

spotted from the world" he writes in still another piece in this collection. He felt that in order to see one must step back, and for a man who prized in his own work its quality of detachment, the isolation of being a foreigner abroad, an Englishman in an American hemisphere, and a Catholic (however semilapsed) in a pagan world, was all part of the appeal.

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Crusoe's Island

by Geoffrey Wagner

British Literature Since 1945

by George Watson

New York: St. Martin's Press;
208 pp., \$39.95

Because William York Tindall's *Forces in Modern British Literature* extends itself only to 1946, and because there has been nothing as wide-ranging published since, I looked forward to George Watson's book repairing the omission. Watson, a Cambridge don, is also the author of a splendid study of English criticism from Dryden to Eliot, which I have praised elsewhere.

What is more, I once studied at Oxford with many of the men he discusses in his new book. Alas, I find in it a new Watson who thinks Eliot "perverse," Spender "flatulent," and John Betjeman to have "triumphant lucidity." True, he devotes space to the Christian revival of Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, but Tolkien, my Anglo-Saxon tutor and just about the most boring man in the world in his day, hated Eliot and indeed almost everything written since the Middle Ages; while portly C.S. Lewis, whose lectures I attended with Kenneth Tynan, was enraged by Eliot to the point of writing a poor parody of *The Waste Land*.

Unfortunately, these useless donish prejudices are infectious. Watson's opinions stand in for critical rigor. Even the period under survey in his book is vague. Watson compares George Orwell with Evelyn Waugh (whom I used to meet in the inebriated company of Randolph Churchill), but

Orwell died in 1950, and Dylan Thomas three years later. "I believe," Watson claims, "the age of the second Elizabeth to have been one of the great ages of the British arts," but its intellectual life as laid out here seems pitifully feeble. Besides its American equivalents, or even a British successor written by Keith Waterhouse, Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* seems second-rate; while his *Stanley and the Women* (1984), frequently alluded to by Watson, ranks as one of the worst novels I have ever read, excepting some of Graham Greene's later works. Amis has now been knighted, while Greene received the Order of Merit. Iris Murdoch, a wartime communist and a charming lady, annually churns out novels that George Stade, chairman of Columbia University's English department, has described as pretentious Harlequin romances; her latest books consist of trivial conversational matter that never ends, but only stops. Nevertheless, Iris Murdoch is now Dame Iris. Watson advances William Golding to support the contention that, "In literature, if in little else, Britain was again a world power." Golding has got a Nobel Prize. Pearl Buck had one too. Poet Laureate John Betjeman wrote what John Wain, in a Sunday newspaper review, identified as locally successful doggerel; Wain, who has since tried tactfully to bury this opinion, has been elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford. The official English literary establishment seems thin beer indeed, by comparison with the stronger brew of its academic critics, such as Kermode, Cranston, Davie, Ricks, and Alvarez. As the knighted and damed pass before our glazing eyes, writers of the rank of Amis, Braine, Muriel Spark, Colin Wilson, C.P. Snow, Margaret Drabble, Beryl Bainbridge, and Barbara Pym appear to fall sadly short of Dickens and Defoe.

But Watson has this curious notion that English has become "the *lingua franca* of the world—the first mankind has ever known—and more than half of the world's mail, it is said, is now in English." Most of that half surely originates outside the British Isles, while the claim that "Britain annually publishes three times as many titles, relative to population, as the United States" is spurious in view of American control of the British publishing indus-

try. I recall the late Bennett Cerf of Random House telling me that by the end of the century there would be only seven book publishers left in Manhattan, and that he intended to make sure he was one of them. There are only a handful of independent book publishers left in England today; even its once flourishing paperback firms are all appendages of some American conglomerate.

The penalty for this industrialization of what was formerly a gentleman's avocation (Meredith's Richard Feverel is casually asked by his father if he intends to "publish" when he goes to London) is that writers leave few footprints, or lasting ones, behind. In their day, there was enormous acclaim for the following authors, not one of whom rates a mention in Watson's pages: Lawrence Durrell, Henry Green (Yorke), Thomas Hinde, Rex Warner, H.E. Bates, Rosamond Lehmann, William Sansom, V.S. Pritchett, Nigel Dennis, Gabriel Fielding. (I merely glance along my shelves as I write.) Doris Lessing and L.P. Hartley receive one non-evaluative mention each, Anthony Burgess little more. Such, too, is the fate of John Le Carré, who brilliantly refined a genre; while a thriller writer of extreme sophistication, Norman Lewis, is not mentioned at all. (I fail to find my erstwhile literary agent, Paul Scott, a very stimulating substitute.) No one in England in this period has altered the course of fiction. As Watson lets drop, "Proust and Joyce were not Englishmen." Indeed.

When he tackles poetry, Watson is equally hard to follow with sympathy. "The aging W.B. Yeats" apparently "tried to be influenced by Pound." Did he? Where? Yeats' last poems, notably the Byzantium pair, are among the finest in the English language. When Yeats died in 1939, "he was treated," Watson writes, "with only distant and qualified admiration by W.H. Auden." But that poet's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" was among the most moving eulogies written in his time. Baffled by Betjeman, conned by Connolly (notably over *The Outsider*), what can one say? Instead, one turns to British drama.

I was lucky enough to attend an early performance of John Osborne's seminal *Look Back in Anger*—which Watson nicely terms "a kitchen-sink

version of *Private Lives*”—at the Royal Court in 1956; and I admit to entertainment (little more) by subsequent fringe theater in England, as also by some postwar cinema there. Thanks to a fine dramatic tradition and intelligent audiences, Albion has enjoyed a rich mine of theatrical originality owing to the presence of such playwrights as Osborne, Wesker, Pinter, Stoppard, Alan Bennett, and Michael Frayn, to say nothing of the sometimes hilarious Joe Orton, murdered in 1967 when in his 30's (though no Marlowe for all that). Yet can we seriously agree with Watson that, “since the 1960's the British have had it mostly their own way in the theaters of the West”? Beckett was not British. Nor were Ionesco, Durrenmatt, Genet, Miller, Giraudoux, Sartre, and a dozen others of consequence.

The penultimate chapter of *British Literature Since 1945* is the best. It is an excellent generalized essay on feminism, and to some extent the fiction “inspired” by feminism, and it is devoid of the irritating Britain-Is-Best chauvinism that robs so much else in this book of value.

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Motels and Filling Stations

by Allan Carlson

What Are People For?

by Wendell Berry

San Francisco: North Point Press;
210 pp., \$9.95

Rural and small town America is nearly dead. A distinctive culture rooted in family farms, weakening since 1900 and seriously diseased since 1960, emerged from the 1980's in a terminal state. In Iowa alone, the last ten years saw a net out-migration of 280,000 people, a full tenth of the state's population, with most of the loss concentrated in the countryside and in hamlets of under one thousand souls. As a rural

minister recently told the *Wall Street Journal*, “These towns are bleeding people.” Deaths now outnumber births in many Iowa counties. As another commentator remarked, “People who grew up with families and neighbors suddenly don't have either.”

Amidst this accelerating collapse of the agrarian order, the most consistent voice of protest and warning has been that of Kentucky farmer and poet Wendell Berry. With good reason, his most recent collection of essays, *What Are People For?*, conveys mainly pessimism, even despair.

Berry remains a maddening figure for ideologues, both right and left. Conservatives have fumed over his lack of respect for industrial capitalism, and his new volume offers no recantations. Americans live “by the tithes of history's most destructive economy,” he says. The author labels the economic ideal of competition as false, silly, and “destructive both of nature and of human nature.” He despises “agribusiness” in all its forms. Blasting both “industrial food” and “industrial sex,” Berry concludes that “[o]ur kitchens and other eating places more and more resemble filling stations, as our homes more and more resemble motels.”

At the same time, Berry repeatedly violates left-liberal sensibilities. He questions racial integration schemes, suggesting that “the two races are useful and necessary to each other because of their differences.” Berry doubts the wisdom of more immigration from Mexico, because a “generous immigration policy would be contradicted by our fundamentally ungenerous way of life.” He endorses child labor “in viable household and local economies.” Scandalizing the libertines and the universalists, Berry praises marital fidelity, the central importance of family life, and local loyalties. He denies the merits of feminist egalitarianism, arguing that “[t]o have an equal part in our juggernaut of national vandalism is [still] to be a vandal.” He condemns state education systems that “innovate as compulsively and as eagerly as factories,” and wants no part of schools that “serve the government's economy and the economy's government.”

Heir to the agrarian populists, Berry decries the institutions that have homogenized American life, battered

self-sufficiency, and smothered family autonomy. “My small community in Kentucky,” he reports, “has lived and dwindled for at least a century under the influence of four kinds of organizations—governments, corporations, schools, and churches—all of which are distant (either actually or in interest), centralized, and consequently abstract in their concerns.” His key (and absolutely correct) point is that “the old cultural centers of home and community were made vulnerable to this invasion by their failure as economies.” When the members of a household or village no longer aid each other through productive endeavors, then the individuals involved “fall into dependence on exterior economies and organizations,” and lose their freedom.

In an insightful discussion of the novel *Huckleberry Finn*, Berry hints that American families and communities have been particularly vulnerable in this regard. Mark Twain's real “failure” was not the oft-noted turn toward juvenile foolishness in the last third of the book, but the inability of the book's only “adult” characters—Aunt Polly and Aunt Sally—to impress their notion of settled community on Huck. For him, the only choice in the end seemed to be between the dreaded “pious civilization” of Miss Watson and escape into some “territory.” Berry concludes: “*Huckleberry Finn* fails in failing to imagine a responsible, adult community life. And I am supposing further that this is the failure of Mark Twain's life, and of our life, so far, as a society.”

Through most of his discourses, Berry sees little prospect for hope. Farm communities “are declining and eroding,” while “most of the enterprises of the old household economy” are gone. He sees “a diminished country,” marked by crumbling stone walls, sagging and fallen barns, and empty houses, all evidence of “human life poorly founded, played out, and gone.” Increasingly, country people live and think like city people, and so participate in their own demise: “Our garbage mingles with New Jersey garbage in our local landfill, and it would be hard to tell which is which.” He denies that individual protest is of any public use, eschews politics as corrupt and corrupting, and dismisses as presumptuous the idea that he might be part of