

A DAY AT THE BEACH: RECOLLECTIONS

Geoffrey Wolff

Alfred A. Knopf/259 pages/\$22

reviewed by CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL

The reason I lied as a young man," Geoffrey Wolff has written, "was the same reason my fiction was so awful: I didn't know that anything had happened to me." Astonishing—his life has been more interesting than the average person's, and considerably more interesting than the average Princetonian's. *The Duke of Deception*, Wolff's memoir of his father, is a non-stop picaresque of dodging creditors and the law in the company of a globe-trotting dipsomaniac confidence man with several aliases and a wall full of fake degrees. *A Day at the Beach*—Wolff's uneven collection of autobiographical reminiscences—is something of an unwitting sequel.

After a brief introductory chapter, Wolff reintroduces us to his mercurial family (and Shep, the dog) with a year-by-year tourist's guide to his youthful Christmases, which he rates with Michelin Man-style icons:

The quality and quantity of gifts received (by me) is bestowed one to four Santas. What I call quality of life [includes:] was an edible holiday feast served in a timely manner? did we live in a house with a fireplace? with a separate bedroom for me? was snow on the ground? was the snow clean? was Daddy . . .

Drunk? Usually very. And in the third chapter, "The Sick Man of Europe," Wolff shows himself to have been very much his father's son in Istanbul—where he spent the early sixties teaching English, chasing prostitutes, and marveling at the Turkish propensity for homosexuality and autoerotic asphyxi-

ation. The pub crawling is relentless:

Turkish vodka was awful, awful, awful. We all made our own from 180-proof grain alcohol. . . . The sisters at Rejans, working with the same raw material, worked alchemy; they served their vodka chilled and straight in silver thimbles, and none smoother anywhere ever, with a hint of the Seville oranges they were rumored to grow for no reason other than to impart to their vodka a hint of Seville orange.

Wolff is a bit less sanguine about the behavior of the staggering Vermont farmers who attend a girly show in "At the Fair." The yokels in this rural *noir* piece, this Barthesian mythology, shout obscenities at (and perform obscenities on) a troupe of clueless women. Their observations don't bear printing in a family magazine. Leave it at this: Wolff has an acute ear for the stomach-turning, cornball spiel of the carnival barker:

You know what you wanna see, they know what you wanna see, that's what you're gonna see. That's exactly what you're gonna see. Shake it loose like a bucket of juice—they're gonna do it. Have no fear, these girls are here. Racy, spicy, horny and red-hot. Hootchy-kootch, a red-hot ramble waiting for you. They're gonna shake it to the east, they're gonna shake it to the west, they're gonna shake it down the middle where you boys like it best. . . .

Wolff can write about drinking bouts so sensually that it's no surprise where it all ends: the chapter called "Drinking" describes the late-night phone fun that all drinkers will recognize, runs for the umpteenth time through the list of American writers who

were alcoholic, and quotes Sinclair Lewis's famous poser: "Can you name five American writers since Poe who did not die of alcoholism?" A pedestrian effort on the whole, but the fact that Wolff continues to drink ("No surrender," as Henry Fairlie reportedly used to say) will cheer all tosspots who hope the game is not (quite) up.

Wolff has some interesting drinking buddies. His father drank with Lon Chaney, Jr. and Buster Crabbe. Wolff dated not only Crabbe's daughter but also Hunter S. Thompson's ex, who tried to stab him. His stepmother's first husband was an early developer of LSD. He was tutored by George Steiner and R.P. Blackmur. In *A Day at the Beach*, he lets us know of his friendships with polemicist "Izzy" Stone, journalist "Nick" von Hoffman, critic "Al" Alvarez (yes, that's A. Alvarez's first name), and novelist "Jimmy" Baldwin.

The most interesting character we meet, however, is "Andrew," Harvard kid, son of a "cabinet officer in Eisenhower's administration," best man at Wolff's wedding, off-the-deep-end hippie, "despotic nutritionist," and documentary filmmaker. After years of estrangement, Wolff confronts him, only to find out that Andrew has avoided him because he suspected Wolff of working for the CIA and of betraying him to the government. For Andrew is such a typical communist (with a small "c") that he doesn't stop being a communist until some of the hippies he's been sharing his Vermont farm with suggest he share the farm's title as well. Wolff is saved from obloquy by Andrew's teenage girlfriend, who tells him that Wolff is not *cool* enough to have been a CIA man:

"Hey, Andrew? guys like this . . . weren't the kind of guys who ratted us out. The pricks who sold us out didn't wear neckties."

"I'm not wearing a necktie," I said.

"Yeah," she said, "but you look like a guy in a necktie. The worst finks were the coolest dudes."

Andrew actually appeared as "John" in *Duke of Deception*. A quick leafing through an almanac and a *Who's Who* will reveal his father as James Henderson Douglas, Jr., Ike's secretary of the Air Force from 1957 to 1959. Andrew, in fact, is one John Douglas. Who is this

Christopher Caldwell is assistant managing editor of *The American Spectator*.

guy? And why does Wolff give us a pseudonymous mystery man when he's merely rehashing old material about a non-public figure?

John/Andrew is an example of Wolff's annoying tendency to reuse and recycle material, a tendency familiar to buyers of Grateful Dead albums: only half the songs are ever new. The "M—t D—n" whose brother he gives a chemistry set is clearly the Margaret Dean he bought mittens for in *Duke of Deception*. (Again: Why all the subterfuge?) The Washington material echoes *Bad Debts*, his first novel. The best line in the book—about Wolff's uncertainty whether to describe his distant mother as "a Spanish Communist exiled to Russia or a Russian princess exiled to Spain"—is another comebacker. The book opens with a letter he wrote his brother Tobias from Cambridge: "We live in an age when contraception and the Bomb and rejected opportunities usurp each other as negative functions . . ." A good send-up of his own youthful pretension and preciousness, but it's already in *Duke of Deception*. And Wolff's Princeton novel *The Final Club*. And Tobias's memoir *This Boy's Life*.

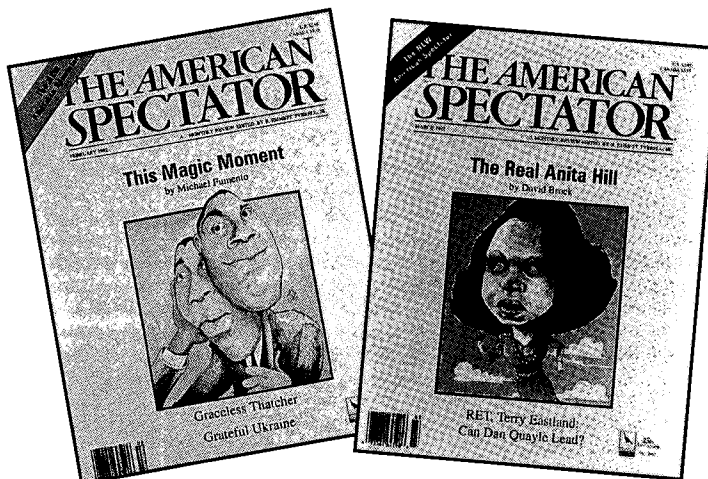
The heart-attack narrative has become an American literary staple, and Wolff's title piece—in which he weaves his cardiac history into an account of a nightmare vacation in Sint Maarten—stands up well against Philip Roth's and Howard Moss's, to name just a couple. Wolff doesn't suffer a real myocardial infarction, only a mildly "stenosed" aortic valve, which strikes him down after he has been booked for a week into an exorbitant "resort" located at the end of a runway, paid six dollars apiece for shrimp, had all his money stolen, and been forced to share his digs with a crowd of fat tourists from Queens and their unneutered dog, whom the reader comes to know as Five-Legged Butch.

But Butch isn't along on Wolff's other holidays, and it's a shame. In this rich country, older writers are always in danger of mistaking the hobbies their writing success has permitted them for the adventures that allowed their writing success. If the narrative doesn't exactly die after Wolff's successful open-heart surgery, then it *does* retire to Leisure World. "Matterhorn" is saved by an informative account of Edward Whym-

per's tragic ascent of the peak in 1865, but is otherwise a fairly predictable Men's-Movement-manifesto, road-not-taken piece about *not* climbing the Matterhorn. The longest and last essay, "Waterway," should clearly have been lopped. This log of a sailing trip in the Bahamas winds up a paean to his family—his son's seamanship and generosity, his wife's patience and insight—that reads like a pastiche of schlock genres: part-1984 Reagan campaign plug ("If I

couldn't have counted on Priscilla to continue to see and say unambiguously, we wouldn't have come to this place in this way"), part-Geritol commercial ("I thought of it as her rainbow, and do. When I met Priscilla in 1963, she was temperamentally unlike anyone I'd known; I fell in love with her for the inexpressible reasons people fall in love"), and part-Hewlett Packard prospectus ("Imagine someone who sees things and systems whole, and who articulates pre-

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cisely what she sees . . . because her comprehension is a renewable resource driven by curiosity”).

Wolff just doesn't tackle these serious emotions well, and much of the book is an apology for not having taken the high road to being a "Writer," as he puts it, in the solemn sense. "It has been a point of dispute between me and people I love that I suffer from a failure of gravity." The people Wolff loves are right. He's happier larking around, and prone to *haut-preppy* failings: brand-name litanies; smirky synonym-chasing, like saying "tits-up" for "belly-up"; and off-color punsmanship, like translating Choate's motto *Quai* [surely *Quae?*] *sivi bona tibi* not as "I have sought to do thee good," but as "We seek to do thee: good." Is this

all Wolff has to offer us in place of his hobo father and R. P. Blackmur?

Wolff even lets the reader in on his little equivocations: "No, I'm being flip . . ." "Not so fast . . ." "I mean to say . . ." There's a postmodern self-consciousness here, a need to tell us how he got his material and to assure us that writing, especially his own writing, is nothing special. Wolff would probably see it as a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, but it reads more like a stop-me-if-you've-heard-this-one self-effacement. Maybe a childhood on the lam has inclined Wolff to undervalue the adventures he has had. Perhaps he really is still unaware that anything has happened to him. That's not a good quality in a memoirist. □

failed abysmally, *Undoing Drugs* proposes a third way, which the authors call "the Constitutional Alternative." Daniel K. Benjamin and Roger Leroy Miller, professors of economics at Clemson University, argue that drug prohibition should go the way of alcohol prohibition—which is not to say necessarily that drugs should be legalized.

Despite an obvious sympathy for the legalization arguments, which take up more than half the book, the authors reject national drug legalization as democratically unacceptable (a majority of Americans just won't tolerate it) and prudentially inadvisable, a real Pandora's Box if the arguments of the legalizers turn out to have been merely plausible.

The analogy drawn by legalizers between the current era of antidrug warfare and the era of Prohibition (1920-33), a familiar mainstay of the drug debate, is pursued at length by Benjamin and Miller. We are reminded that Prohibition successfully reduced the number of the nation's drinkers by about 30 percent, but that most of those who went on the wagon were only casual drinkers to begin with. Their relatively insignificant teetotalism was achieved at the cost of a staggering rise in organized crime and gang violence, a higher consumption of hard liquor in place of beer and wine, an increase of disease and death caused by adulterated booze, and so forth.

Less familiar is Benjamin and Miller's analysis of the legal status of Prohibition. When Prohibition ended with the Twenty-first Amendment in 1933, a blanket legalization of alcohol did not thereby kick in. What the Twenty-first Amendment did, precisely, was to end the role of the federal government as enforcer of most laws pertaining to alcoholic beverages. Apart from matters of interstate commerce and taxation, responsibility for alcohol control was returned to the several states.

As it happened, Kansas, Mississippi, and Oklahoma chose to continue Prohibition. Seventeen other states elected to permit the distribution of alcoholic beverages only through state-controlled outlets. More than thirty states delegated enforcement authority further by allowing local jurisdictions to prohibit or permit alcohol as they saw fit. Most states limited the hours at which alcoholic beverages

UNDOING DRUGS: BEYOND LEGALIZATION

Daniel K. Benjamin and Roger Leroy Miller

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reviewed by JOHN R. DUNLAP

Among today's fault-line issues, there are few so inert as the topic of drug legalization. It is one of the handful of topics that I declare off-limits in an argumentation course I teach once a year. Don't get me wrong. I support free speech. As an English teacher, though, I oppose clichés, and the topic of drug legalization has become so mired in bromides, pro and con, as to leave the 20-year-old college junior without hope of doing more than sliding into a verbal bog.

Those who argue against drug legalization have the advantage of living with a national policy that they can, at least, live with. They don't feel much need to exert themselves in defense of their position, and their debater's points are never too far removed from their underlying

warrant: drugs promote moral debasement. If drugs are legalized, drug use is certain to increase, and drug *abuse* is almost certain to increase proportionately. America's alcohol trouble is bad enough without placing a snort of cocaine on the legal footing of a shot of rye.

Those who favor drug legalization (just over 30 percent of the adult population, according to polls) are stuck on an uphill grade, contending with political inertia as well as dialectical counterpoint. Forced to exert themselves, they have come up with good arguments, chiefly in support of the proposition that drug prohibition makes the drug problem worse than it might otherwise be. But a tiresome repetition has worn down the persuasive power of such arguments, leaving the unmoved majority to yawn while the legalizers wax testy and self-righteous.

Given the consequent impasse, and amid evidence that the war on drugs has

John R. Dunlap teaches English at Santa Clara University and contributes regularly to *The American Spectator*.