

The Price of Peace Was War

Harold Nicolson: *Diaries and Letters 1930-1939*, edited by Nigel Nicolson (Atheneum. 446 pp. \$7.50), recaptures the anguish of the decade of appeasement. Leon Edel, who was a foreign correspondent during those years, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer and critic.

By LEON EDEL

THE DISTINCTION of these diaries lies in their truth to feeling, to observation, to history, and in their revelation of a singularly charming and visual-minded Englishman of cosmopolitan spirit.

Sir Harold Nicolson was trained as a diplomat. He was also a scholar, a gifted biographer and historian, and for some years a vigorous and clear-sighted member of Parliament. In the sixteenth century he might have become one of Elizabeth's more remarkable courtiers; in our era of world wars he was an able foreign service officer and one of the voices of England's conscience in the midst of hysteria and disaster. In the margin of a crowded and productive life, his son tells us, he found time to type out brief daily accounts of things seen, noted, felt. He never explained to the satisfaction of his sons why he did this. It was a "mere record," something set down for memory and reference. Now, in the fullness of time, we can see that Nicolson wrote out of his profound sense of history. And since he was an accomplished professional writer, he recorded with brevity and wit, sensitivity and vividness. His diaries put us into possession, as few records of our time have done, of people and events that were a part of an entire generation's common experience. They serve as a polished lens which suddenly brings blurred—and bitter—memories into sharp focus.

Within these pages the reader will find a close and painful series of pictures of the era of Britain's appeasement-neurosis, preceded by the pathos of the Graustarkian abdication crisis. He will see Neville Chamberlain with his "spiritual trickiness," his "hardness of a self-righteous man" and "mind of a clothes brush." There is Ramsay MacDonald, a fading figure, "vain and vindictive"; and Anthony Eden, clear-minded where the issues were concerned but hesitant to give leadership when it was needed;

and Winston Churchill, with all his insight and vitality still a calculating parliamentarian on the eve of what would be his and England's test of endurance. In this prelude to war Nicolson's perceptions reveal anew the all-too-painful game of chess Chamberlain played; how he tried to throw Hitler at the Russians in the hope they would fight each other instead of the West. The trouble was that Stalin threw Hitler back at Chamberlain. Munich and the Hitler-Stalin pact can be seen from our time as corollary acts in the drama of Chamberlain's reluctance to deal with the Russians.

Churchill understood this clearly when he, Nicolson, Eden, Duff Cooper, and a few other far-sighted spirits found themselves impotent in the face of Tory fears to act against the Fascists. Chamberlain's fundamental mistake, Churchill said, resided in his "refusal to take Russia into his confidence." But Nicolson also notes in his diaries that "here we are at the gravest crisis in our history, with a genius like Winston doing nothing." A year or two later Winston was doing everything.

Nicolson disliked the "Cliveden Set" and has words such as "vain" and "self-conscious" for Lady Astor. He remained seated in the House while the rest of the members cheered Chamberlain's going to Munich, and a Tory behind him hissed "Stand up, stand up, you brute." But civilized gestures and the warning voice become ineffectual when a nation is ridden by fear; and the terror of England's leaders can be read in these pages with a kind of historical heartache—a terror born in part of the knowledge that not only was England ill-prepared for war but it was throwing away the resources of accumulated wisdom, history, character. As Nicolson wryly observes, "diplomacy is based on a knowledge of foreign psychology." It was "owing to lack of that knowledge that the Government have landed us in war."

This was the drama of Nicolson's public life on the eve of war. There was also his other world, that of society and of letters; and here too his diaries are exquisitely visual. He notes Bernard Shaw's shoulders sticking out of his jacket like a schoolboy's, or describes how James Joyce moved his head "like a bird." Or he sets down this quick vignette of T. S. Eliot at lunch: "Perfect manners. He looks like a sacerdotal lawyer—dyspeptic, ascetic, eclectic. Inhibitions. Yet obviously a nice man and a great poet." We



—From the book.

Harold Nicolson in 1936—"exquisitely visual" observations.

glimpse Mrs. Simpson in London society before the abdication, attending embarrassing dinner-parties. And then we see the Duke and Duchess, when they are comparative newlyweds, at Somerset Maugham's Villa Mauresque on the Riviera:

She has done her hair in a different way. It is smoothed off her brow and falls down the back of her neck in ringlets. It gives her a placid and less strained look. Her voice has also changed. It now mingles the accents of Virginia with that of a Duchess in one of Pinero's plays. He entered with his swinging naval gait, plucking at his bow-tie. He had on a *tussore* dinner-jacket. He was in very high spirits. Cocktails were brought and we stood around the fireplace. There was a pause. "I am sorry we were a little late," said the Duke, "but Her Royal Highness couldn't drag herself away." He had said it. The three words fell into the circle like three stones into a pool. Her (gasp) Royal (shudder) Highness (and not one eye dared to meet another).

It is like a Somerset Maugham story. (It will be recalled that Parliament would not extend to the Duchess of Windsor the "Royal Highness" the Duke was permitted to retain after abdication.)

Some American readers may squirm at Nicolson's sharp criticism of "the eternal superficiality of the American race," and one can only regret that he seems to have moved in showy circles here without encountering his peers in this country's intellectual life. His other judgments might give us pause: "They have no sense of the past; they have no sense of the future. They do not plant avenues for their great-grandchildren. They give them not merely an absence of past roots, but of future roots also." The diaries offer some significant glimpses of Charles Lindbergh, not only of his family tragedy but of his too-ardent espousal

al of Nazi power—a gifted young man who knew everything about machines and had only an *ad hoc* knowledge of history.

The qualities of warmth and realism that made Nicolson an able diplomat and talented writer also made him a devoted father and husband. He had a high future in the foreign service, but quit at forty-four because his wife hated embassy parties, evening gowns, and living abroad. They purchased a ruined tower at Sissinghurst and restored it, creating those avenues of trees and gardens for their great-grandchildren which are today the admiration of all England. Here Lady Nicolson, who was Vita Sackville-West, the poet and novelist, lounged in slacks and wrote her books. Nicolson for a while seemed to flounder: he wrote a column for Beaverbrook, but hated journalism's "constant hurried triviality which is bad for the mind." Then he thought the friend of his youth, Oswald Mosley, might create a new party

to save England from the faltering MacDonald and the complacent Baldwin. Mosley, however, turned to Fascism; Nicolson broke with him and was elected on the National Labour ticket to the House of Commons. In the meantime he had made a name as broadcaster and as author, with his lives of Curzon and Dwight Morrow, his great success *Some People*, and his earlier literary biographies of Byron, Tennyson, and Swinburne.

If he seemed to disperse his many talents, they found unity in his public service; and they shine anew in these diaries, which are filled out by some touching personal letters between him and his wife. Edited in exemplary fashion by his son, these pages are a brilliant record of a tragic decade. Two more volumes covering the later decades are promised. There seems little doubt that the Nicolson diaries will be judged among the most distinguished of the twentieth century.

A Person First, a Poet Second

James Russell Lowell, by Martin Duberman (Houghton Mifflin. 516 pp. \$8), based largely on unpublished sources, rehabilitates the poet as a human being while accepting his own modest verdict on his work. Poetry collections edited by Louis Untermeyer include "An Anthology of the New England Poets."

By LOUIS UNTERMAYER

WERE James Russell Lowell alive today he would undoubtedly be in trouble with the House Un-American Activities Committee. Besides other suspect alignments, he was a flailing opponent of his government's foreign policy, an embattled pacifist ("Ez fer war I call it murder/There you hev it plain and flat"), a radical agitator, a scathing exposé of complaisant corruption (witness "The Pious Editor's Creed"), and an angry satirist whose loud dissent could easily have been equated with disloyalty.

Martin Duberman's account of Lowell's life, unlike many biographies, is not a synthesis of previous estimates, but is based largely on unpublished sources. It is a bold and brilliant revivification. While it puts new emphasis on Lowell's compassionate fervor and his unwavering probity, there is no attempt to glorify him as a bard. Even when tempted to enlarge on Lowell's values, Duberman

does not strain to exaggerate them. He rehabilitates Lowell's qualities as a human being, but he agrees with Lowell's modest and even self-derogating summary of his position as poet. After taking potshots at Bryant, Poe, and other poets in "A Fable for Critics," Lowell turned upon himself:

There is Lowell who's striving Parnas-
sus to climb
With a whole bale of isms tied together
with rhyme.
He might get along, spite of brambles
and boulders,
But he can't with that bundle he has
on his shoulders.
The top of the hill he will ne'er come
nigh reaching
Till he learns the distinction 'twixt
singing and preaching.

The book opens pointedly and, in its wry disposals, pungently. "Once, so we like to believe, there was a time of incorruptible simplicity. Men lived with high purpose, their lives stripped of superfluities, their affections open, their goals clear, their way serene. This vision of a golden age persists because it serves multiple needs. For the discontented it validates disgust with the present, assuring them that theirs is no personal failure; for the optimistic it serves as a promise of the good life—a vision attainable because once attained. Nowhere can this fantasy of a pristine past find richer play than when one lingers over the New England towns of the early

nineteenth century. And, within that charmed circle, none is more goldenly suffused than Cambridge, Massachusetts, home of the Brahmin literati."

The scene is thus set for the Lowells and particularly for James Russell, fifth and youngest child of a socially conscious father and a whimsically moody mother. What follows is a scrupulous stocktaking. Duberman's researches reveal fresh aspects of Lowell's youth, his undistinguished debut as poet, his inglorious venture as a magazine publisher at twenty-four, his marriage at twenty-five, his early participation in reform activities and especially in the antislavery movement. Duberman is particularly sensitive to the intimate side of the Lowell story: the death of Blanche, Lowell's first child, who succumbed (it was said) to rapid teething but who probably died of excesses of mustard baths, purgatives, and leeches; the birth of a second daughter; the energy resulting in the almost simultaneous publication of four volumes; Lowell's violent antagonism to America's "manifest destiny" manifested in the shameful war against Mexico; the unhappy European trip and the death of an infant son in Rome, the enforced return to Boston and the tubercular death of his wife; the determination to begin again, his marriage to his daughter's governess, his becoming a Harvard professor and editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*.

At forty Lowell was established but far from complacent. Without pandering to popular taste, he had made the *Atlantic* not only a cultural but also a commercial success. He had become an honored teacher, a penetrating essayist, and a productive critic whose praise was just and whose condemnation was justified. A wit, he rarely used comedy, as his compatriot Holmes did, for its own sake; the humorist was always at the service of the humanist, and satire was employed by Lowell not to kill but in an attempt to cure.

IN his late fifties Lowell was appointed American Minister to Madrid and remained abroad eight years, alternately enjoying his position and suffering from gout and his second wife's alarming fits of hysteria. In his sixties he was the United States Minister to England, where he became involved in awkward political controversies and where Frances Lowell's seizures grew worse. After a final attack of insanity she died and, in the depth of his depression, Lowell received a curt note from Washington telling him he was recalled. Alone and footloose, he returned to America, then went back to England for occasional visits until, succumbing to cancer at eighty-two, he died in the house in which he had been born.

Duberman glosses over nothing; he