

There seems little doubt that, had not Rowan done his O.K. Corral impression, this book would have remained mercifully unpublished. The author reveals himself as a streetwise scrivener with a single goal: a quick climb up the ladder to financial and social status. There is little to criticize about such a motivation. It might be called the American

Way. But for Rowan, who has gotten fat weeping crocodile tears for the Black Brothers he abandoned for the cozy Beltway establishment, it is another example of the duplicity of those whom Mario Procaccino once denounced as "limousine liberals."

Oh, yes. Carl T. Rowan drives a Lincoln. □

THE WAY OF THE WASP: HOW IT MADE AMERICA AND HOW IT CAN SAVE IT, SO TO SPEAK

Richard Brookhiser/The Free Press/171 pp. \$19.95

Francis X. Rocca

If America had been settled and founded by Frenchmen or Spaniards," Richard Brookhiser muses, "it would be a different place now. And a worse one." In *The Way of the WASP*, he makes a sketchy but persuasive case that democracy, the free market, religious liberty, and this country's material wealth are the legacy of John Locke, John Wesley, and other English Protestants. "The way of the WASP," as he calls it, "explains why we are richer than Russia, though we have fewer natural resources; calmer than Lebanon, though we have more sects; freer and more just than either." It is fundamentally a matter of character.

The now-famous acronym for White Anglo-Saxon Protestant was popularized, if not invented, by E. Digby Baltzell almost thirty years ago in *The Protestant Establishment*, a study of the American patriciate. Brookhiser is chary of the term's tony connotations and construes it as widely as possible. In the end he is concerned not with contemporary demographics but with the cultural influences summed up in those four letters.

"The WASP character is the American character," Brookhiser claims, and he describes it with a circular diagram of six mutually reinforcing "traits":

... success depending on industry; use giving industry its tasks; civic-mindedness placing obligations on success, and anti-sensuality setting limits to the enjoyment of it; conscience watching over everything ...

Four of these terms speak for themselves, but two stand out for not being character traits at all, strictly speaking. "Use" is simply Brookhiser's awkward term for practicality. By "success" he means respect and desire for earthly success as "the outward and visible sign of grace," an idea

Francis X. Rocca is a writer living in New Haven, Connecticut.

that follows from Calvinist doctrine.

Brookhiser is a persuasive apologist for these unfashionable ideas, arguing that they have led men to be productive, tolerant, considerate, and lawful, if a bit dull. Maybe WASPs are, as others complain, "bad dancers and lousy lays." In general, it is true, their cooking is insipid. Crudely, they "drink to get drunk. The only alternative to drunkenness is temperance." The arts for them are merely instruments of moral uplift or social climbing. Yet, while WASPs are neither epicures nor aesthetes, they are good neighbors, even by virtue of their shortcomings. Neglectful of history because it does not seem useful, they forget "grudges and festering hatreds." Conformists out of civic-mindedness, they have no tolerance for "charlatans and maniacs."

This is a vision tinged with nostalgia—yet not with nativism. Of all the unfashionable concepts Brookhiser re-examines, the least fashionable is that of assimilation, anathema to both multiculturalists and the few remaining believers in the Melting Pot; the word connotes insincerity and humiliation. But Brookhiser is not writing about name changes or nose jobs:

The process is more than a matter of recognizing that life here is better than it was at home. The immigrant knew that when he arrived, sometimes before he arrived. Assimilation occurs when the outsider intuitively feels the character traits that make life here better for him.

As an example Brookhiser offers an entire church: Roman Catholicism, which "arrived as the one true faith, outside of which there was no salvation, and ... became a denomination." Anyone who has heard a nun reverently recount to her students the stirring epic of the Pilgrim Fathers—who held her Pope to be the Antichrist

—will grant Brookhiser this point.

Catholics and others who have adopted the WASP character have become "the only kind of WASP that counts: WASPs by conviction." But increasingly, Brookhiser laments, WASPs lack all conviction. The character described above has been vitiated: conscience replaced by self, industry by ambition, success by gratification, civic-mindedness by group-mindedness, use by diffidence, and antisensuality by "creativity." Here "diffidence," the obscure term in this new list, means "the cumulative effect of multiple acts of deference—to other standards, cultures, even species": an "insecurity, uncertainty, sheepishness."

The demise of the WASP character has led to insider trading, underclass demoralization, compromised national security, teenage pregnancy, and atrocious manners, among other disasters. In his postmortem, Brookhiser finds that WASPs themselves are the culprits. After some clumsy attempts to suppress socialism, Freudianism, and modernism in general, WASPs have adopted them all. The social elites draw the greatest blame, commensurate with their responsibility as custodians of the universities and churches. And accordingly, as Americans look to recover their lost virtues, they turn to the elite to take the lead.

George Bush was elected, according to Brookhiser, "because the public had a hope, based in part on what it gathered from his private life, that he could bring WASP virtues to bear on them." Now, there is nothing peculiarly WASPy, even in this book's terms, about being a good father, a war hero, a loyal public servant, or a generally affable fellow. But never mind that: more serious is Brookhiser's suggestion of how

the President can minister to our moral needs.

Brookhiser, who once wrote speeches for Bush, now offers him a primer on "the politics of a renaissance," a strategy for advancing an agenda of cultural reform by appealing to the nation's deeply held WASP sympathies. The administration could, for instance, push the capital gains cut by referring to industry and success; promote tuition tax credits on the grounds of "use," and justify restrictions on arts funding by renouncing the latter-day "god" of creativity.

The President is urged to take these initiatives knowing that they will earn him "storms of disapproval" from many quarters. Is this a realistic expectation of a politician whose greatest talent is for reaching consensus through compromise?

The *Way of the WASP* bills itself as a plan for saving America, but it hardly inspires much hope. Never mind the facetious subtitle; the main title itself is ambivalent, suggestive of both life ("the way of the West") and death (*The Way of All Flesh*). The elegiac sense seems the stronger, and not merely because Bush has been poorly cast as the Great WASP Hope. The American character as Brookhiser describes it cannot be revived for the reasons Brookhiser wants or in the ways that he suggests.

The WASP character traits are all vestiges of Puritanism. Brookhiser himself says as much, and he is consistently sensitive to the role of religion in the lives of WASPs and non-WASPs; believers should take his skepticism of ecumenicism as a mark of respect for denominational integrity. Yet when he decrees that "what American Protestantism needs, for its own good and everybody's, is a period of religious warfare," we hear unmistakably the voice of the unchurched. A free market of faiths is an intriguing concept but not a pious one. As soon as religion is reduced to an instrument of social change, piety is lost, and religion proves ineffectual for the purpose.

Every year at Thanksgiving, Americans commemorate a seventeenth-century feast celebrated by Puritan settlers in what is now Massachusetts. Most have never heard that, a year before the Pilgrims even arrived there, colonists in Virginia had already celebrated their own version of that singularly American holiday. Plymouth, which was intended to be the New Jerusalem, looms vastly larger in our national historical consciousness than Jamestown, which was a profit-making venture. This suggests whence the inspiration for the way of the WASP first arose, and where its redemption would have to be sought. □



AURORA 7

Thomas Mallon/Ticknor & Fields/238 pp. \$18.95

John R. Dunlap

On Thursday, May 24, 1962, at 7:45 a.m. EST, the second U.S. manned orbital space flight was undertaken when the *Aurora 7* was launched from Cape Canaveral with astronaut Malcolm Scott Carpenter aboard. Although the flight made the intended three orbits within the anticipated five hours, Carpenter flubbed his retrofire maneuver during re-entry and overshot the expected landing position by nearly 300 miles. For about an hour, sixty-five million television viewers were held in suspense, until Walter Cronkite announced that Scott Carpenter had been located bobbing on a life raft beside his floating spacecraft northeast of the Virgin Islands. Carpenter, safe and in good health, was picked up by a helicopter dispatched from the aircraft carrier USS *Intrepid*; Cronkite and his audience were mightily relieved; and the American space program had again inched forward without, as yet, serious mishap.

In a sense, the foregoing is what Thomas Mallon's second novel, *Aurora 7*, is about. The space mission is the occasion for the novel's setting and pacing, the means of its unity and motivation, the mirror of its point of view and thematic musings. In *Aurora 7* Mallon has cooked up a neat gimmick that is all the neater for not being the least gimmicky.

Aurora 7 is mostly about a bright eleven-year-old boy teetering on the edge of puberty and obsessed with the space program; our story finds young Gregory Noonan suspended between a sullen rejection of the world and a grateful acceptance. If, like his school psychologist, we were to treat Gregory as "a case," we might anticipate that "Gregger," as his father calls him, would eventually (perhaps by the age of nineteen) find some kind of middle ground.

But Gregory's impatience with ambiguity runs deep. Jim and Mary Noonan, his parents, are a "moderately religious" and eminently decent couple in their forties, vaguely worried about (and soon to be panicked by) the spooky world their only child seems to be moving into. Although Gregory attends pub-

lic school and therefore is instructed in the faith only on Wednesday afternoons, his mind is thoroughly Catholic, with a preference for neatness and order. So his early adolescent crisis will have to be short, and its resolution decisive.

In fact, Gregory's crisis (*Does his father love him? Something is calling Gregory away—why won't the grown-ups quit tugging back on him?*) has been troubling him only a few weeks, and *Aurora 7* centers chiefly on the resolution, which occurs in just over the four hours and fifty-five minutes of Scott Carpenter's flight. In mind and heart, Gregory is up in "the captive freedom of orbit" with Carpenter. Under his shirt, he has hidden a small portable radio connected to an earphone, so that he can follow the space mission minute by minute while attending his fifth-grade class at Melvyn Park School in a suburb of New York City.

Well before school is out, on impulse (something on which the fastidious Gregory otherwise never acts), he bolts from the schoolyard on his bike, pedals furiously to the local railroad station, and catches a commuter train to ride the twenty-five miles to Grand Central Terminal. Earlier that morning, he had

seen on television the crowds at Grand Central, who themselves were watching the space mission on a huge screen under the vaulted ceiling of the Terminal. That's where Gregory suddenly knows he has to be, and that's where we sense that he is going to collide with his destiny.

That destiny will involve several other characters whom we get to know through intermittent sketches. At St. Agnes Parish in the city, Tommy Shanahan is a 29-year-old Catholic priest who, five months before the convening of the Second Vatican Council, is already taken with "modern problems": to wit, a romantic fascination with what is just beginning to be called the "Third World," and a propensity for attaching religious significance to his own restless vanity and horniness.

In counterpoint to the self-involved Father Shanahan, Eddie Rodwicki and Herbert Johnson evince an unassuming dignity. Rodwicki is a New York City cabbie who loves his work for its "unpredictability"; he has a strong wife, three kids, and the startling ability to analyze character with instant and devastating precision.

Johnson, a porter at Grand Central Terminal, appears briefly in Gregory's field of vision as an anonymous "Negro man with friendly yellow teeth." Within a few deft pages, though, moving backward and forward in time, Mallon dissolves the anonymity, giving an intimate portrait of a man who "escaped" Georgia for Harlem a quarter of a century before, who is warmed by the sound of a Georgia lady's voice, and whose son will, in a few more years, die in Southeast Asia.

There is also Elizabeth Wheatley, professional writer and proto-feminist, whose face "is an uncanny feat of simul-

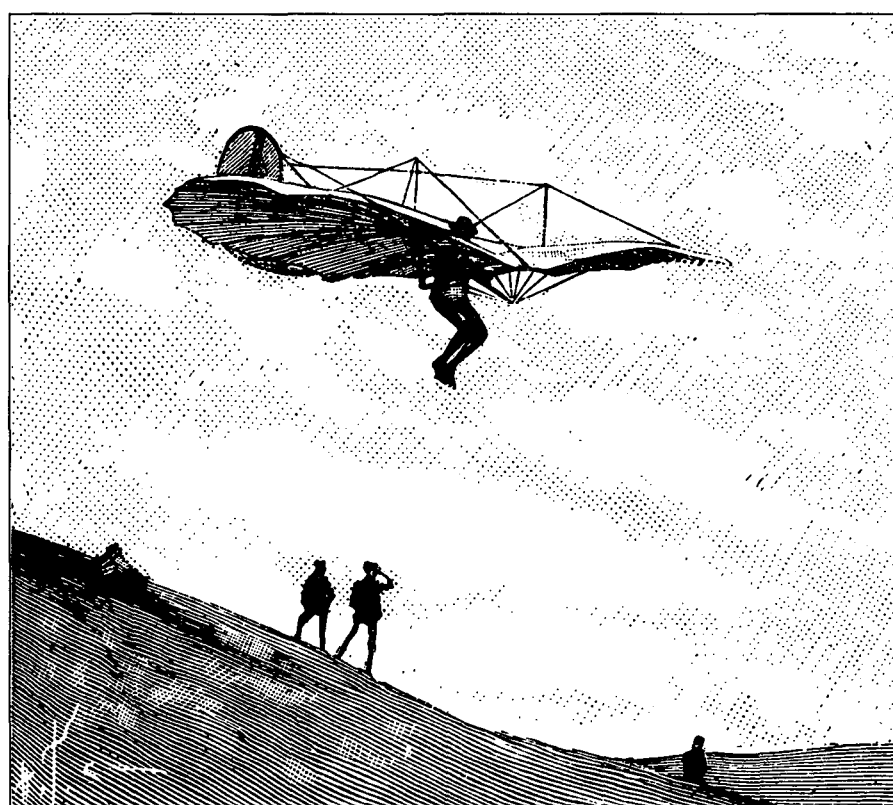
taneous animation and fixity." Elizabeth, cynical about space missions and stony in her pursuit of ambition, will turn out to be softer than she pretends.

But Tony DiPretorio, a CBS production crewman and "one of the church" (i.e., a prolific homosexual half out of the closet in 1962), will be a good deal coarser in a few more decades and hugely fretful about his health. Among several other minor characters is Joanne Kalkowski, a 22-year-old file clerk who is "slightly cracked"; in the coming years, after her father dies, she will spend some time in a state mental institution and be released to join a class of Americans whom social activists will call "the homeless."

Mallon plays freely with the sense of history his 1991 readers will bring to bear on these 1962 characters. Like Scott Carpenter (or for that matter, like a library patron browsing through decades-old copies of newsmagazines), we get a heaven's-eye view of the world, which makes ordinary hindsight feel like providential foresight. We are given to know, for example, that, in May 1962, while (a) John F. Kennedy is thinking about the newspaper he may start up in 1969 when he retires to Massachusetts after his second term in office, (b) Lee Harvey Oswald has just returned from the Soviet Union greatly annoyed with Soviet authorities for the lowly treatment accorded an American defector of his obvious importance.

Older readers, by the way, will remember that the year Scott Carpenter almost lost his life was a bumper year for deaths of all manner of other celebrities: William Faulkner, Isak Dinesen, e.e. cummings, Robinson Jeffers; Niels Bohr and Arthur Compton; Mickey Cochrane and Bobo Newsom; Arthur Vining Davis and Enrico Mattei; Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Trevelyan; George Sokolsky and C. Wright Mills; Bernard Hubbard and Auguste Piccard; Ernie Kovacs, Hoot Gibson, Charles Laughton, Marilyn Monroe, Thomas Mitchell; Adolf Eichmann and Eleanor Roosevelt. The carnage is recorded in the 1963 *Britannica Book of the Year*, one of the sources acknowledged by Mallon in his preface.

With *Aurora 7*, Thomas Mallon has taken us on a flight of keen sensibility and relentless intelligence. When we touch down, perhaps a little giddy from the heights at which Mallon likes to romp, it becomes apparent that *Aurora 7* is, finally, a novel about Providence, but not exactly the Providence that plays dice. It is a novel about the Providence some of us know—and all of us at least remember—as the God of Abraham: cranky, jealous, fond of spectacle, prone to snits. □



John R. Dunlap teaches English at Santa Clara University.