

## Books Encountered

**Terrorism: The PLO Connection.** By YONAH ALEXANDER and JOSHUA SINAI. Crane Russak, \$42.00, £31.00; paper \$22.00, £16.00.

Well-documented account, with directory, chronology, and bibliography, of the PLO's history and policies, taking a highly sceptical view of Yasir Arafat's apparent change of heart, and pointing out the complexities within and around the organisation. Its prognostications, however, are astonishingly banal: negotiation and compromise, or escalation and destabilisation.

**The Writing Systems of the World.** By FLORIAN COULMAS. Basil Blackwell, £30.00.

Fascinating history and analysis, at its most original when pointing out the interaction between written and spoken language. Examples: Charlemagne's insistence that Latin be spoken as spelt led to its becoming only a written language; Noah Webster was responsible for "labor", "honor", etc., in American; Turkey could adopt Roman script in 1928 more easily owing to illiteracy.

**Coleridge: Early Visions.** By RICHARD HOLMES. Hodder & Stoughton, £16.95.

Shelley's most sympathetic biographer tackles the dazzling, helter-skelter young Coleridge. "I have taken Coleridge into the open air", he justly claims—easier in youth, but a wonderfully refreshing antidote to the almost canonical image of the bookish Old Man of Thermopylae/Who never did anything properly.

**Divided Britain.** By RAY HUDSON and ALLAN M. WILLIAMS. Belhaven Press, £30.00, paper £8.95.

Aggressively anti-Thatcherist (and anti-capitalist) polemic arguing that Britain was divided already, by wealth, sex, race, and location; that the present Government has intensified the divisions; and that they will continue after it unless—what? Convincing data: debatable diagnosis: no prescription. Help!

**Mixed Blessings: An Almost Ordinary Life in Hitler's Germany.** By HEINZ R. KUEHN. University of Georgia Press, \$17.95, £16.95.

"Mixed Breed of the First Degree": it sounds like a cattle market, but this was the official classification which saved the young author, son of a Catholic father and a Jewish mother, from the Nazi ovens. His subtitle says it all, but his spare prose is as telling as Christopher Isherwood's in its cool indictment.

**Perspectives and Identities: The Elizabethan Writer's Search To Know His World.** By PETER LLOYD. Rubicon Press, £20.00.

Disguise, the author thinks, was not just a dramatic device for Shakespeare and others: it also expressed uncertainties—about humanity, the natural world, the spiritual life, science, geography, and astronomy, all in turmoil in the late Renaissance. Much here is familiar; but the links are plausibly traced.

**Thomas Arnold, Head Master: A Reassessment.** By MICHAEL McCURM. Oxford University Press, £17.50.

"Ludicrously exaggerated, distorted, and unfair": not this book, but its verdict on Lytton Strachey's portrait of Arnold as an Eminent Victorian. The author, Master of Corpus Christi, Cambridge, former Headmaster of Tonbridge and Eton, taught classics at Rugby and is one of its Governors. So his corrective account is professional, mildly critical, and a bit headmasterly.

**Red Brigades: The Story of Italian Terrorism.** By ROBERT C. MEADE, JR. Macmillan, £35.00.

Well-researched, thoughtful narrative of the *Brigate Rosse*, their growth, their outrages (notably but by no means solely on Aldo Moro), and the calm, skill, and courage needed to defeat them. Good on specifically Italian stimuli and support; excellent on lessons for all democratic societies facing terrorists.

**The Germans: Rich, Bothered and Divided.** By DAVID MARSH. Century, £16.95.

Sensible, factual, and timely (though now outpaced) survey-with-figures by the chief German correspondent for the London *Financial Times*. On Europe, it shrewdly contrasts the Germans' growing preference for "federalism" with the "centralism" they increasingly dislike: HMG please note. On reunification, it suggests confederation.

**Miss Manners' Guide for the Turn-of-the-Millennium.** By JUDITH MARTIN. Pharos Books, \$24.95.

Enormous (742-page) and wordy etiquette book in jokey old-fashioned style and typeface, clearly having more fun than many readers will. But the tiny print and excessive verbiage contain much common sense on courtesy problems posed by answering machines, faxes, beepers, credit cards, "gay" weddings, etc.

**Taming the Flood.** By JEREMY PURSEGLOVE. Oxford University Press, £9.95.

Spin-off from a Channel 4 TV series: a splendidly illustrated, scholarly account of how water has been feared, curbed, wasted, harnessed, and increasingly despoiled. The author's particular concern is river management and wetland conservation: he sees danger in water privatisation but a chance in the new National River Authority.

**Kristallnacht: Unleashing the Holocaust.** By ANTHONY READ and DAVID FISHER. Michael Joseph, £16.95.

Lively, painfully vivid account of 9-10 November 1938, when the Nazis staged "the night of broken glass", smashing Jewish shop-fronts, beating and burning, in the biggest anti-Semitic pogrom since the Middle Ages. The pretext was the shooting of a young German diplomat: the sequel we know.

**Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye.** By ANDREW ROBINSON. André Deutsch, £17.95.

Absorbing biographical and film-by-film study of the greatest Indian director, by an expert on both Indian and screen matters, with a glossary, filmography, excerpts from shooting notebooks, and nearly 150 stills or other illustrations. The only carp is that the plot summaries don't do justice to the films: but what could?

**Philip Larkin: His Life's Work.** By JANICE ROSSEN. Harvester Wheatsheaf, £14.95.

Intelligent, alert, close-to-the-text reading of Larkin's growth through his work. But on jazz, Ian Fleming, and dislike of Picasso—"the time and energy he devotes to these subjects make it somewhat difficult to take him seriously as an intellectual". Oh dear, oh dear.

**The Other Europe.** By JACQUES RUPNIK. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £6.95.

Revised and updated (August 1989) version of the book of the Channel 4 series first issued in 1988. Expert, deeply felt, very acute and even witty account of the tyranny and inefficiency which preceded and helped cause the present precarious renaissance of freedom and democracy in Eastern and Central Europe. "The most difficult time for decaying empires comes when they try to reform themselves."

**Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorised Biography of T. E. Lawrence.** By JEREMY WILSON. Heinemann, £25.00.

Ignore carping critics: this is a fine fair monument, with excellent illustrations. The only relevant detail it omits is Lawrence's wise advice about writing, scribbled on a menu card and reported by Ira Jones in *An Air Fighter's Scrap-Book: inter alia*, "neat, precise, plain English words . . . original metaphor and sparkling examples". For the next edition?

R.M.

---

# MEMOIR

---

*Raymond Williams (1921-88)*

## The Return of the Sage

By George Watson



PICTURE A large face—waiting, one sometimes felt, to be carved in stone by a Polynesian—a figure somewhat shorter than the face implied, a velvety voice accentless and yet wholly distinctive, a manner unremittingly affable and confident, and a tongue ever ready with views about life, space, and time. I first met my future colleague Raymond Williams in

1959, when I was a young lecturer in Cambridge and he a tutor in adult education in Oxford, soon after his best-known book, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958), appeared—a late-Marxist interpretation of British intellectual life from the French Revolution to D. H. Lawrence and after—and what I principally remember from that first encounter was his glowing pride, as a young author, in the commercial success of his book which, he explained to me, as a stranger, had enormously surprised his publisher though not him. “He is taking me to better restaurants for lunch now”, he remarked, exuding pleasure at a triumph at once appropriate and yet unexpected by the world. At the age of 37 he was a famous man.

In the almost 30 years I knew him, down to his sudden death in January 1988 at the age of 66, that paradoxical note was to be struck again and again: an open pride in capitalistic success and its consumer rewards, with much talk of brand-names and domestic comforts, and a deep hatred of capitalism itself and its cultural pretensions. By mid-career in Cambridge, to which he returned as a Fellow of Jesus College in 1961, when *The Long Revolution* appeared, he was to become the proud owner of two country houses—one near Cambridge, one in his native mid-Wales—and the talk was much of hi-fi, wall-to-wall carpets, and colour TV, his chief passion in entertainment being for American musicals, especially if they starred Sammy Davis Jr.

But the usual jibes about parlour-socialists never quite seemed to fit. He was so utterly open about his prosperity, for one thing: about wanting it, and wanting more of it. No man was less hypocritical about success. It suited his personality, in any case, which was always faintly affluent, though less grand than his friend and rival E. P. Thompson, so that

life and thought always seemed comfortably of a piece. Thompson lived in a country manor; Williams, by contrast, was essentially bourgeois, and his talk was of shopping and gadgetry, not of deer-parks and walled gardens. Few I have known have enjoyed the consumer-society so much; none so frankly. In fact he was fond of teasing his Cambridge audiences by asking them if they had ever bought anything after watching TV commercials; and when their mouths puckered into attitudes of stereotypical disdain, he would shock them by saying: “I have, often.”

This, then, is a success story, and the tale of a happy man. In fact the old Hollywood he loved might have called it *The Williams Story*—from rags to riches, and proud of it. I have seldom known anyone so fulfilled by professional life. In New York it is called “Making It”, and so many socialist intellectuals have made it in the last 30 years that the story of the fat-cats of the Left might justify a volume and even a series. London theatre is by now full of them, and the film industry—some of them, like David Hare of the National Theatre and Trevor Griffiths, Williams’s pupils. Most were middle-class by upbringing, more or less. Williams was not, and his claim to working-class origins—a perfectly good claim—is an essential part of his self-image, just as that self-image is an essential part of his career. In fact his books, as reviewers often noticed, are commonly about himself—a sort of continuous memoir lightly masked as cultural history. That pervasive egotism was part of his inheritance from F. R. Leavis, whom he had idolised as an undergraduate when he returned from the War; less, perhaps, from R. H. Tawney, to whom he owed rather his sense of social history. Williams is inconceivable without these masters; but his problem was wholly different from theirs, and harder. By the 1960s—his flourishing age—capitalism was not visibly failing, and there was little to justify Tawneyesque predictions about proletarian destitution or inevitable class-war. Nor was Britain at war in Viet Nam.

THOSE DISADVANTAGES, seemingly insuperable, were overcome with astounding ease. The solution was to create the image of a suffering being, glancing behind at William Cobbett and Thomas Carlyle, at Lawrence and Orwell. Williams turned history into “a continuous horror-show”, as Marilyn Butler once remarked in a review (*London Review of Books*, 2-15 February 1984) of *Towards 2000*, his books all seeming to “crave the dynamics of antagonism”, with unnamed forces ranged against a lonely defender of civilised values. All that is a very Leavisite opposition. But it was also faintly nebulous in its detail, so that reading Williams can be rather like watching a stag-at-bay locking antlers with a ghost. A sense of contest was somehow indispensable to him when he wrote.

Even the most secular age can need its saints, and self-canonisation can fill a need. *Modern Tragedy* (1966), for example, laid out as it is as literary history, begins with a bitter though obscure account of the author’s early life and the sufferings of his (unemployed?) parents in a Welsh village, presumably during the Depression of the 1930s: but where we are, and when we are, and why we are there or then, is not entirely clear. Williams’s first novel, and