as *una turista*, and tries unsuccessfully to sell her vision of reality to the *New Yorker* in a series of "Letters from Central America." *Salvador* is essentially Joan Didion's "Letters from Central America," published originally not in the *New Yorker*, but in the *New York Review of Books*. When we read these letters, it is perhaps best to keep in mind that at the end of the Boca Grande novel, Didion's narrator Grace concedes: "I am less and less certain that this story has been one of delusion.

"Unless the delusion was mine." □

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Ronald B. Shwartz

Paul Fussell is a chaired professor of English who doesn't take literature—or much else—sitting down. It's been said that he is "untrammelled by reticence," but that puts it too daintily. In fact and by reputation, he is a bull in the china shop of American letters, and no wonder: he fashions himself as a kind of thinking man's John Wayne, wielding prose

Ronald B. Shwartz is a Boston attorney and freelance writer.

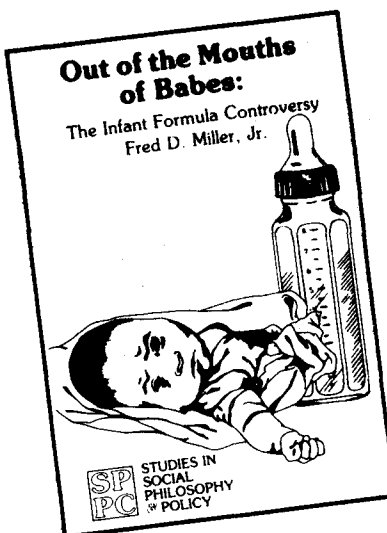
with a certain fetching swagger and acid humor, and blaming it all on nothing less than his stint as a combat platoon leader in WWII: "The careful reader," he writes, "will discern in all the essays in this book a speaker who is really a pissed-off infantryman, disguised as a literary and cultural commentator . . . I entered the war when I was nineteen, and I have been in it ever since."

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