

Western European ones are more generous and efficient because they cover the middle classes. This is plausible in political terms—the more people involved, the greater the pressure on the government to provide decent service—though the American experience with the Postal Service argues against it. But Kuttner finds himself in an uncomfortable box. “As the welfare state becomes larger and more universal, it becomes less redistributive. . . . Beyond a certain point, it is not possible to have both universalism based on citizenship and also redistribution based on need.” Surely this is the crucial problem for “radical democrats”—deciding whether univer-

salism or redistribution is more important, or else finding a way to combine the two. This book does neither.

That is characteristic of Kuttner's approach. In the end, *The Economic Illusion* fails to persuade, burdened by its misrepresentation of evidence, prudent evasions, and preference for assertion over demonstration. Kuttner, having offered his brief for egalitarian economics, concedes that fostering a “politics of equality” is “a little harder.” But he has shown how hard it will be for those on the left to construct a sound economic case. If Kuttner's book is any evidence, the illusions are still theirs. □

AN AMERICAN PROCESSION

Alfred Kazin/Alfred A. Knopf/\$18.95

George Sim Johnston

We know that we should have stayed home, that Alfred Kazin's American procession is going to be a grim parade, a sort of anti-Fourth of July, a few pages into this endless book. Before the floats bearing Emerson and Hawthorne and Whitman pass by in due chronological order, there comes a banner, so to speak, in the form of two bleak quotations from T.S. Eliot. The prologue's title is “Old Man in a Dry Mouth,” under which is an epigraph, “I will show you fear in a handful of dust.” On that note, we are introduced to Henry Adams as an old man and Eliot himself as a young man. Not, mind you, the young Henry Adams, the brilliant writer, lecturer, and social figure, but the bitter octogenarian, whose favorite topic of conversation was “the total failure of the universe.” And not the mellow, spiritually reconciled Eliot of later years, who rejected his early poses of disaffection, but the young nervous wreck who wrote *The Waste Land*. It would be difficult to find two drearier Grand Marshals for a parade. But these two desiccated figures, who projected their melancholy onto everything around them, set the tone for all that follows. For Kazin, solitude and desolation are the hallmarks of being a writer in America. Virtually every float in his parade is decorated with ash and cinders, with the subject furiously staring into space or grinding his

heels on the national flag.

Some of our great writers have, of course, been what Melville called “isolatos.” Melville, Poe, and Dickinson were not gregarious people. But Kazin, in this critical-biographical survey of great American writers, tries to skew as many of his subjects as he can into their company. He isolates and builds his discussion around the least happy epochs of a writer's life. Thus, we get Hawthorne in his dotage, Mark Twain after his bankruptcy, Melville when he was an obscure customs inspector, Eliot before his conversion and happy second marriage, and Adams after the suicide of his wife turned his mind to distilling wormwood and gall.

Each writer is depicted, implicitly or explicitly, as a victim of America's crass civilization. This involves considerable biographical distortions. Of Emerson, for example, Kazin writes that “his situation in rough, indifferent, hard-drinking Concord was one of isolation.” This is palpable nonsense. “It was impossible to be more honored and cherished, far and near,” Henry James wrote of Emerson, “than he was during his long residence in Concord.” Concord was a hive of intellectual activity. Emerson's neighbors were the likes of Hawthorne, Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, and Ellery Channing, and their ranks were swelled by visitors from Boston like Margaret Fuller. So what if Concord also contained its share of hard-drinking and unlettered Yanks? It probably made the place more interesting for resident mandarins.

Likewise, Kazin's portrait of Hawthorne passes over Hawthorne's happy marriage—perhaps the happiest of any major American writer—and the pleasant years that Hawthorne spent in his beloved “old Manse” in Concord. Kazin instead serves up the late, ailing Hawthorne during the Civil War, when his imagination had run dry and he had become disgusted with American politics.

When dealing with a genuine social deviant like Poe, Kazin blames his subject's mental disorders on American society. Poe would have been just fine, according to Kazin, if he had had the good luck to be born in Paris. But Poe's French counterparts—symbolist writers like Baudelaire and Rimbaud—were, if anything, even more neurotic. They shared with Poe the kind of literary temperament that is not happy anywhere outside of a vale of Kashmir or an opium den. If Poe had spent his life drinking absinthe in the sixth *arrondissement*, his desolation would have been no less acute. But Professor Kazin has one set of standards for judging Americans, and another for Europeans. He chides Henry James for his “total surprise” at the outbreak of World War I. But one is hard pressed to think of a single European writer—or statesman, for that matter—who was not similarly dumbfounded.

Kazin writes literary criticism the way Henry Steele Commager writes history—he is all gush and unction. There is no indication anywhere of a critical intelligence bearing down hard on the texts at hand. He has nothing of interest to say about Emerson, for example, whom he rightly regards as the spiritual progenitor of American letters. Kazin has the bad taste to bring in Karl Marx six times as a gloss on Emerson. Emerson, the supreme “individualist,” would have detested Marx's ideas about class struggle, and the fact that certain of Marx's early romantic writings, lifted from their context, sound like Emerson signifies nothing. Kazin talks of Emerson's “genius for compression.” No writer, except his friend Thomas Carlyle, could be windier. Kazin just gushes on, apparently pleased with Emerson's version of secular humanism. He is oblivious to the most glaring fault in Emerson's philosophy, which is a complete unconcern with the problem of evil. Emerson saw everything, even contemporary horrors like the Middle Passage, in a mellow light. It is inconceivable how he would have reacted to Dachau or the Gulag. “There were certain complications in life,” Henry James noted dryly, “which he never suspected.” Emerson possessed, in

concentrated form, that American strain of innocence, that blindness to what most of mankind has experienced as History, which Europeans have always found so exasperating. Jimmy Carter is Emerson's degenerate posterity. When Carter enraged Helmut Schmidt by asking why the Germans simply couldn't get together and tear down the Berlin Wall, the pale ghost of Emerson was hovering nearby.

I don't mean to pick on Emerson, who was a luminous phrase-maker, but Kazin's avoidance of such a glaring issue is symptomatic of a political bias which informs the whole book. Kazin is an unreconstructed liberal in the debased sense of the word—he is a social democrat, really—and such liberals in their heart of hearts do not believe in radical evil. They apply the word “evil” only to political arrangements which they do not like. They think that if the right social levers are pulled, human affairs will cease to be difficult. This is why, parenthetically, so few great writers since Flaubert can be described as liberals in the current sense of the word, for a vision of the world which eliminates half the equation has a hard time translating itself into meaningful works of literature.

Kazin inserts sententious political squibs into the narrative at every turn. His favorite trick is to say that a writer would or would not have been outraged by a certain political development. This allows him to indict America for shortcomings which have nothing to do with the literary personalities being discussed. He writes, for example, that “. . . it would not have been in Adams's character or in his philosophy to worry over the two thousand prosecutions under Section 3 of the Espionage Act.” In a footnote, Kazin then gives us all of Section 3 of the Espionage Act. On Stephen Crane: “He was never heard to protest America's maneuverings against Spain in the name of Cuban ‘freedom.’” These are surely issues, but they belong in another book.

Apart from its slanted biographies and annoying political intrusions, *An American Procession* is filled with appalling errors of fact and judgment. The chapter on Henry James is particularly misleading. Kazin, who takes every shot he can at religion, declares that James had no respect for church religion. This is completely false. While James could not bring himself to believe in any church doctrine, he had a deep regard for organized religion, the more organized the better. He once told a Catholic woman that he envied her faith. He approved of the art and rituals of the Anglican and Roman

George Sim Johnston is a writer living in New York.

churches and wrote excitedly, when he first visited Rome, of seeing the Pope. Kazin goes on to say that for the New York Edition of his works, James "rewrote his earlier novels in his elaborate later style." If anything, James's revisions made novels like *Portrait of a Lady* easier and more colloquial. Instead of "their multifarious colloquies," for example, he wrote, "their plunge . . . into the deeps of talk." A few paragraphs later, Kazin says that Eliot in 1916, the year of James's death, "admitted that James had been dead for some time." But Eliot wrote that in 1918, and he was referring to James's physical death, not his critical standing. And to say that James never allowed the "unconscious force of sex" to his heroines is nonsense. Professor Kazin should reread (or read for the first time) the descriptions of Mrs. Luna in *The Bostonians*.

The errors just pile up as the parade goes on. Kazin quotes Virginia Woolf as saying that 1908 was the year "human nature changed." Woolf said that about 1910. The distinction is not trivial, because she was referring to the tremendous impact that the first Post-Impressionist exhibit, which opened in London in December 1910, had on English sensibility. Kazin says that it was one of F. Scott Fitzgerald's boasts "never to be too tired for anything." But that was the boast of his friends Gerald and Sara Murphy who inspired *Tender Is the Night*, which is where Kazin got the quote. And, in the same paragraph, we are told that when Joseph Conrad visited the United States and was secluded on a Long Island estate, Fitzgerald, unable to see him, "humble as Gatsby, waited on the lawn for the merest sight of the great man." Very touching, very romantic. But what really happened, as attested by all of Fitzgerald's major biographers, is this: In May 1923, when Conrad was staying at the Doubleday estate, Fitzgerald and his friend Ring Lardner got roaring drunk and tried to get the great man's attention by performing a tap dance on the lawn outside his window; not only did they fail to get Conrad's attention, they were thrown off the grounds for drunken behavior.

But even when Kazin has got the story straight, the book suffers terribly from his manner of writing. Like Emerson, his basic unit of utterance is the sentence, and, again like Emerson, he has difficulty stringing his sentences together in a manner which will keep the reader turning the page. Many paragraphs become a series of non-sequiturs. The reader often has to backtrack to see what train of thought, if any, led to the sentence he is reading. The sentences themselves range from

the ungrammatical ("Adams would be more interested in world conflict than in the social misery filling up realism from Chicago") to the platitudinous ("The unredeemed wasteland of the century began in 1914, that onset of all our woe") to the ridiculous ("*The Sound and the Fury* is certainly hot"). To be fair, a felicitous observation surfaces now and then in this sea of intellectual melted caramel. Of Thoreau

he writes: "The altar was Nature, but Henry Thoreau's God was one of those faint radio signals that can still be detected from a stellar explosion that ceased millions of years ago." Kazin also has the gift of quotation. But such pleasures are few in the nearly four hundred pages of sentimentalism and distortion, and this reviewer could not wait for the fleet of street cleaners after the last float. □

JAMES BOSWELL: THE LATER YEARS, 1769-1795

Frank Brady/McGraw-Hill/\$24.95

Stephen Miller

What does one make of a great writer who liked to perform on the London banquet circuit as an after dinner singer of doggerel? Or who once ended a day drunk in St. Paul's churchyard, singing ballads in the company of two women in red cloaks? Great writers, we tend to assume (probably mistakenly), are often difficult and eccentric human beings, but I wonder whether any other great writer has been so deficient in dignity as the drunkard and compulsive womanizer, James Boswell. In *James Boswell: The Later Years, 1769-1795*, Frank Brady speaks delicately of Boswell's "obvious infirmities," but it is easy to make a more blunt assessment: In many ways, Boswell was a first-class buffoon.

Buffoonery aside, Boswell is a difficult subject for the biographer because there was no development in his life; he was the same at fifty as he was at twenty, preoccupied with his moods and motives, saying the same things about himself over and over again. Even Samuel Johnson complained to him: "Of the exaltations and depressions of your mind you delight to talk, and I hate to hear." One does get tired of hearing about Boswell's irresponsible behavior. He always complains about gonorrhea, yet he continually picks up prostitutes; he always protests his devotion to his wife, yet he continually leaves her to go off and have fun in London—doing so even when he knows she is at death's door; he continually brags about his ancient Scottish lineage, yet he never stops flattering the rich and politically powerful. Reading this biography you'll have no

Stephen Miller is executive assistant to the Board of Radio Free Europe and author of Special Interest Groups in American Politics (Transaction Books).

trouble understanding why his dour and difficult father had no use for him.

Brady spends too much time chronicling the ups and downs of Boswell's moods and too much time on Boswell's career as a lawyer. But he also never lets us forget that Boswell was liked by an extraordinary variety of distinguished men and women. At a fairly young age, Boswell was accepted into a club that included Samuel Johnson, David Garrick, Adam Smith, Richard Sheridan, Oliver Goldsmith, Edmund Burke, Edmond Malone, Joshua Reynolds, and Charles James Fox—to name only its most well-known members. These people did not suffer fools gladly.

Though he made his name in London, Boswell was one of a remarkable group of Scottish writers who made a name for themselves in the second half of the eighteenth century in Edinburgh, or, as it was often known, the Athens of the North. Boswell's influence was not that of Adam Smith or David Hume, but through his masterpiece—*The Life of Samuel Johnson*—he changed forever the course of biography.

Brady understands Boswell's genius very well. Boswell, he makes clear, was a man with intense curiosity about the social, political, and cultural world (he cared not a whit about the natural world). While not a deep thinker, he was a great listener who, as Brady says, "prized [his] ability to 'tune' himself to others. . . ." When he died, Edmond Malone—the century's greatest Shakespearean scholar—who was also Boswell's close friend and collaborator on *Life of Johnson*—said, "I used to grumble sometimes at his turbulence; but now miss and regret his

noise and his hilarity and his perpetual good humor, which had no bounds."

Brady also realizes that Boswell brought a discipline to his work that he could not bring to his life. Critics have argued, for example, that the rich supply of wonderful conversation with which Boswell lards *Life of Johnson* is mostly his own creation, or else there because he had the bad manners to scribble continuously in the company of others.

But Brady persuades us that Boswell was neither a liar nor a stenographer. What Boswell actually did was write condensed notes—a method, as Boswell himself said, that "brings to my mind all that passed, though it would be barren to anybody else." Boswell got the essence of what Johnson and others said, if not their exact words, Brady argues, and most of Johnson's contemporaries would agree with him. Joshua Reynolds, who was present at many of the conversational feasts that Boswell attended, said that "every word in [*Life of Johnson*] might be depended upon as if given upon oath." Also, by quoting from Boswell's correspondence with Malone, Brady shows us what a careful writer Boswell was—how he usually resisted Malone's attempts to make his prose more dignified and latinate.

In short, Boswell the writer was very

PERSONA VACATIONS

Tour Specialists


This year beW ales
Ireland
Scotland
England

Use the freedom of your own personal car and driver/courier to tour Britain or Europe at around \$125⁰⁰ per day unlimited mileage

For Leisurely Touring and Sightseeing



For Leisurely Golfing Around Britain's Top Golf Courses



Send for details and brochure to:-

PERSONA VACATIONS
26 Lawrence Walk
Newport Pagnell
Buckinghamshire
MK16 8RF
England

Prestel Videotex No. 220125
Telephone
Newport Pagnell (0908) 612589