

DICKENS

Peter Ackroyd/HarperCollins/1,195 pp. \$35

Kenneth S. Lynn

On workdays, Dickens went to his desk, rather formally dressed, and sat there for five hours, whether or not words flowed from his pen. At two o'clock he arose, sometimes in the midst of writing a sentence, and went for a walk that proceeded at the brisk pace of four-and-a-half miles an hour and quite commonly covered twelve to twenty miles. Famous at twenty-four for the first number of *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37), he went on to produce twenty-two more books, many of them huge, start two important magazines, make endless public appearances, travel abroad with considerable frequency, and father ten children.

That his ceaseless activity was self-punishing is evident in the fact of his early death, at fifty-eight, from vascular ailments made worse by overwork, as well as in a confession that he voiced through his fictional counterpart, David Copperfield: "I made it a rule to take as much out of myself as I possibly could, in my way of doing everything to which I applied my energies. I made a perfect victim of myself." But as Peter Ackroyd demonstrates in his valuable new biography, the symptoms of the novelist's inner turmoil were by no means confined to his fatal inability to relax. Alexander Blok, the Russian poet, once observed that "in reading Dickens I have felt horror, the equal of which Poe himself does not inspire." Picking up on that quote, Ackroyd adds that "there is no doubt that there was within Dickens's consciousness a private world built upon nightmares and fantasies and anxieties."

A specter of violent death, for instance, reared up in the public readings from his works that he instituted in his later years. For a long time he held to the opinion that Bill Sikes's murder of Nancy in *Oliver Twist* was so "horrible" that his audiences should not be subjected to re-creations of the event. A year and a half before his death, however, he suddenly felt impelled to "commit the murder again," as he savagely phrased it in a letter. His friend Edmund Yates attended a performance:

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Gradually warming with excitement he flung aside his book and acted the scene of the murder, shrieked the terrified pleadings of the girl, growled the brutal savagery of the murderer. . . . The raised hands, the bent-back head, are good; but shut your eyes and the illusion is more complete. Then the cries for mercy, dear Bill! for dear God's sake! uttered in tones in which the agony of fear prevails even over the earnestness of the prayers, the dead dull voice as hope departs, are intensely real. When the pleading ceases, you open your eyes in relief, in time to see the impersonation of the murderer seizing a heavy club and striking his victim to the ground.

Who was the symbolic target, one has to wonder, of this insensate assault? The novelist's dead mother, about whom he had bitter memories? His abandoned wife? Himself, in punishment for a multitude of sins?

Morbid themes engaged the minds, to be sure, of many Victorians—but Dickens's interest in them was obsessive. He loved the blaze of destructive fires and the grim details of grisly murders; the scenes of crimes were high on his list of sights to see, as were jailhouses and prisons; and on trips to Paris he repeatedly visited the city morgue, where he lingeringly examined the ghastly faces of the drowned. Madness was another of his obsessions; at times, indeed, he seemed overtaken by it. Having fallen in love in his mid-forties with Ellen Ternan, who was young enough to have been his daughter, he behaved "like a madman" toward his wife, as one of their daughters was later to say. Totally unfounded accusations were launched at the poor woman in out-of-control barrages that questioned her love for their children, and darkly referred to her "mental disorder." In an essay that Thackeray composed for the *Cornhill* magazine, he pretty clearly was thinking of Dickens as he described a man whose

anger is not a brief madness, but a permanent mania. His rage is not a fever-fit, but a black poison inflaming him, distorting his judgment, disturbing his rest, embittering his cup, gnawing at his pleasures, causing him more cruel suffering than ever he can inflict on his enemy.

On the other hand, the Boston publisher James T. Fields called his good friend Dickens "the cheerfulest man of his age." In Trollope's concurring opin-

ion, he was "a hearty man." Dickens himself insisted that, even if he were to turn sour, he would still try to "sweeten the lives and fancies of others," and as the creator of the most memorable gallery of comic characters in English fiction he was certainly entitled to that self-defense. Yet a good many of his comic characters are Hogarthian grotesques, and the fun that he has with them is often cruel. As for the bonhomie of Dickens the man, Emerson suggested to Fields that it masked an exhaustion of beneficent feeling:

You see him quite wrong, evidently, and would persuade me that he is a genial creature, full of sweetness and amenities and superior to his talents, but I fear he is harnessed to them. He is too consummate an artist to have a thread of nature left. He daunts me! I have not the key.

Possibly the author of *Nature* was thinking of the novelist's unnatural behavior on the day he arrived in Boston. As he walked past proper households,

he became oddly excited, to the point where he began pulling the bellhandles on all the doors. Even odder was his reaction to the Old South Church. "Dickens screamed," a witness averred.

Marxist appreciations of Dickens, very popular these days on college campuses, take off from Marx's remark to Engels that his novels "issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together." The great virtue of Ackroyd's portrait of an artist caught in an unending struggle with private demons is that it lays the groundwork for a renewed understanding of the novels as personal testaments, rather than as the socialist fables adored by academe.

The struggle within him seems to have originated in a childhood explosion of anger at his mother. In later years, he accused her of having neglected and betrayed him, even as he denounced his

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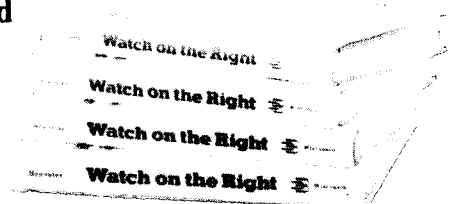
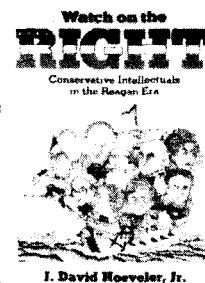
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wife for her alleged maternal crimes. Specifically, he cited his mother's desire to have him sent back to his humiliating job in the blacking warehouse, after a quarrel between his father and the manager of the warehouse had resulted in Charles's dismissal. "I know how all these things have worked together to make me what I am," said Dickens, "but I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back." This vividly resentful statement did not acknowledge the probability that the financial affairs of Dickens's improvident father, who had only recently been released from debtor's prison, were still imperiled. Moreover, there was reason to suspect that the senior Dickens would not be kept on in his job at the Navy Pay Office. How, then, could the family afford to dispense with the seven shillings a week that twelve-year-old Charles was earning? It was considerations of family survival, not

indifference to her son's sensitivities, that almost surely prompted Mrs. Dickens to urge his return to the warehouse. Dickens's summation of this anguishing episode was, in short, manifestly unfair, which suggests that his quarrel with his mother was rooted in a real or imagined grievance of an earlier time that he was unwilling to discuss.

In any event, it is no wonder that practically all of this tortured writer's novels focus on the degradation and disintegration of family relationships. Unhappy family life, in Dickens's view, was the poisoned well out of which all forms of social pathology flowed, and the restoration of familial health was the *sine qua non* of renewed social health. As Ackroyd aptly puts it, "The conclusions of his novels tend . . . to reinstate some idealised family group which can withstand change and the world. In Dickens's fiction that idealised family becomes an image of social and religious life." □

THE WEB OF DISINFORMATION: CHURCHILL'S YUGOSLAV BLUNDER

David Martin/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/425 pp. \$29.95

THE RAPE OF SERBIA: THE BRITISH ROLE IN TITO'S GRAB FOR POWER

Michael Lees/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/384 pp. \$29.95

Aram Bakshian, Jr.

As often happens with peripheral regions of a major civilization, the peoples of the Balkan peninsula have been shaken and scrambled by wave after wave of conquest. Hellenes have been followed by Hellenists, Romans by Byzantines, Ottomans by Russians, in between outbursts of tribalism or nationalism and, latterly, a veneer of European cosmopolitanism.

Like most poor relations, the Balkan peoples are quicker to claim kinship with the mainstream West than vice versa. The situation was lightly summed up by Guillaume Apollinaire (*né* Wilhelm Kostrowitzky) in an aside in *The Debauched Hospodar*, an otherwise forgettable ribald novella he wrote in turn-of-the-century Paris. A bumptious Roumanian (to use the contemporaneous spelling) is visiting the City of Lights. Having bored a local with the endless glories of his motherland, he boasts about his capital: "As for Bucharest, Bucharest is a little Paris!" The Parisian pauses, shrugs, and replies, "Perhaps, monsieur, but thank God Paris is not a big Bucharest."

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I quote from imprecise memory; the last time I used this anecdote was in a 1975 conversation with Nicu Ceausescu, son of the late dictator, who was trying to convince me to visit his capital. Alas, poor Nicu! His enthusiasm for all things Romanian is hardly likely to survive his current prison sentence in the land he and his family pillaged for a quarter of a century.

Like Apollinaire's fictitious Parisian, we can all be grateful that, while the Balkans may pass for a mini-Europe, Europe is not a macro-Balkans. There is, however, an unhappy microcosm of the Balkans: the involuntarily assembled and fast unraveling Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. A bloodstained crazy quilt of a nation, Yugoslavia is politically and militarily dominated by its Serbian plurality (36 percent of the population). The Federation's Croatian (20 percent), Bosnian Muslim (9 percent), Slovene (8 percent), Macedonian (6 percent) and Albanian (8 percent) minorities have all expressed a desire for genuine autonomy, if not outright independence.

Their involuntary servitude to a bankrupt Communist authority is the grim legacy of one man, Josip Broz Tito. Until his death in 1980, Marshal Tito

managed to hold Yugoslavia together through a cunning mixture of Russophobic nationalism, police-state brutality, and a cult of personality that combined elements of Stalinism and Peronism in a uniquely Balkan context.

In some ways, Tito, whose *nom de guerre* and entire biography had been fabricated, genuinely embodied Yugoslavia—an artificial nation with an invented history and name ("Land of the South Slavs"). Even in the throes of death Tito symbolized his disintegrating creation; in his eighty-eighth year, in a desperate attempt to save the failing dictator, his doctors amputated a gangrenous leg, prompting one Croatian wag to declare: "Today they're partitioning Tito; tomorrow it'll be Yugoslavia."

Yet, for all his personal dynamism, Tito's seizure of power in Yugoslavia was as much the work of a small band of British traitors and their dupes as it was the fruit of his own considerable talents. What a curious band they were, these effete Cambridge dilettantes who managed to deceive the Churchill government into one of the most cynical Allied betrayals of World War II.

In two valuable new books, David Martin and Michael Lees chronicle not only the treachery of such well-known double agents as Kim Philby, Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, and Anthony Blunt, but also the tragic self-delusion of better men, like Lt. Col. William Deakin and Brigadier Fitzroy Maclean. Evelyn Waugh, who served with Deakin in the Balkans, would later (1954) write to a mutual friend: "Bill Deakin is a very lovable & complicated man. He can't decide whether to be proud or ashamed of his collaboration with Tito . . ."

A curious subtext of the British betrayal of Yugoslavia was a particularly nasty variation of sexual politics. Much has been made in recent years of real or alleged state persecution of homosexuals in the forties and fifties, especially for security reasons. There were, however, two sides to the coin, both addressed in a recent biography of British artist Duncan Grant by Douglas Blair Turnbaugh: "Many brilliant homosexual men had become Soviet agents . . . not so much because of an enthusiasm for communism but for a kind of revenge."

So it was that, in a grim, real-life fairy tale, a free, pro-Western constitutional monarchy was murdered in its cradle by a handful of vengeful queens—a case, *pace* Hannah Arendt, of the anality of evil. The national victim was Yugoslavia, the personal victim General Draza Mihailović, a brave and honest soldier who led the pro-Western "Četnik" resistance forces loyal to Yugoslavia's

legitimate government-in-exile. The winners were Tito's Moscow-backed Partisans. Tito's post-war break with Moscow was a reflection less of nationalism than of an egotistical desire to be his *own* Stalin rather than a flunky of the Kremlin original.

Both Martin and Lees have researched rigorously and written well. While they overlap, their two books are complementary: *The Web of Disinformation* is a broad, lengthy narrative by an experienced journalist and political analyst, while *The Rape of Serbia* is the work of a man who, as a youthful British liaison officer with Mihailović's Četniks, again and again saw his own and other dispatches suppressed or distorted by higher-ups determined to divert support from Mihailović to Tito. Much of this disinformational dirty work was done by one James Klugmann, a less well-known member of the Cambridge Communist clique who, Martin argues, may have been the elusive "Fifth Man."

This plump, affable little traitor, always smiling, always glad to put in overtime in the file room, and generally well liked, even as he went about his murderous and deceitful work, is a reminder of how much more dangerous sincere, dedicated, selfless people can be than routine scoundrels, once they have taken the Devil's shilling.

The truth should have been obvious to everyone. As the second Lord Birkenhead, who served as a liaison with Tito's Partisan forces, would later recall:

[Their] blind adoration of the Soviet Union was extremely irritating, as we soon discovered that the Russians were supplying practically no arms to them, whereas the British aid was immense and ever-increasing. It was our duty . . . to do our best to insure that the weapons so lavishly bestowed were used for their proper purpose of fighting the enemy, and not simply stockpiled against an eventual post-war seizure of power in the state. This task proved to be beyond our powers.

Instead, Tito, with official British backing, became the resistance leader of preference, his accomplishments inflated in the British press, while Mihailović became a non-person, his supplies cut to a dribble. Churchill later acknowledged that this switch was one of his "biggest mistakes of the war." Mihailović, abandoned by the allies, struggled on. He was ultimately hunted down and murdered, along with thousands of his followers, after Communist show trials in the best Stalinist tradition.

Tito, Philby, Maclean, Burgess, Blunt, and Klugmann all died in their beds—or in someone else's. Yugoslavia continues to pay the price of their perfidy. □