

his essays, there are some who seek to meet the challenge he poses to the philosophical and moral assumptions of the old liberalism. □

A WRITER'S BRITAIN: Landscape in Literature, by Margaret Drabble, photographed by Jorge Lewinski. Alfred A. Knopf, 287 pp., \$22.50.

English in context

DONALD DAVIE

THIS HANDSOME VOLUME looks at first sight like an unusually sumptuous brochure for the British tourist industry, but it is something else. Those who know Margaret Drabble from her novels as above all a dogged-as-it-is author, nothing if not deliberate and thorough, will realize that, unlike other writers of repute, she is probably incapable of supplying what used to be called "the letterpress" for a coffee-table picture-book. And indeed she has turned in something quite different. *A Writer's Britain* will disappoint anyone who buys it as a gift for someone who uses books as interior decoration, or as stimulus for casual conversation. Though it comes with clear and useful maps of England, Scotland, and Wales (Ireland isn't dealt with, not even Northern Ireland), it couldn't conveniently be taken along on travels in Britain; and even the armchair traveler will need to settle for several hours at a time in an armchair that is not of the softest.

Jorge Lewinski's excellent illustrations are what should give the clue. We all know by now that the camera *can* lie, and that it is the normal business of the professional photographer to make it lie most seductively; but Lewinski's photographs are, though expert and attractive, unspectacular. They are also, we discover when we start to read, keyed very scrupulously and self-effacingly to passages of the text—so much so that many of the pictures don't, in isolation from the text, explain themselves. The

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illustrations in fact illustrate. Whereas in coffee-table books photographer and writer collaborate on equal terms, if indeed it isn't the photographer who calls the shots, here the writer is firmly in the saddle and the photographer runs at her stirrup.

A Writer's Britain is more about writers than it is about Britain. That is not quite true; for it *is* about Britain, but Britain as a physical entity constant though changing through centuries, rather than Britain in the here-and-now around the tourist as he leaves his aircraft at Heathrow or Gatwick. In the first of five quite massive chapters—there is a sixth, less daunting, about British writers and British landscape in the present century—we know what we are in for as soon as our author takes on Sir Kenneth Clark, no less, challenging out of English and Welsh literature of the Dark Ages and the Middle Ages his contention that the experience of landscape as an aesthetic object or aesthetic stimulus is a relatively late-come phenomenon, not to be encountered before the Renaissance and rare still in the seventeenth century. This chapter is called "Sacred Places," and concerns itself with how the religious mind comes to terms with the seductiveness of the British earth, rang-

poem on Penshurst idealizes the hierarchical society symbolized by the manorial great country house. I suspect that she, like Raymond Williams who has wrestled with this problem before her, underestimates the extent to which not just pastoral literature but *all* literature (including for instance her own novels) is necessarily and unavoidably idealizing in tendency; how wide a gulf there is between the truth that honest literature deals with, and the sort of truth that we call "documentary."

She is admirably fair-minded as she forces herself to acknowledge the truth and the beauty of *The Seasons* of James Thomson, who in a vulgar Marxist view would have to be denounced as a Scottish lackey of the English ruling class; but we can sense her relief and enthusiasm when she's able to turn to those writers—John Clare, more dubiously Burns, and in a different way Cobbett—who see the landscape through the eyes of the agricultural *worker*, not the eyes of the privileged visitor to the manor. Her pages on Clare are really admirable, and at many points I think they genuinely break new ground in the appreciation of this very great and still neglected poet. After judicious looks at the novelists Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Trol-



ling from anecdotes told of the heroic anchorites and missionaries of the Dark Ages, through to Gerard Manley Hopkins and T. S. Eliot.

In the next chapter, "The Pastoral Vision," Margaret Drabble's sympathy with the egalitarian aspirations and resentments of British socialism gives her trouble as she is forced to struggle with the undoubtedly idealizing procedures of all pastoral literature, for instance with the way Ben Jonson in his great

lope, and Hardy, this chapter ends surprisingly yet naturally with two poets of the present day, R. S. Thomas in Wales and Alasdair Maclean in Scotland, both writing of harsh and unrewarding landscapes.

In the next two chapters, "Landscape as Art" (largely about English gardens, and contrived or uncontrived "beauty-spots") and "The Romantics," the narrative pace at times deteriorates into a dutiful *trudge* through the names and ti-

bles that "cannot be overlooked"; and one sympathizes with an occasional distraught gesture toward matters that must be mentioned but can't be dealt with properly—for instance the complicated aesthetics behind landscape gardening and "the picturesque," or Wordsworth's unstable relations with what he called "Nature." And yet it's just here that Margaret Drabble's virtue of conscientious thoroughness is most welcome; it's salutary to be reminded for instance of George Borrow and his *Wild Wales*. And Borrow is one bridge into the fifth chapter, "The Industrial Scene," where the author hits her stride again. We might expect as much from one who has championed Arnold Bennett, the novelist of industrial Staffordshire.

Lewinski is equal to the challenge, and his illustrations to this chapter seem to me, in a profoundly serious sense, poetic. (I instance particularly the color plates at pp. 219–20.) From John Dyer in the eighteenth century, sanguine and sure that industry and commerce could only beautify England, we are taken through the recognition—by Dickens ("the poet of pollution") for instance—that industrialized landscapes could be celebrated only as luridly *sublime* (as distinct from "beautiful"), to the often frenzied conflict of love and loathing that such landscapes provoked in D. H. Lawrence. It is typical of Margaret Drabble's thoroughness that she takes note of a belated celebrant of the industrial sublime in our own day, Jack Clemons, extraordinary proletarian poet of industrial Cornwall; and she rightly and staunchly recognizes as byproducts of industrialism the thinly green pockets of precarious suburbia, celebrated wistfully and ironically by the two poets of today most popular with the British public, Betjeman and Larkin.

I have called Margaret Drabble a *dogged* writer. It is a left-handed compliment at best, one may think, yet in the present instance I don't mean it so, as perhaps I have shown writing a *dogged-as-does-it* review. Nothing else seemed right for what is, when one thinks about it, an astonishing feat of synopsis: an introduction to the social history of Britain as well as to its literary history, and indeed by implication a contention or demonstration that no one can responsibly write the one without writing the other. That implication may be challenged, in ways I have suggested; but we need to come to terms with it never more than here and now, when the most influential critics, inevitably much more brilliant than Margaret Drabble can be,

are at one in pretending that works of English, as of any other literature, can safely be studied, and fittingly appreciated, when they have been torn out of the highly specific historical and geographical matrix that they were hewn from.

THE QUESTION OF PALESTINE,
by Edward W. Said. *Times Books*,
265 pp., \$12.50.

ASSAULT ON THE LIBERTY, by
James M. Ennes, Jr. *Random House*,
299 pp., \$12.95.

Mideast cover-ups

RUSSELL STETLER

NOW THAT PRESIDENT Carter is thinking about conscripting our sons (and perhaps our daughters) to fight for freedom on the sands of Oman, it is surely time for a national debate on U.S. Mideast policy. The two books under review are essential reading for that debate, and their appearance could not be timelier. *Assault on the Liberty* reminds us that thirty-four Americans have already been killed in an Arab-Israeli war—strafed, torpedoed, and napalmed by America's unquestioned ally Israel. *The Question of Palestine* is even more sobering. It not only reminds us of the Carter administration's most spectacular inconsistency (asserting that the Palestinian issue was at the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict and then offering the Palestinians only "autonomy" under eternal military occupation in the Camp David formula). It also explains, in depth and detail, what "the question of Palestine" is.

The author of *The Question of Palestine* is Edward W. Said, a Western-educated Palestinian who teaches English literature at Columbia and also served in the parliament-in-exile known as the Palestine National Council. He is at once deeply involved with the internal politics of the Palestinian movement and with his life as a respected professional in an American intellectual milieu which he

feels is less critical of Israel and Zionism than are the Israelis themselves. As a result, this is a very personal book, a unique synthesis of the inner vision of the self-conscious Palestinian experience and Western perceptions of that experience.

Said begins with a rigorous examination of Zionism: its close connection to late Victorian liberalism, the effect of its institutional presence in shaping contemporary attitudes toward the Arab world, and the special problems arising from the Jewish experience in twentieth-century Europe. Zionism arose and took hold in a world that had already made certain assumptions about the non-European races. Said recalls that even such thinkers as John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx seem "to have believed that such ideas as liberty, representative government, and individual happiness must not be applied in the Orient for reasons that today we would call racist." The idea of substituting superior civilizations for inferior ones in distant lands was already firmly entrenched when Zionism made its appearance.

The depth of this conviction in otherwise enlightened minds is hard for us to appreciate today. Said notes that even the staunch anti-imperialist J. A. Hobson believed in the existence of "subject races." I am reminded that when Bertrand Russell went to jail for objecting to the First World War, he had taken pains to make clear that he did not object to all wars; he argued that "wars of colonisation" were fairly often justified. Writing in 1916, Russell explained:

By a "war of colonisation" I mean a war whose purpose is to drive out the whole population of some territory and replace it by an invading population of a different race. . . . In modern times the conflicts of Europeans with American Indians, Maoris, and other aborigines in temperate regions, have been of this kind. Such wars are totally devoid of *technical* justification, and are apt to be more ruthless than any other. Nevertheless, if we are to judge by results, we cannot regret that such wars have taken place. They have the merit, often quite fallaciously claimed for all wars, of leading in the main to the survival of the fittest, and it is chiefly through such wars that the civilised portion of the world has been extended from the neighbourhood of the Mediterranean to the greater part of the earth's surface.

In the Victorian setting, the Zionists' callous attitude toward the existing population in Palestine was hardly surprising. At least they thought in terms of displacement—not military annihilation. In 1895 the early Zionist leader Theodor Herzl confided to his diary, "We shall have to spirit the penniless population across the border by procur-

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