

COMMENDABLES

A Gloaming

Raymond Aron: *The Committed Observer; Interviews with Jean-Louis Missika and Dominique Wolton*; Regnery Gateway; Chicago.

On 17 October 1983, the light in the world of the intellect and action became dimmed with the passing of critic, scholar, thinker, teacher, journalist Raymond Aron. Aron, of course, left much behind him—40 books, enlightened students, journalism, lectures, and, indeed, a tradition. Yet even the power of texts like *The Opium of the Intellectuals* notwithstanding, Aron's departure, like his existence, was somehow less noticed than that of his school chum Jean-Paul Sartre's. The difference between the two situations, perhaps, is that while Sartre turgidly dallied on the extremes, a popular pastime for the postmodern intelligentsia, Aron set himself foursquare in the middle of things. As he told two French television interviewers of the

class (intellectually, that is) of '68, people decided "that I was really a man of the Right because I based my policy in reality." *Reality*, in contemporary cant, is a dirty word.

The Committed Observer consists of the edited transcripts of three television programs that focused on the periods from 1930-1947, 1947-1967, and 1967-1980. Aron was born in 1905. The title comes from a comment that he made about how he had given himself "the task, when I was twenty-five, of being a committed observer of history." His commitment had a purpose, a focus, which set it apart from that of his pie-in-the-sky existential peers. As Alain Besançon wrote of Aron in an obituary entitled "The Sage of a Generation" that appears in the journal *Survey* (Autumn-Winter 1983), "The first commandment of the intellectual is to love the truth. He followed this point scrupulously; he never tired of seeking, thinking and speaking the truth." Such was the light that left our midst. □

Another "Miracle" Drug?

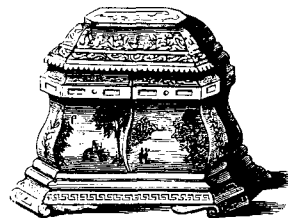
Charlaine Harris: *A Secret Rage*; Houghton Mifflin; Boston.

A Secret Rage deals with a subject so violent, so dehumanizing, and so debilitating that the majority of its victims will not even report the event to the police—will, indeed, confide in no one. The crime, of course, is rape. It occurs in the smallest of towns, in the most respectable of neighborhoods, to all kinds of

women. The rapist is rarely discriminatory in his choice of victims; though there are instances when he may actually seek out a certain one, rape is usually inflicted on the woman unfortunate enough to be available at the given moment. It matters not to the rapist if she is young or old, married or single, beautiful or a plain Jane, or, in some instances, large with child.

In a recent showing of *60*

Minutes, doctors, lawyers, and convicted rapists, interviewed while serving their "time" in correctional facilities, tried to assert that a rapist is not a criminal but a physically ill man, driven to the act by his inability to control overwhelming sexual urges—just another flare-up of the old hormones. (Much the same, evidently, as a person with a cold cannot suppress the urge to sneeze.) These men are now undergoing a program of treatment whereby they are given injections of a new "experimental" drug that will suppress these urges and free them from this illness. How comforting this thought must be for the multitudes of women who live behind locked doors and closed shutters, fearful of leaving their homes or of being left alone in a room because they have already been violated, very possibly at



knife or gunpoint, by one of these poor sick men. On the *60 Minutes* segment, the doctors, rapists, and interviewers were all but accusing women of spreading the sickness by the mere circumstance of their existence as women. A woman raped twice by the same man (who, incidentally, was captured by neighbors as he returned to violate her for a third time) was asked by the interviewer if she felt that her attacker was really, as the doctors stated, a sick man rather than a criminal. Her answer: a definitive *No*. (The rapist, it should be noted, was not incarcerated even after pleading guilty to the crime, but placed instead on the treatment program and is today walking around a free man.) The Christian way is to forgive and

forget; it is doubtful, however, even if a rape victim will forgive, she will ever be able to forget.

Ms. Harris sets her story not in New York City, but in a small town in Tennessee. Her protagonist is raped and not only reports the crime to the local authorities, but teams with another of the rapist's victims to pursue their attacker. The book is fiction; the degradation, humiliation, and, finally, anger that these women experience are not. (KW) □

The Stylized Self

Peter Ackroyd: *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde: A Novel*; Harper & Row; New York.

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde. Even his name evokes a certain something that is hard to define but which always hovers over Wilde. To be sure the spirit, or vapor, is sweetly sick and pungent, appealing and revolting. His was a dualistic nature. There was, of course, the writer whose literary classicism bordered on conservatism. It was, however, amputated by the decadent poses and mannerisms—and certainly by the private perversities that he tried to gild ("the love that dare not speak its name") while in the dock. Although it is possible to separate an artist from his art, that act is extremely difficult with Wilde, for his life, as he displayed it, was his art. The two natures must exist in one being; Wilde did not have an Other, a fictitious brother a la Ernest in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Wilde stated, in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, that "life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it." In Peter Ackroyd's fictional diary of Wilde's final months, life is taken to be very important, the more so as it is slipping away from the

bloated, deserted, muted, spurned, exiled Wilde, from the man who, Ackroyd's Wilde says, has become "a monument . . . to the grosser aspects of urban civilization." This Wilde doesn't figure himself as a garish headstone, a mauve sepulcher, but "to be an example of modern art." Perhaps he was; perhaps that was the cause of his fall; doesn't much modern art close in on itself to the exclusion of all human concerns; isn't it merely an artistic but egotistical dead end? □

Right On!

William F. Buckley, Jr.: *The Story of Henri Tod*; Doubleday; Garden City, NY.

With the latest novel, Mr. Buckley came up with more politics than espionage. But Blackford Oakes is in it, and it's reassuring that our man sees what should be seen, knows what should be known, distrusts what should be distrusted, and supports what should be supported. And reads what should be read—the *National Review*, of course, in its infancy. □

Life as Lived— and Lost

The Lisle Letters: An Abridgement; Edited by Muriel St. Clare Byrne; University of Chicago Press; Chicago.

The modern, informal communicator has, basically, two options available: the service and/or equipment rendered by AT&T (or one of the multiplicities that it has spawned like guppies) or packaged and processed remarks by Hallmark ("When you care to send the very best . . .") Imagine what

documentary historians will be left with some 400 years from now: telephone directories and transcripts of dubiously recorded telephone calls; cards showing the visage of Ziggy. Given such evidence, they'll undoubtedly conclude that America, in the late-20th century, experienced what can be designated as "The Great Depression."

During the years from 1533 to 1540, when Henry VIII ruled England (and Thomas Cromwell peaked and plummeted), there were, of course, no telephones, street-corner mailboxes, Western Union offices, Bic pens. . . . One didn't flick a switch to get light; office supplies weren't available at some Tudorian K-Mart. Modern amenities are so ubiquitous that many tend not to think about their absence when gazing back on the past; somehow, daily newspapers, TV sets, radios, and paperback books just seem to be there, lurking in the background along with refrigerators, microwave ovens, and no-wax floors.

The Lisle Letters are documents of daily life of the period in question, when such things weren't even dreamed of by visionaries. As their editor Muriel St. Clair Byrne puts it, "Here is the very earth—the background, but the soil itself. . . the last moment that was Tudor England." Miss Byrne collected over 1900 of the letters sent between and among the Lisles and associates, people who were involved not only in the politics of the day (which helps explain the literacy), but also enmeshed in the dailiness of living. Brigit Boland has reduced Miss Byrne's six volumes to one, thus making the documents accessible to those who must fulfill their daily routines today. Certainly, the letters are full of history and drama. More importantly, they shed light onto some of the paltriness of contemporaneity. □

IN FOCUS

Signals of Strength

Charlie A. Beckwith and Donald Knox: *Delta Force*; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; San Diego.

by Candace de Russey

This warrior's account will leave its mark above all as hero-saga in a land by no means lacking in heroes but oblivious and often antagonistic to their deeds. Nor will it be forgotten as testimony in a vituperative controversy about American military will and competency. It will also be seminal as documentary about an emerging form of American defensive action, counterterrorism. Due to intensifying global terrorism, this force may prove increasingly the defense of U.S. citizens abroad and, alas,



within this country. Military historians will be well served by retired Colonel Charlie Beckwith and author Donald Knox's detailed recounting of the genesis, nature, and ill-starred mission of America's first behind-the-lines unit, Delta Force.

The formation of Delta Force was impeded for 14 years by a succession of military bureaucrats who were basically unin-

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terested in Beckwith's plan. They seem to have been absorbed in vigilance and vision. One can only be wary of these encrusted tendencies, recalling Edward Teller's observation that "defense requires ingenuity, ever more ingenuity." The idea for the force derived from Beckwith's combat experience and his admiration for the British Special Air Service (SAS), a commando elite in which he participated as an exchange officer. Beckwith's resolve to forge a standing rescue force was especially fortified when he commanded a Green Beret rescue mission of enemy-monitoring civilians at Plei Me, under savage attack by the North Vietnamese Army.

The unit's members were often introverted, self-subsistent, and persevering—and able to "take out" enemies without pause or remorse. Their preparation included exercises in storming mock terrorist strongholds with maximum aggression—in seven seconds. Delta Force was put to a real test, known as Operation Eagle Claw, in which it was to evacuate the 52 U.S. Embassy hostages in Iran in 1980. Beckwith describes the landing at the Iranian staging site, Desert One, the sandstorm that crippled Navy Sea Stallion helicopters intended for transport, the excruciating decision to turn back because of inadequate airlift, and the blazing collision of refueling aircraft in which eight perished.

On another level Beckwith's story must be viewed as prime testimony in the controversy