

Across the River, Into the Steppe

A View of All the Russias, by Laurens van der Post (Morrow, 374 pp. \$5.95), discerns the humanity inherent even in what is usually described as a monolithic nation. Harrison E. Salisbury is the author of numerous books about the Soviet Union.

By HARRISON E. SALISBURY

LAURENS VAN DER POST may describe himself as a novelist or even as a world traveler. But he has the heart of a poet and a poet's shrewd skill in cutting through mass to the very veins and nerves of a country's spirit. His journey to Russia was a long, complicated, and carefully constructed trip designed to give him a feeling of what this contradictory and almost excessively analyzed country is all about.

The product is pure joy—the observations and reflections of a mature, thoughtful man, a man deeply attached to the political and personal philosophies of the West but a man who regards all humans as part of the whole, one who is prepared to meet and talk with Russians as one man to another and not within the context of an interminable debating match.

He quickly came to feel with Klyuchevsky that the determinant factor in Russian character and psychology is the steppe, the open, boundless land that flows like a sea from horizon to horizon. And he sensed, too, as few professional analysts or scholarly students have, that Russia is still pre-eminently a land of rivers and the true domain of the railroad.

Colonel van der Post crisscrossed the Soviet Union. He saw the Baltic, the Black Sea, Yalta, the Caucasus, ancient Central Asia, the raw newness of Siberia, the great relics of Kiev, the imperial glory of Leningrad, and Moscow's bureaucratic bustle.

He found the Russians at their best when they were traveling, for "physically and mentally they are people still on a journey and so journeys release them from complex reserves and fears of all kinds."

Of the approaches to Moscow on a spring evening he writes:

The calm was immense and not a shiver of air stirred the frail branch-

es. Beyond the trees rose neither mountains, hills, mounds nor even towers. On such level earth in so level an evening the sky achieved its fullness of space and height. And that, too, was very Russian.

Very Russian also was the young girl he met who got even with a red-tape-bound superior by sending him a subscription to the *Pig Breeders' Gazette*. Even more Russian, perhaps, is the fact that this caused the official to suffer a nervous breakdown.

Like others before him, he noted the deification of Lenin as a kind of god in mufti, and he observed with wry perplexity a system in which those who profiteer in goods needed by the people are punished by the death penalty whereas officials who fail to provide for those needs are deemed guilty of no crime at all.

At almost every step Colonel van der Post was struck by the contrast between the hideousness of Russian "things"—from pots to mighty buildings—and the delicacy, tenderness, and sensitivity of the people.

And here in the dozens of vignettes of Russian individuals, which pass in panorama across his pages, van der Post's book reaches its poetic height.

There are, of course, minor inaccuracies. Lenin did not retain to the end his belief in the wisdom of Stalin's nationalist views. Indeed, he died in deep concern about them. Odessa, despite early Greek settlements, is essentially a very recent Russian city, founded just before 1800. Far from having been "al-

most destroyed by Germans," it was hardly touched, except for the suburbs and shipping facilities. Stalin's famous expropriations occurred in Tiflis. And the steamboat trip from Rostov to Moscow takes twelve or thirteen days, not five.

But these are inconsequential beside the brilliance of Colonel van der Post's word picture, the finest we have yet had of contemporary Russia.

P's and Q's in Aix: "Oh no!" groaned an old friend of M. F. K. Fisher's as the author and gourmet strolled about Aix-en-Provence with a "writing-look" in her eye. "Not you too! Not another tiny poetical masterpiece. . . ."

Fortunately, Mrs. Fisher's *Map of Another Town: A Memoir of Provence* (Little, Brown, \$5.75) merits no such damning description. It is a lovely, lively book written with imagination and style. The day-to-day adventures of the American author and her two young daughters as they encounter life in a French town of the 1950s are certainly not the stuff of which drama is made, but they are, in a quiet way, delightful.

This is a book to be savored, like a good *pot-au-feu à la provençale*. Although such is far from being Mrs. Fisher's intention, her memoir could also serve as a guide on how and how not to behave when living abroad.

The writer found Smith College girls generally "serious and attractive" but prone to overemphasize the importance of adequate bathing facilities and having their cigarettes lit for them. The boys at the American University School performed childish exploits and "would languish, away from Mother's Cooking." Least adaptable of all were the affluent Fulbright students, who "seemed to have very little wish to identify themselves with the life of the town, and small talent for it when they showed any at all."

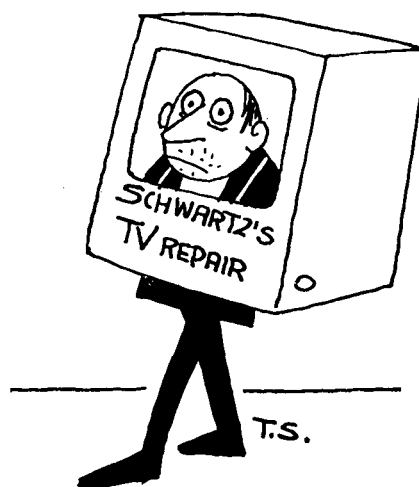
But, in the longest best chapter in the book, "17 Rue Cardinale," Mrs. Fisher details with sympathy, bafflement, rage, and love the formidable strength, the equally formidable extravagances, the maddening and inscrutable *Frenchness* of assorted French landladies.

One of the hardiest of this hardy breed, Madame Lanes, once described for her foreign guests the unforgettable day when, overtired and ready to faint, she leaned against a tree and would have fallen but for the help of a "very ordinary" woman. The woman was kind but, Madame contended, most rude to assist her, being of a different class.

Surely, interposed the startled foreigners, you would have helped her had the circumstances been reversed?

"Never," Madame said simply, and we tackled the scallop of veal."

—DORRIE PAGONES.



Between the Sirens and the Muse

By DUDLEY FITTS, *editor of the Yale Series of Younger Poets*

I DON'T know what song the sirens sang, but I think John Ciardi has studied voice with them. "The Poetry Quarterly," he says; and although it is an exercise that neither one of us believes in—a coarse, necessarily hasty glance at the far too many books of verse produced during the last few months—I yield once more to his beguilement. The man out-trills Parthenopé.

Here are some thirty books: poetry, verse, metered language, impassioned paralysis, passionless linotype constructions; a few "Collecteds" with the usual additions; several monographs anatomizing the Great Dead; and the customary effluvium of narcissistic or vanity-press idleness, neither better nor worse than it always is. At least half of the thirty will receive no identification, let alone further comment, in the hit-and-run discussion that follows; and if the reader misses one of his favorites, he must assume either that the pearl was not cast before me, or that my deficiencies blinded me to its worth. So we shall avoid empty wounding and save space: economy abetted by humility.

It is a pity that two of the books remaining should owe some of their force to death. Posthumous printing raises questions that are, or ought to be, irrelevant—sentimentalities, perhaps, like those that surround a man's personal possessions the morning after his funeral, vain divinings, speculations as to the artist's awareness of the approaching end. When death was sudden, we know that the book was left open, so; the pen or the pipe or the spectacles put aside, with no consciousness of ending, certainly with no symbolic design; yet it is difficult to contemplate these objects without reading into them more of an intention than we know they can bear. This spacious pathos attaches itself particularly to the last utterances of a good poet unexpectedly taken by death, and there is a danger that it will color one's judgment. If it were possible, one would assume that E. E. Cummings will be writing his poems through all the predictable future—as, in a sense, he will be—and that Louis MacNeice has given us merely his latest book, not his last. Regarded so, Mr. Cummings's 73



Poems (Harcourt, Brace & World, \$4.50) repeats his usual form: four or five poems of a beauty and a power that annihilate objection, accompanied by a number of minor pieces in which wit and eccentricity oscillate between illumination and confusion. At least one of these lyrics, "now does our world descend," will be remembered with the best of his work—the unembarrassed overtiness of speech, the intricate variations of tonality and rhythm culminating in the last eight lines:

therefore despair, my heart
and die into the dirt

but from this endless end
of briefer each our bliss—
where seeing eyes go blind
(where lips forget to kiss)
where everything's nothing
—arise, my soul; and sing

(The meter demands *nó thing*. I had almost said "of course," but there's no "of course" about it: a learner could do worse than spend a long time thinking about that final couplet.) There are three excellent sonnets as well: "your homecoming will be my homecoming," "if in beginning twilight of winter will stand," and "enter no silence in the blood whose flesh"; and one epigram worthy of Mimmermos:

wild (at our first) beasts uttered human words
—our second coming made stones sing like birds—
but o the starhushed silence which our third's

One can only say *Ad multos annos*. The serious weighing of E. E. Cummings began more than thirty years ago, with Richard Blackmur's magisterial and friendly attack in *Hound & Horn*, and there has been nothing of equal value since then. Now we must have the reassessments.

As of Louis MacNeice—although it must be confessed that this very appealing poet has hardly been assessed at all. *The Burning Perch* (Oxford University Press, \$3.75) has about it even less of the posthumous aura than the interrupted poetry of Cummings. It is graceful, deliberately slight and underplayed, disdainful of the great and general audience:

. . . for whom Lares, Penates,
And all their kind are nothing but
rhetoric,
Funerary urns from the supermarket.

MacNeice was one of the Auden constellation that sailed into our ken early in the Thirties, and many of us thought at the time that he was the most promising of them all. Yet he never won the recognition that Stephen Spender and C. Day Lewis have enjoyed, though neither of them, at first, was predictably his superior. Like John Wheelwright and John Peale Bishop in our country, he seems to have missed fire, to have become a poets' poet, a rumor among poets, though no less ponderable for that. A classical scholar—a gifted amateur, at any rate—he has always been at his best in the humanistic tradition: one remembers the two fine Eclogues from his first book; later, his tender evocation of the animal epigraphs from the Greek Anthology; his craggy, sonorous rendering of the *Agamemnon* of Aischylos and his exuberant translation, certainly the best in the language, of Horace's "*Solvitur acris hiems*." His last poems are more casual, more "tourist" in tone, than any of these; yet there is a serious playfulness here that is wholly his own, a mode that I find especially touching (the death-pathos again?). And there are brilliant pieces, too: "Children's Games," for example; "The Introduction," a savage requiem for youth and age in love; and the harsh rhetoric—funerary, perhaps, but by no means from the supermarket—of "Ravenna":

What do I remember of Ravenna?
A bad smell mixed with glory, and the
cold
Eyes that belie the tessellated gold.

As a collection *The Burning Perch* is not particularly significant: an *ad interim* book, one would say. It acquires its weight from the unhappy fact that the interim is forever.

So much for elegy. We must turn