

**ANNALS OF AN ABIDING LIBERAL**, by John K. Galbraith.  
 Houghton, Mifflin, 384 pp., \$12.95.

## *A dominie's delusions*

JOHN O'SULLIVAN

**E**VERY JOURNALIST WHO writes on politics soon learns to dread the regular arrival of a certain kind of letter. It is bulky; it includes numerous Biblical quotations of a menacing character; at frequent intervals passages are fiercely underscored in colored inks, green for some reason being especially favored; and its argument leans heavily on the old advertising principle that repetition is all. Whether the writer is concerned with proving that the world's ills stem from, say, the "money-power of Wall Street," or the failure of the Bishops to open Joanna Southcote's box, he never varies his message or stoops to answer criticism of it. Events in the real world that might challenge his thesis are either ignored altogether or confusingly interpreted as supporting evidence—just as a flat-earther might claim that man's arrival on the moon only goes to prove that the space program is a gigantic hoax in the Nevada desert.

Disturbingly, there is more than a whiff of these obsessive techniques of controversy in the economic essays included in Professor Galbraith's latest collection. Here, for what seems the umpteenth time, are the standard Galbraithian themes—that conventional economics is a form of induced myopia accompanied, in the case of neoclassical economics, by the delusion that perfect competition in the market subjects firms of whatever size to the wishes of consumers; that, in consequence, no economist (except, of course, the author and a few observant friends) has noticed the troublesome existence of such phenomena as

stagflation or the practice of large corporations which, having abolished the market and made themselves secure against competition, raise prices at will and shape consumer tastes to suit production; and furthermore, that these new forces can be tamed only by active government intervention, notably by price control and incomes policy. We have heard these liberal pieties from Galbraith before, but he seems persuaded that the model form of argument

is neither debate nor the scientific testing of hypotheses, but the Tibetan prayer wheel. So he cranks them out once again.

But repetition does not make these arguments any more persuasive. His picture of the generality of economists, for instance, is pure straw-manship. It assumes that economists believe the textbook analytical device of perfect competition to be a literal account of how the economy works in practice. Of course, as Galbraith disingenuously concedes in the decent obscurity of a subordinate clause, they believe nothing of the sort. And their actual belief in an effective, albeit imperfect, competition would seem to be more justified than his own picture of omnipotent oligopoly—certainly more justified by the statistics



JOHN O'SULLIVAN was formerly an editorial writer and contributed a daily column on Parliament to the Daily Telegraph (London). He is currently editor of Policy Report.

he quotes. Do fifty competing banks, which control 48 percent of the U.S. banking assets, and fifty competing insurance companies, which account for 82 percent of insurance assets, really deserve the description "a few large firms that are infinitely large"? As for his claim that conventional economists cannot account for "stagflation," this is surely hard on Friedrich Hayek, who predicted this combination of inflation and unemployment when Galbraith was still blithely assuming the continued success of Keynesianism.

Then the real world keeps butting in. For some years Galbraith has been informing us that large corporations had protected themselves against market competition and so enjoyed the comfortable state of security and slow, steady growth. Bankruptcies and closures were things of the past. It might seem that the collapse of Chrysler and, before that, of Penn Central, contradicted this theory. Not so, however, in these essays. It has simply been amended to read "a very large corporation is no longer *allowed* to go out of business" (my italics), since "the social damage is too great." This leaves out of account the social damage from the wasteful use of scarce capital caused by state assistance, the continued production of unwanted goods,

and the economic undermining of the aided firm's competitors, which then join the queue for state subsidies.

If British experience is any guide, the subsidy cost grows increasingly burdensome until, eventually, a political decision is made to reduce it—which ensures that several large-scale redundancies

of my home, using Galbraith's method of reckoning producer sovereignty, revealed that the most powerful sovereign in American industry is the manufacturer of clothes hangers. Toothpick producers ran a close second.

And Professor Frank MacFadzean, the British economist-industrialist, has cast severe doubt on the theory of producer

## Professor Galbraith's famous wit grows tetchy and curmudgeonly under the influence of ideology.

occur simultaneously amid the maximum political uproar. So, in endeavoring to fit his theory to the Procrustean bed of economic reality, Galbraith has inadvertently transformed it from one of economic stability to one of political instability. A new twist is added by his intervention in the Chrysler controversy when he argued that Chrysler should be given state assistance because firms like Chrysler always are given state assistance. This might be called "circular logic" or "the imperative indicative tense"—but, however you slice it. . . .

**T**HE FATE OF GALBRAITH'S remedies can be very briefly indicated. Prices in Britain never rose so far or so fast as under "the comprehensive incomes and prices policy" of which he approves as a solution to inflation. And state intervention in the food market, which he regards as necessary to compensate for the "inadequacies" of the private sector, has in Europe produced the inverted miracle of artificially high food prices alongside butter mountains and wine lakes. There are some beneficiaries, to be sure—namely Russian consumers and others outside the protective arm of the Common Agricultural Policy who are allowed to buy up the surpluses cheap.

It is hardly to be wondered at that a theory so flawed and generating such boondoggles would come under occasional criticism. In a discussion before the American Economic Association in 1969, for instance, Professor Harold Demsetz spoke thus:

. . . Galbraith argues seriously that "we have more appliances than houses because General Electric is more powerfully sovereign than the house builders." If this meaningless comparison is to be made, one would expect that attention might be called to the fact that the price of a house is about 1,000 times greater than the price of an appliance. A quick survey

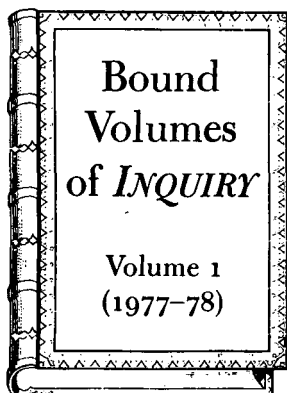
sovereignty through advertising by pointing out that, of all the products launched with scientific market research and Madison Avenue fanfares, only one in seven survived in the actual marketplace.

But the careful reader will find here no trace of these names, or indeed the names of *any* of the critics. Their formidable attacks are simply ignored and the propositions demolished by them are again displayed for our admiration as if general acclaim (or only manifestly absurd criticism) had greeted their earlier appearances. It is all very puzzling.

Or is it? If we take the green-ink-letter-writing disease to be the terminal stage of devotion to a dogma that is plainly at variance with the real world, then we may reasonably surmise that Galbraith is displaying some of the early symptoms. The final collapse into total humorlessness is, happily, still far off. Galbraith continues to wield a savage pen, especially at the expense of business executives—their prose styles and their "philosophical" pronouncements in favor of the market. (It is worth noting in passing, however, that when businessmen rush to the government for subsidies, they are at once transformed in the professor's eyes into masterful capitalists from a Shaw play who transcend the limitations of their calico ideology and seize economic reality by the throat. This rhetorical device is known as the Cantuar Gambit: viz., if the Archbishop of Canterbury says that he believes in God, well, that's his job, isn't it? If he says he *doesn't*, then he must be telling the truth.)

Yet even Professor Galbraith's famous wit can grow tetchy and curmudgeonly when he is under the influence of ideology. A distinctly querulous note can be detected in his comment on Milton Friedman's monetarist prescription

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for stable prices and low unemployment: “. . . if [it] could indeed achieve such a result, it can hardly be believed that his revelation would have remained so long unused.” High Tories have long maintained that nothing should ever be done for the first time, but Galbraith outdoes them in declaring that nothing *can* ever be usefully done for the first time. It comes ill from the confident New Frontiersman who, a few pages back, was deriding critics of Franklin Roosevelt’s “untried experiments” with the lofty but proper reply that it is in the nature of experiments to be untried.

**B**UT WHAT A CHANGE OC-curs when Professor Galbraith abandons economics to write the literary reviews, autobiographical essays, and accounts of financial scandals that make up the bulk of this book. Freed from the trying responsibility of having to prove that Keynesian liberalism is an idea whose time can be extended indefinitely, he shrugs off the influence of the demented letter-writer, resumes his old, easy wit, and contributes a series of pleasant and amusing essays.

His account of how, according to the FBI files, his life was erratically monitored by that organization is a model of tolerant comedy. Avoiding the tone of moral outrage often expressed in connection with intelligence agencies, he describes instead the way in which misinformation was placed within its files (sometimes by hostile colleagues or politicians with personal grudges), there to linger down the years, confusing future investigators as they set out to test his loyalty. Occasionally, however, some brave fellow would pierce through the mist. Galbraith recalls with remarkable detachment the result of one inquiry as: “Investigation favorable except conceited, egotistical and snobbish.”

He might therefore seem to be a suitable reviewer of Evelyn Waugh’s diaries. But the professor’s snobbery, I suspect, is that timid, modern, East Coast kind, which dares to despise only rather safe targets like corporation men in gray flannel suits. At any rate, he disapproves sternly of Waugh’s reference to “the lower classes.” It is plain that the two men could never have got on. Waugh, for instance, once told a general, his CO, who had reprimanded him for having gotten drunk after dinner in the mess: “Don’t suppose I intend to change the habits of a lifetime for a whim of yours.” The Scotch-Canadian Presbyterian who lurks at the rear of Galbraith’s personality could hardly approve of this blend of

self-indulgence and frivolity (though he might smile upon the insubordination to traditional, noneconomic authority).

Yet, disapprove though he must, he pays full tribute to Waugh’s comic genius, even asserting that “Waugh’s firmest intention was to be nasty, even vicious . . . no one, I assert, has the right to frustrate so clear a purpose.” If Galbraith can offer even this ironical tolerance toward a Tory of Evelyn Waugh’s undoubted ferocity, why does he deny it to the far milder and more respectable figures who merely differ with him about the likely consequences of restricting the money supply? Is one play, and the other real and earnest? Or is this simply another example of the crippling effects of ideology upon imagination? At any rate, the professor would be well advised to keep off the green ink. □

**DARKNESS VISIBLE**, by William Golding. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 265 pp., \$10.95.

## Golding’s nasty games

ANTHONY BURGESS

**T**HIS IS WILLIAM GOLDING’S first novel in twelve years. A long sabbatical spent sailing, reading Greek, and brooding over the evil in the world has not noticeably served to refresh his muse or, in a creative sleep, build up his fictional strength. It has always seemed to me that a novelist should write novels, that his *métier* is defined by incessant practice, and that prolonged inactivity never did any artist any good. This belief is confirmed by the quality of Mr. Golding’s latest book, which is far inferior to his first. But, rereading *Lord of the Flies* after more than twenty years, I find myself pricked by a doubt that, at the time of the book’s first adulant reception, would have been considered philistine if not heretical.

*Lord of the Flies*, like *Darkness Visible*, is about evil triumphant and innocence besieged, but it seems that the choice of this theme was dictated less by theological conviction than by a sense that it

Among ANTHONY BURGESS’s recent books is 1985, published by Little, Brown.

was a good subject for a novel. There is something contrived about this story of a group of decent shipwrecked boys who are set upon by Beelzebub, and there is something confused and confusing about its whole concept of evil: Is it inborn, genuine, original sin, or is it an outside force like a spirochete? What, for that matter, is Golding’s religious position? The ludic tone rings clearer in *Lord of the Flies* today, when it is considered a classic, than in the fifties when it first appeared. Indeed, the quality of game playing, of delight in ingenuity of contrivance, is to be found in all the handful of books he has written on the great traditional themes of free will and sin. One misses the tone of horror: There is a near sadistic delight in the dealing out of damnation, and smaller instruments of punishment are handled with relish. Golding’s evil is neither to be swiped by the forces of good nor exalted to a Luciferan vision; it merely tastes nasty or leaves the reader feeling unclean.

*Darkness Visible* is nasty, and is probably meant to be. Its hero is a boy who steps naked, a genuine burning babe, out of the London blitz, orphaned, nameless, terribly disfigured. He is Number Seven on the hospital’s list of blitz victims, and his middle name becomes Septimus. His first name is more arbitrary and hence more symbolic—Matty, which can stand for the first evangelist, or to be taken as a transliteration of the Malay word for death, or be seen as androgynous, or imply the filth and ugliness of the coiled or matted. His surname is in doubt—Windrave? Windrove? Windgrave?—but it suggests the apocalyptic.

This boy with a burnt face and a deformed ear goes out into the world, ready to take on any job, sickening his

