



Reviewed by
Anthony Astrachan

The study of history keeps changing. Most familiar is the shift in values: Successive discoveries and re-examinations transform the Whigs of the eighteenth century and the Trumans and Achesons of the twentieth century from villains to heroes and back again. Historians also shift their lenses and their metaphors: First the frontier shapes American history, then economics, then racial conflict. Laurence Veysey has chosen the commune, not as the source of historical materials that it has often been, but as the lens for a study of American cultural radicalism. He has also chosen to try another kind of change. Instead of confining himself to a completed past that must be studied from documents and monuments, he compares communes that started sixty years ago with communes that he has lived in and experienced today. The marriage of history and sociology is consummated in this book.

That should make the book exciting. Unfortunately, it is exasperating and dull. *The Communal Experience** is stifflly written, badly organized, often super-

*Harper & Row, 536 pp., \$16.95

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ficial in its analysis. Veysey stimulates one's interest enough to make one want his four communes to come alive as a novelist would make them live on the page. They never do. It's a pity, because Veysey clearly has imagination, sensitivity, even wit—but they are all victims of academic atherosclerosis.

The diagnosis is inescapable from Veysey's first use of the jargon phrase "intentional communities." Does any community survive longer than a day unintentionally? Rigidity increases with his insistence that cultural radicalism, as distinguished from political radicalism, "is usually related to a communitarian impulse." So much for dada, for black power, for women's liberation; all are reduced to the status of abnormalities in cultural radicalism. The intellectual arteries harden further with Veysey's insistence that communitarian cultural radicalism "dwarfs the entire Communist movement in America." Can communism really have had less influence on American culture than Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands or Katherine Tingley's Raja Yoga school, where children were strapped to their beds to keep them from masturbating? Veysey seems to have difficulty assessing the real relationship between the political and the cultural. He barely mentions the Vietnam war, though he surveys the reasons for the revival of the communitarian impulse among young Americans in the 1960s and examines violence as one of the nine themes he finds recurring in American cultural radicalism. Vietnam was surely a major factor in both.

ALL THIS SLOPPY THINKING could be ignored if Veysey had produced some revelation from his study of two anarchist and two mystic communes. In fact, he may lead historians to a new treasure lode in his long chapter on the Ferrer colony and modern school of Stelton, New Jersey, a nominally anarchist settlement (it included a fair number of people who became Socialists or Communists) that lasted from 1915 to the 1940s. He has examined its many publications, the extensive correspondence of its members, the recollections of its survivors and their children. (One was Joan Baez's mother; Veysey mentions this as a possible example of the continuity of cultural radicalism.) He revives forgotten characters like Harry Kelly and Alexis and Elizabeth Ferm, and he tells us that they were interesting people who led picaresque intellectual lives. But he does

not do for them what Cecil Woodham-Smith did for Lord Lucan and Lord Cardigan in *The Reason Why*, her history of the Crimean War: He does not make us feel these people; he does not tell their story from the inside.

One example will suffice of Veysey's sensitivity to the telling anecdote and his difficulties in telling it. It comes from a passage on the four-way ambivalence of intellectualism and anti-intellectualism among middle-class and proletarian members:

In this context, curiously enough, it was anti-intellectualism which could seem abstract and impractical as a philosophy of life, while a certain crude version of intellectual formalism—at least involving the three Rs and Charles Darwin—meshed more easily with a proletarian and activist view of the world. The naming by his parents, around the year 1909, of one of the future children at the school Herbert Spencer Goldberg well captures the simple intellectualism which underlay the working-class side of this contrast.

What will a student learn by writing for a professor who writes like that?

CURIOUSLY AND SADLY, Veysey does not do much better at bringing to life Rockridge, the (pseudonymous) contemporary anarchist commune in New Mexico that he lived in briefly. He describes the routine of farming during the day and getting high on pot or wine in the evening, the single sexual experiment, the resentment of the incursion of modern technology—a noisy pump needed to bring potable water up from a well. It still reads like a teacher's version of a police report. The chapter is short because the life of Rockridge has been short and because people today do not produce letters and articles for their own pleasure or necessity the way people did fifty years ago. But there are other reasons for the chapter's hollowness. Veysey tries to persuade us that the Rockridge people are *de facto* anarchists while acknowledging the tenuousness of their connection with any intellectual tradition of anarchism. He is not very convincing and produces little reason to take their thinking seriously. In fact, he does just the opposite when he describes what happened when some Rockridge people came to speak to his history class at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1972:

None of us was prepared for the result: a barrage of highly critical, sophisticated questions from an interested handful and obvious boredom or revulsion from a majority of the students. The visitors' low-key voices and the crying baby they brought

with them may have helped create this result. But they had desired very much to communicate with such an audience, and the painful fact was that they lacked the ability to do so. Until that afternoon I had not fully realized the gulf that separates these hard-core dropouts from the merely liberal college longhairs, and perhaps the 1970s from the 1960s.

On the mystical side, Veysey examines former Vedanta monasteries in Massachusetts and California and a contemporary "new age" community in New Mexico, led by a man he calls Ezra. With Vedanta, as with Stelton, Veysey tells us that the people are interesting without making us feel that they are. It would be truly interesting to read a psychological study of the reasons why wealthy WASP women chose to become followers of Indian swamis who constructed cults on Hindu, Buddhist, occult, and other religious foundations. At least one of the women Veysey describes maintained a positively impudent self-reliance that sorted oddly with the devoted submission expected by the guru. It is hard to take either the swamis or the women seriously as thinkers or as major influences on American cultural life. Still, they do deserve inclusion under the rubric of cultural radicalism, as Veysey points out by showing their connection with Christopher Isherwood and Gerald Heard.

Veysey brings Ezra's commune to life more fully than any of the others, even though he makes plain that its mysticism is regurgitated Gurdjieff. The theatrical productions that are its chief form of expression belong in the same class as those of a mediocre college dramatic society. It becomes equally difficult to take Ezra and his followers very seriously as actors on the stage of cultural radicalism. The very life that Veysey gives these communards makes them sound like material better suited for a psychological than a historical study. He finds six personalities in Ezra, for instance: planner-organizer; father-lover-confessor; guru, with "just a bit too much naked eagerness to be the authority on anything and everything"; dominating anecdotalist; bully; and gracious emissary—charming host. Ezra insists on sharp confrontations with other members as part of a public dinner-table ritual in which he accuses them of actual or philosophical offenses, and they confess, act out, and reintegrate. Absolution in one case takes the form of asking the offender to read some of his favorite William Blake poems to the group.

This kind of material leads Veysey to

make a point of finding three streams in the flow of American cultural radicalism—not only political and religious but also psychological. He thus shows himself to be post-Freudian. He keeps insisting, however, that the communes he examines are primarily political or primarily religious and seems unwilling to test the hypothesis that they may all fit more easily into a psychological stream. One wonders if he is afraid that this would reduce their historical significance.

One also wonders if this is why he treats communal sex life so skimpily, though he always makes a point of mentioning it and lists sex as one of his nine recurrent radical themes. Perhaps it is only the radicals' own propaganda and superficial journalism that makes us expect sex to be important in communes. Veysey is inherently plausible when he notes that sexual experimenters keep lapsing back into monogamous coupling. Still, a fuller treatment, especially of the

communes of the past, would be more convincing.

One of Veysey's major conclusions is that anarchist settlements are usually loosely structured—a tendency reinforced at Stelton by the fact that individuals owned their own land—and tend to develop *de facto* leaders despite their best efforts at direct democracy, while the mystical communities tend to become hierarchical under their charismatic gurus. This gives the mystical communes more likelihood of survival over long periods, so long as the guru lives. These are not exactly startling discoveries for the prodigious labors Veysey has performed. He may inspire a series of historians, all overestimating the importance of his theories for the societies they will describe. I'd rather see somebody generate a play or a novel from the material he has unearthed, something that would demonstrate its own psychological or dramatic importance. □



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A Swift Journey

SWEET DREAMS
by Michael Frayn
Viking, 173 pp., \$5.95

Reviewed by Alan Green

To call *Sweet Dreams* a "novel of today" is to reveal only one face of Michael Frayn's new gem. And on the whole, a small face. Yet the book is unquestionably about modern man, his wife, his children, his mistress, and his contretemps. The problem here is how to suggest its other facets without spoiling the pleasure of discovering how wide he ranges and with what comedy he invents.

From a London intersection, where a man waits for the lights to change, a journey begins. A journey to a not quite, but tantalizingly almost, familiar city where time is a bit erratic, where accepted ideas need new accommodation, where personal activity is equally muscular and cerebral.

Frayn has created deceptively ordinary events, placed them in deceptively ordinary surroundings, and, imagining with boundless originality, endowed it all with the extraordinary. Those who read *Gulliver* too early to appreciate the depth of Swift's penetration may not realize what exalted satiric company Frayn is moving toward here. His characters—in skyscraper offices and suburban living rooms—fumble simultaneously with the prosaic and the unfathomable. They uncertainly juggle such problems as whom to invite to dinner, how to move mountains, where to go for lunch, how to establish a workable ethical system, who's sleeping with whom, and Who is running the Show. It is comic and cosmic.

It may, at fleeting moments, haunt you with suggestions of *The Skin of Our Teeth*. For here, too, are Antrobus and Mrs. A, a Sabina who teases and mocks—and always the wonder of how we ever made it to where we are and how we'll manage onward. Always, too, as in the Wilder play, the provocative idea lurking in laughter.

Several years ago Frayn's *Against Entropy* delighted a relative handful of lucky discoverers. Perhaps because of its title, it never caught on. Which is a pity, for it is a richly funny story of a collapsing London periodical and the

Alan Green is author of the forthcoming *Mother of Her Country*, to be published by Random House.

people who are caught in its wreckage, even in the act of undermining it. *Sweet Dreams* is every bit as witty as his previous best work and even more stimulating. It's difficult to quote many of his brightest lines without revealing his theme. Two or three second bests will have to do: His hero thinks (as La Rochefoucauld might have) "you can create a good impression on yourself by being right, . . . but for creating a good impression on others, there's nothing to beat being totally and catastrophically wrong." And later, thinking that perhaps mortality rates can be reduced, the same man hesitates because "it won't do to weaken the funeral as one of the main bonds of family life." Elsewhere, two men who've long heard of each other but have never met say:

"I thought you'd look entirely different."

"No . . . no . . . I look pretty much like this."

It's a bit as though Bertie Wooster and the Earl of Emsworth had met on the eerie void outside Granada that Shaw once peopled with the Devil, Dona Ana, the Statue, and Don Juan. □

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