

to Washington, D.C. to deal with Iran's terms for the release of the American hostages. We learn that Ronald Reagan became so angry with campaign chief John Sears shortly before he fired him that Reagan "leaped out of his chair, his face flaming red, and raged at Sears" so intensely that another aide feared the candidate would throw a punch.

The authors also defend their craft—and themselves—from the charge that political journalists neglect the issues. "This is utter malarkey," Germond and Witcover insist. "If what a candidate says is covered too little, and the tone of his campaign or his personal foibles is covered too much, it's usually because he hasn't said anything new or newsworthy; the kind of campaign he's running is telling the voters more about his campaign than what he's saying about the issues does."

Yet throughout this account of the 1980 presidential campaign, Germond and Witcover seem to recognize that what filled the columns and the airwaves may not have been the most critical aspects of the election—either in advancing the obsessive desire of the press to figure out "who's ahead," or in attempting to provide readers and viewers with a coherent sense of what the battle was all about.

For example, George Bush's Iowa caucus victory (meticulously detailed here) triggered a classic reaction among reporters and politicians alike—that the momentum (or as George Bush liked to call it, "Big Mo") was inexorably swinging his way. Germond and Witcover themselves wrote, shortly before the New Hampshire primary, that "a consensus" was emerging among Republican professionals that Bush might win every remaining important primary. In retrospect, the authors conclude that Bush's campaign failed because he never established a substantive alternative to Ronald Reagan's campaign. Republicans, in other words, stuck with Reagan because they shared the world view he had been offering for 16 years.

Similarly, the stumbling entrance of Senator Edward Kennedy into the campaign—a disastrous Roger Mudd interview, frequent slips on the campaign trail, and an impolitic attack on the deposed Shah—reflected the fact that Kennedy lacked a clear sense of *why* he wanted to be president (that was the question he flubbed so badly when Mudd asked it on national television).

And Jimmy Carter's "streak of mean-

ness," which dominated political coverage all through September, was, as Germond and Witcover note, inextricably linked to a broader political context. Carter and his aides knew he could not run on his record. As one aide told them, "We knew if we had to fight this campaign in the trenches, talking about the consumer price index and the Iranian hostages and the economy, we would not be in good shape. We knew we had to make Reagan the issue." The only way to do this was for the President himself to paint Reagan as a threat to national unity and world peace. That it did not work was irrelevant; there simply was no other possible route to victory. As Pat Caddell said after the election, "All along we were trying to keep real events out of the campaign."

The dilemma for reporters such as Germond and Witcover is that there are two levels to politics. One lies at the

surface, where every day there are new ripples and shifts in the current. At the other level, events move much more slowly. It takes years for the basic elements of a political coalition to shift, as during the last 20 years much of the middle class and significant numbers of Jews and Catholics moved away from the Democratic Party. These shifts are usually not covered by daily political journalism, but they have more to do with what happens in an election than a hundred commercials and a month's worth of polls.

For years, Germond and Witcover have covered the first level of our political life as well as any reporters in the country. In *Blue Smoke and Mirrors*, they have tried to put what happened into a broader context. The result is an absorbing glimpse back into our recent political past. ■

Stalking an Elusive Poet

W.H. Auden: A Biography

by Humphrey Carpenter, Houghton Mifflin, 466 pp., \$15.95

Reviewed by D.M. Thomas

THIS IS A GOOD biography, but somehow it doesn't work. Packed with information, lucid, well-organized, competently written, it does not "write the life" of W.H. Auden. Partly this may be because Humphrey Carpenter, for all his industry, does not give the impression that he has absorbed himself fully in his subject, in the way that—to take a recent poet's biography—Avril Pyman absorbed herself in the life of Alexander Blok. There is not the same fusion of plentiful material into a coherent, if complex, portrait; rather, Carpenter relies heavily on gossipy observations by friends and acquaintances, which fizz across the pages like random particles. Auden, we hear from several people as well as from himself, preferred to pee in the washbasin. Well, so what? We hardly need to be told about this mild eccentricity a dozen times.

But probably the main reason why this biography fails to write Auden's life is Auden himself. Although he tried, with predictable lack of success, to make a biography impossible, by requesting his

friends to burn his letters, he need not have worried. His own life makes a biography impossible, or at best immensely difficult, to write. He loved reading thrillers and detective stories, and once said he was "proud to believe" that C. Day Lewis's detective Nigel Strange-ways in the "Nicholas Blake" thrillers was partly based on him. "Strangeways" would be a good pseudonym for Auden. I ended this constantly interesting and informative book still wondering *Whodunit?*; or rather, *Who was it?* Where was the missing person, and who was he? He was not in England, or America, or Ischia, or Austria. It was not even quite certain where his mortal remains were: in Christian ground, but huddled against the railings, since he was a Protestant in the Catholic church at Kirchstetten. Even the gender was uncertain; he once described himself as "the Man-Woman."

Did he love reading detective yarns

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because he wanted to solve the mystery of himself? Perhaps the would-be biographer should renounce formal biography for the detective story. In that case, two important characters and suspects would obviously be his parents living in the middle-classes in the middle of England, Birmingham. Auden remembered above all that they "loved us and treated us gently." The father was a physician, intelligent, gentle, henpecked. The mother was dominating, and established Auden's fierce work ethic, his obsession with punctuality and paid bills. The adult Auden would register his disapproval of something by remarking, "Mother

cuit. Rootless, yet yearning for home and family life, Auden even proposed marriage to various women friends—so long as his son could be called Chester.... *Sudden Encounters*: A.L. Rowse remarks that Auden could always manage to pick up a youth on the short train journey from Oxford to London when he was an undergraduate; he kept a homosexual "Don Juan" list of boys picked up in Berlin. These encounters were, in his eyes, no more than swift transactions, like buying meat at a butcher's.

In contrast, there was the "marriage" with Chester Kallman, which we would have to represent under a marriage of

On one side there was Kallman; and on the other side, "meat." There were temporary fusions of the two forces—notably perhaps when Auden was a schoolmaster at the Downs School in Herefordshire in the early Thirties. (When, toward the end of his life, I invited him to read at my Herefordshire college, to my great surprise he agreed. I believe in retrospect that he came because the train journey would take him past a place where he had been happy.) For the most part, however, Eros and Agape were sharply divided. Also, of course, homosexuality was still a twilight world. The effect of these tensions on Auden's



HENRY REDL, LIFE MAGAZINE © 1970 TIME INC.

Auden did all he could, including asking friends to burn his letters, to keep his biography from being written.

wouldn't like it." Perhaps an early clue in the biography-thriller occurs when these respectable Edwardian people alarmed Wystan at the age of five by appearing at a fancy-dress party, each wearing the other's clothes.

Or, in view of his changeable, contradictory nature, his life might be told poetically, in variations on the *I Ching* hexagrams. Let's try some examples. *The Family*: "English life is for me a family life, and I love my family but I don't want to live with them...." Yet after he had left England, his poetry became increasingly domestic, and *cozy* one of his favorite words. *The Traveling Stranger*: The first professional poet, flying from coast to coast, continent to continent, like tennis players on the cir-

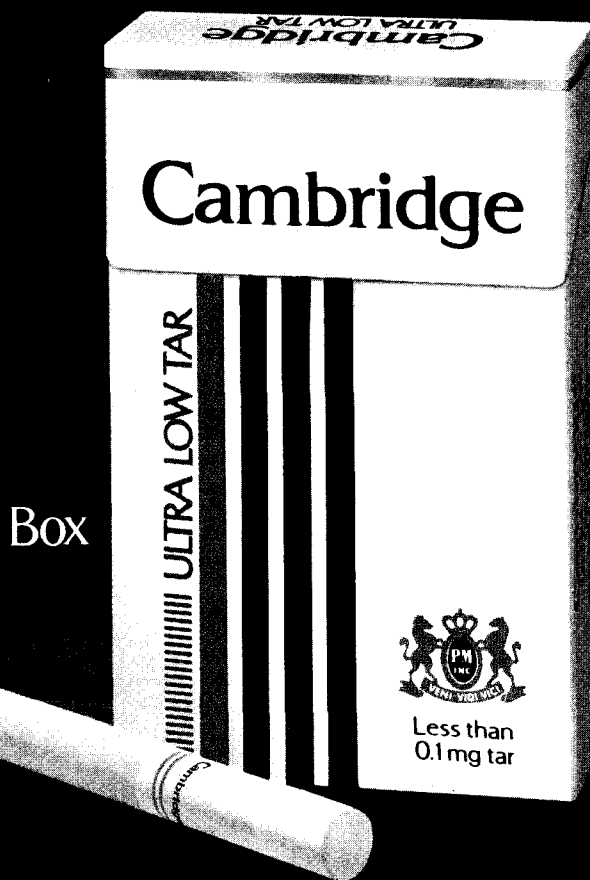
hexagrams, such as *Mutual Attraction*, *The Marrying Maiden*, *Obstructions*, *Withdrawal*, and *Long Duration*. Falling in love with Kallman a few months after his arrival in the United States with Christopher Isherwood, in 1939, Auden found to his sorrow that they were incompatible. Auden had to acknowledge that Kallman didn't want sex with him; he was forced to accept the fact that Kallman needed other lovers; and gradually Auden too was compelled, reluctantly, to turn to casual affairs again. But "long duration" there certainly was, in their platonic marriage. Kallman was faithful in his fashion, and did not long survive his friend's death.

Love, and its physical expression, had to be separated for most of Auden's life.

inner life and his poetry can only be guessed to have been enormous.

His first years in America were a climacteric, as well as literally the halfway point in his life. In quick succession came the break from England, love and its frustration, the conversion from a superficial Marxism to Christianity, and the death of his mother. They are connected, in some profound way that Carpenter hints at but does not explore as Strangers would have done. Auden broke with Mother England at her hour of greatest need; he associated the Church closely with his own mother, and also with magic: "My first religious memories are of exciting magical rites...." He once wrote that "abnormal"—for example, homosexual—sexual acts were also rites

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of symbolic magic.

Where that line of connection takes us, I don't know, because I'm not Strangers. But it's interesting that Auden's religious verse emphasizes the rational, not the magical, and there is no erotic magic in his poetry. Indeed, from his middle life on he increasingly and deliberately avoided all magic in his poetry, in favor of the rational, the social, the domestic. Carpenter quotes approvingly John Lehmann's tribute to Auden: "None, I believe, has shown such an extraordinary capacity to speak through poetry...about the whole of life." Yet there is a whole segment of the living spectrum—that part which Yeats explores in his later poetry—which Auden turned away from. Perhaps the evasions are shown most clearly in the lexicon-hunting he indulged in; they are more subtly indicated, I think, in the prose-like rhythms of his late poetry. As T.S. Eliot brought in the rhythms of the internal combustion engine, so Auden introduced to poetry the rhythms of the transatlantic jet-liner. It is a symptom of how much, in the roots of his life, he had had to suppress or cut off. He advised an acolyte to write with his groin; but he himself always wrote with his brain.

So, at any rate, I gather from reading Carpenter's dossier and re-reading some of the poetry alongside it. Others will draw very different conclusions. It may be that the right form of biography for Auden is the spy-thriller. As with the Cambridge spies of the between-wars generation, Kim Philby for instance, one gets the impression of a largely hidden life. Like Philby, Auden was charming, dedicated in his chosen profession, scruffy and hard-drinking outside it. He shared with Guy Burgess and Anthony Blunt, both of whom he knew, the homosexual's minority consciousness, the secret anti-establishment feeling. "Do you care what happens to England?" he asked himself in 1940. "Given England, not in the least." The word *betrayal*, he thought, had ceased to have any meaning. He expressed continuing friendship for Burgess after his defection.

Clearly, Auden's "espionage" was immeasurably nobler than was that of Philby and Co. He was, perhaps, "God's spy," not the Kremlin's. I find it an interesting analogy, all the same. No one can write Philby's biography either—not even Philby. Carpenter's attempt to pin down Auden adds an entertaining, inconclusive document to the file—wherever that may be. ■

Down the Mississippi

Old Glory: An American Voyage

by Jonathan Raban, Simon & Schuster, 528 pp., \$14.95

Reviewed by Robert R. Harris

TRAVEL WRITING burgeoned between the two world wars when Englishmen, sensing the dissolution of their Empire, felt the need to set out for one last look at the "colonial" world. Following in the tradition of Charles M. Doughty (whose *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, 1888, is a classic), Evelyn Waugh traveled to South America, D.H. Lawrence took in Mexico and the American Southwest, Graham Greene trekked through West Africa, and Robert Byron ventured into Afghanistan, Persia, and Tibet. The writing of distinguished travel literature has now passed on to a new generation. Paul Theroux, John McPhee, and Edward Hoagland have all published memorable accounts of odd journeys. Now add Jonathan Raban, a 37-year-old Englishman who wrote *Arabia* (1979), a fascinating account of the Middle East. *Old Glory*, his story of a trip down the Mississippi River, is as captivating a travel book as Theroux's *The Great Railway Bazaar* and is as evocative of place as McPhee's *Coming Into the Country*.

Raban has a novelist's eye for the telling detail that surprises and provides perspective. "Nothing does so much justice to the gargantuan scale of American life as its national weather maps," he writes. We take the epic quality of our weather for granted: "Without betraying the slightest flicker of wonder or concern," TV weathermen announce that people are "being frozen to death in Butte, roasted in Flagstaff, and blown off their feet in Tallahassee."

Raban was drawn to the Mississippi from the time, at age seven, when he first read *Huckleberry Finn* by a brook in the English countryside. The child's daydreams were fed by the picture on the novel's dust jacket: The body of water on which Huck drifted was "immense, an enameled pool of lapis lazuli. Smoke from a half-hidden steamboat hung over an island of Gothic conifers. Cut loose from the world, chewing on his corn cob pipe, the boy was blissfully lost in this

stillwater paradise." All young Raban needed then was the family atlas for the place names—Dubuque, Prairie du Chien, Hannibal, Cairo, Natchez, Baton Rouge—to work their magic.

Thirty years later, in 1979, Raban lit out for the Mississippi. Fancying himself a modern-day

Huck, he picked a 16-foot aluminum boat with a 15-horsepower outboard motor. Although Raban did make it all the way down the river (twice hitching rides aboard tows), his choice of craft, as he soon learned, was as foolhardy as attempting the journey on a raft. The Mississippi, you see, is exceedingly dangerous. The four-story tows that work the river, each pushing or pulling eight acres' worth of barge, pack upwards of 9,000 horsepower and throw wakes 20 feet high. In a lock chamber, Raban notes, a tow "could swill the two-or-three-million-odd gallons of water about like a milkshake." Along the river, an "eddy" is often a euphemism for a whirlpool as big as a baseball field. Three to four miles wide in places, the river jerks and spins gigantic trees ripped from its shore "as if a bored child were playing with them by radio control." Wing dams made of rock jut out into the river just below its surface and they can rip the bottom out of a boat.

Dreams, of course, conflict with reality. Or, at the very least, reality imposes a patina on our experience. The river Raban found was not the one depicted on the child's book cover. Yet, it was to prove dynamic, challenging, awesome in its many guises.

Visiting scores of hamlets, towns, and cities along the river, Raban was continually disillusioned by the big urban centers, which seem to have conspired to create a nightmare. Minneapolis "bridged, dammed, locked, [and] piered" the Mississippi, reducing it to a "sluggish canal on the wrong side of the tracks." In the



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