

ology. Hence the title, *Gentlemen in England*, though literally derived from Shakespeare's *Henry the Fifth*, seems more like an echo of Sir Leslie Stephen's Victorian dictum of the Bloomsbury enlightenment: "I now believe in nothing, but I do not the less believe in morality. . . . I mean to live and die like a gentleman if possible."

To the extent that A.N. Wilson has caught the major dilemma of the Victorians—that is, how to be moral without resorting to the underpinnings of theological beliefs—*Gentlemen in England* may be a more serious and important novel than its first readers realize. A serious dilemma nevertheless remains in the failure of Bloomsbury to have effected some kind of synthesis between mere rationality and the sacred mysteries of a Christianity now reduced to a state of caricature by the enthusiasm of the true believers. The question is whether Wilson, in *Gentlemen in England*, has in turn reduced the skepticism of the Victorians to the contemptuousness of the moderns.

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Senator From Nebraska

by Edward S. Shapiro

Forty Years Against the Tide: Congress and the Welfare State by Carl T. Curtis and Regis Courtemanche, Chicago: Regnery Gateway; \$18.95.

George Nash, the historian of post-World War II American conservatism, in a recent speech at Hillsdale College in Michigan called for a conservatism which would attempt to change the world as well as to understand it—a conservatism of politics as well as of scholarship. Conservatism, Nash declared, "must succeed in the arena of politics, not only in the realm of conferences, seminars, and academic quarterlies." He argued that an "intellectualization" of conservative politics was, in fact, occurring because of an incipient alliance between conservative politicians and intellectuals.

Forty Years Against the Tide is an example of the fruitful interchange between politics and the life of the mind which Nash believed necessary if conservatism was to triumph. The book is both the memoirs of Senator Carl T. Curtis of Nebraska as well as an extended meditation on the welfare state. One of its authors is Regis Courtemanche, a historian teaching at Long Island University with a doctorate from the London School of Economics. One suspects that Courtemanche wrote the bulk of the book, since relatively few of its pages discuss Curtis' private or public life.

Curtis represented Nebraska in the House of Representatives from 1939 to 1955 and in the Senate from 1955 to 1979, a record of longevity surpassed by only 21 other solons. He entered Congress the same year that Robert A. Taft became a Senator, and he left Congress the same time that a tax revolt swept eastward from California. Curtis never lost an election, winning most of them by wide margins. (His record is even more formidable than that of the University of Nebraska's football team.)

Curtis was a conservative's conservative and a Republican's Republican. He was Barry Goldwater's floor manager at the 1964 San Francisco Republican Convention as well as one of the last defenders of Richard Nixon in

1974. He accepted most of the tenets of right-wing Republican piety: that Herbert Hoover deserved reelection in 1932, that Roosevelt expected a Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and that Nixon "was harrassed out of office by his political opponents and by the mass media." Throughout his public career, he remained a steadfast opponent of public housing, urban renewal, unbalanced budgets, centralized government, welfare dependency, Federal aid to education, medicare and medicaid, and the manipulation of government by economic interests. Strangely enough, *Against the Tide* is silent on Curtis' attitude toward Joseph McCarthy.

A model statesman while in office, Curtis chose to return to Nebraska after retirement rather than to lead the good and sleazy life of a wealthy Washington lobbyist or lawyer. His own probity accounts for his contempt for Billie Sol Estes, Bobby Baker, and others in Washington who became rich at the public's expense.

The central theme of *Forty Years Against the Tide* is Curtis' opposition to the nation's seemingly inexorable drift to an oppressive and centralized welfare state. For years he and a few other Republicans in Congress, primarily from the Middle West, gallantly but unsuccessfully opposed the enlargement of what had begun during

BOOKS IN BRIEF—MIDWEST

Great Sermons of the 20th Century, compiled by Peter F. Gunther, Westchester, IL: Crossway Books; \$7.95. A dozen memorable sermons from leading Protestant clergymen, mostly American. Especially well-represented is the work of preachers who labored at The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago.

Extraordinary Lives: The Art and Craft of American Biography, edited by William Zinsser, New York: American Heritage/Houghton Mifflin; \$16.95. Six interviews with biographers of prominent Americans. The cantankerous but no-nonsense Missourian Harry Truman still fascinates, but Walter Lippmann and LBJ merely remind us of our depressing national decline.

The Greek Generals Talk by Philip Parotti; *Tigers in the Wood* by Rebecca Kavalier; *Serious Trouble* by Paul Friedman; *Birds Landing* by Ernest J. Finney, Urbana: University of Illinois Press; \$11.95 each. Four new titles in the Illinois Short Fiction series. Kavalier, Friedman, and Finney serve up the now-predictable formulae for academic "creative writing"—low life, sex, feminist rant, and it's-all-meaningless-anyway despair. But inspired by *The Iliad*, Parotti has come up with something fresh and worth reading—the fictional recollections of Thrasymedes, Meriones, Eurypylus, and other Greek soldiers who fought at Troy.

Censorship: Evidence of Bias in Our Children's Textbooks by Paul C. Vitz, Ann Arbor: Servant Books. A careful documentation of the antireligious, antitraditionalist bias in the textbooks used in our public schools from Peoria to San Bernardino. Vitz rightly concludes that nothing less than busting the public school monopoly will solve the problem.

the 1930's. Their forebodings became reality during the 1970's, when it became evident that the social welfare side of the Federal budget was out of control and that the welfare system had created a large dependent and alienated underclass.

But Curtis was more than a naysayer to the welfare state. According to his memoirs, he is the father of perhaps the most important and constructive amendment to the welfare system since World War II—the individual retirement account. Curtis was responsible for a provision in 1973 pension legislation allowing the self-employed to establish tax-deductible individual retirement accounts up to \$1,500 per year. In the Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981, the program was enlarged to cover employees who were also covered by pension programs, and the amount of savings a participant could contribute was increased to \$2,000. This money buys stocks, bonds, bank certificates of deposits, securities issued by the Treasury Department, and other investments. IRA's currently total \$170 billion.

New restrictions on IRA deductions included in the 1986 tax reform will probably make IRA's less attractive for some; yet for millions they still provide a conservative alternative to the Social Security system. IRA's allow for freedom of investment choice, do not require a bloated Federal bureaucracy, provide needed capital for the private sector, lessen the need to increase Social Security taxes, and encourage individuals to take responsibility for their own welfare. But despite the success of the IRA's, Curtis and

Courtemanche remain pessimistic regarding the future of the country. They warn that the welfare state "aspires to be all in all; either it grows into Leviathan, the totalist state, or else the monstrous creation collapses under its own weight." The country may need more than innovative retirement programs to secure its future.

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Peri Bathous by Brendan Galvin

Poison Pen: or, Live Now and Pay Later by George Garrett, Winston-Salem, NC: Stuart Wright Publishers (distributed by Small Press Distributors, 1814 San Pablo Ave., Berkeley, CA); \$20.00.

From front cover to back, the total "package" of George Garrett's new novel, *Poison Pen*, is a shuck and a con. No fictional work in recent memory is so elaborate a satire, and a reader would have to go back to the 18th-century Augustans to find its equal. To begin with, the jacket's slick black stock and white lettering recall the cover of William L. Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. Readers may make what they can of that before turning to the blurbs on the jacket's back, endorsements by such worthies as the Bash Brothers (Dick and Bob), the pornographer Henry Sutton (who invokes comparisons with Lucilius, Persius, Juvenal, Galba, and Gaius Carbo), somebody named Sean Siobhan, and somebody else named Murray Westinghouse, who drags in Wittgenstein and Chung Tzu ("How delightful to be able to talk with a man who has forgotten the words!"). Even the *New York Times* seems to have gotten into the act: *Poison Pen* was recently reviewed there by one "Harvey Pekar," the author of a series of adult comic books.

But we haven't yet cracked the spine of the novel, there to discover that even the ungrammatical liner notes are a send-up of language fallen on evil days, and the photo of author Garrett in mortarboard and academic robe, leaning on a poster of Christie

Brinkley, seems to be making a mockery of the fact that Princeton University finally awarded him the Ph.D. in 1985. Inside, the frontispiece drawing by Jonathan Bumas is of Garrett in Type A loincloth, posing as St. Jerome or Androcles or Daniel perhaps, since there's a lion with him. Still other illustrations dispersed through the text purport to depict Garrett's antihero, John Towne, in such acts as contemplating the bust of Al Capone. OK so far, except that Towne looks suspiciously like the bright young novelist Madison Smartt Bell, and aren't all these illustrations rip-offs of Art History 101?

Nothing in Garrett's previous *oeuvre* prepares us for the hellzapoppin' of *Poison Pen*. Neither his two highly regarded historical novels, *Death of the Fox* and *The Succession*, which established him as an authority on Elizabethan England, nor his numerous collections of poetry and short stories, nor his essays on everything from the New South to WASP Jokes prefigure this epistolary grab bag of memos, transcriptions from tapes, letters to Ronald Reagan, Lyndon Johnson, Cheryl Tiegs, Mrs. DeLorean, Ted Kennedy, Christie Brinkley, Brooke Shields, and other luminaries. Then there are the authorial instructions, lists, denials from the publisher and from the author himself, you name it. In its form, *Poison Pen* takes potshots at the new "metafiction" of writers like John Barth and Robert Coover, and is as zany as Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

Briefly, it goes like this: The academic *picaro* John Towne, a character in George Garrett's unpublished novel *Life with Kim Novak is Hell*, has escaped and is writing the letters and other unclassifiable stuff mentioned above. Towne is also the black preacher Radio P. King, hiding out in Britain, and Dr. Wisdom, the author of a porno magazine's advice column. Towne's notes are being edited by another Garrett character, Lee Holmes, a ne'er-do-well academic who hopes to get tenure by making sense of Towne's unpublished novel manuscript, *Realms of Gold*, whose protagonist is R.C. Alger, a descendant of Horatio Alger who is also writing a novel to be called *America, the Beautiful?: From Pioneers to Pansies*. Are you with me,

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