

the new review



A memorial to Henry James was unveiled this month in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey.
Above: Judith Aaronson's photograph of the novelist's resting place in Cambridge, Mass.

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the new review

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presidency was part of a seamless garment of rascality which all presidents must wear, not an aberration. In their earlier book they tell how one of their editors was busy reading up on the Teapot Dome affair, as though this kind of scandal ran in a kind of Grant/Harding/Nixon fifty-year cycle.

The charge of prying can be dismissed. People told them these things. It seems to have been a characteristic of the Nixon presidency that the wretched man *inspired* treason. His tax returns leaked. His administration leaked. 'Deep Throat' is now a movie legend, Ellsberg a media hero. They and hundreds of others ran Nixon into the shoals. There seems nothing that his courtiers would not tell. Henry Kissinger must have told how Nixon grovelled and wept, and then called back with the final pathetic request: 'Henry, please don't ever tell anyone that I cried and that I was not strong.' Henry did, clearly. Another Nixon aide joked that his duty included briefing Nixon on how to kiss his wife. General Haig, last commander of the Nixon Praetorian Guard, referred to him for a period as 'Our drunken friend'. Compare and contrast, as the examiners say, the post-Chappaquiddick silence of every single person who was at the notorious cook-out. The Kennedys draw loyalty as well as the lightning of fate. Nixon got the lightning without the loyalty. We can no more blame Woodward and Bernstein for setting it all down than we can blame them for using the information which always came up at the crucial moment, cued by a marked *New York Times*, from 'Deep Throat'.

Does this relentless accumulation of detail mean that our authors draw all trees and no wood? The book gives no sense that they have stepped back to pause and consider, to set up signposts along the way as the political process and the judicial procedures worked inexorably on Nixon. Was the long march away from the president in Congress entirely the result of disclosures, one after another, that the president had lied and lied again? The resignation of Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, plea-bargaining his way out of charges of receiving illegal payments, is only incidentally dealt with here. Yet as long as this dubious and increasingly tainted figure was set to succeed him, Nixon could say with Charles II, 'They will never kill me, Jamie, to make you king'. Agnew resigned ten days before the 'Saturday Night Massacre', when Nixon blew his fuses and fired Special Prosecutor Cox. 'Everyone in the government was going off on his own tack', we are told, but there is no real examination of how around this time the administration began to come apart at the seams. Nor is there an appraisal of just how unprecedented the legal challenge to the position of the presidency posed by the subpoena actually was.

The answer to such criticism is prob-

ably that we are looking for a different book. *The Final Days* must climax with the Last Day and begin where the fall began. It must stay with Lucifer in his descent, as the nation is purged by his passing. Suppose, though, that Nixon's dirty tricks were little different from other people's dirty tricks, even those of Ben Bradlee's good friend the Prince of Camelot. Suppose that what distinguished Nixon's tricks was that they were idiotically executed by low-grade people with an even lower loyalty threshold, and that when the line led back to Nixon his style and long tenure made him uniquely suited to be a scapegoat. The American people don't have Dick Nixon to kick around anymore, but are they finished with the practices which will now be associated with his disgrace?

These questions were raised when *The Final Days* appeared in America by Nicholas Von Hoffman in *The New York Review of Books*. Which president picked up the tab for the FBI bugging and harassment authorised under Kennedy and Johnson? When Nixon ordered these facts dredged from the FBI files for exculpatory use he cannot have dreamed that in one sense *he* would, as the fall guy for the sins of executive power. More alarming still, was it actually Nixon's *good* acts, as the president who wanted to come in from the Cold War and bring the federal agencies under control, which led to the skids being put under him. What about the man who blew Nixon out of the water, Alexander Butterfield? 'Deep Throat' had pointed Woodward and Bernstein at Butterfield. Their collaborator Armstrong was a junior staffer on the Ervin Committee. Butterfield had been overlooked. Now he was called, and told all. Was Butterfield a CIA plant? He has denied it. Was 'Deep Throat'? How was it that Nixon, or his secretary, was able to erase the incriminating section of the tape of June 20, 1972, when he first discussed Watergate in front of his own bugging devices, and yet not the tape of June 23, which finally sank him, on which he planned the cover-up in detail? This latter tape had still not been copied when J. Fred Buzhardt 'called a Secret Service agent and requested the reel' in the White House over two years later. These are deep waters, and Woodward and Bernstein do not spend too long in them.

Their picture, which may stand the test of time, is of a Nixon overwhelmed by fate, stretched to the limit of human endurance on a rack fashioned by no single human agency. Slowly his staff saw political death in his face. One remembered 'Nixon had begun to deal with the cold possibility that he might not finish his term. The President had not said to him explicitly, "I may not be around then", but there had been a recognition between them, an almost childlike expression on Nixon's face that seemed to say, "Why me? What did I do? How did I get into this horrible place?"' Nixon's seventh

crisis was his last. He emerges from these pages a better human being than Henry Kissinger, a more loyal friend than most of the men who served him, but still the sad, suspicious lonely figure he had been when he first clawed his way out of the West over the political corpses of Jerry Voorhis and Helen Gahagan Douglas — only more so. The man who had tried everything to manipulate a good opinion of himself in the media and for posterity died a media death, publicly and slowly, so slowly that he was the last to notice the rigor mortis in his presidency. It does not end there however. Ford, and Carter, and Reagan, and Brown, and all the others who aspire to arrive in Pennsylvania Avenue, would do well to remember that Nixon's fall, necessary or not, has left the presidency a house of glass. If everything is accessible the nature of government may change. The presidential garment handed on by Richard Nixon may turn out to be a shirt of Nessus for his successors.

Bards' Army

Not Without Glory: Poets of the Second World War

VERNON SCANNELL
Woburn Press £5.95

Spirit Above Wars: A Study of the English Poetry of the Two World Wars

A. BANERJEE
Macmillan £6.95

In 1939 both public and publishers were quick to ask 'where are the war poets?' During the previous twenty years, poetry of the First World War had attained almost mythic status, making it difficult to imagine another such conflict without another such body of verse, and establishing a standard and an attitude which that verse should adopt. But when the response came it did not conform to expectations. Instead of courageous protestants warning against the horrific circumstances of actual battle, there appeared work more concerned with the dehumanising process of military training, boredom, inactivity, and frustration. In some cases that appearance was not made at all until the war itself was over: Hamish Henderson and Bernard Gutteridge did not publish until 1948, and Keith Douglas's poems were not collected until 1951. By this time the uniform critical thumbs-down for the forties was already well rehearsed, and it is only in the last dozen years or so that more discriminating assessments have been made. Ian Hamilton performed some valuable spadework in his essay 'The

Scannell includes American as well as English poets in his survey, devoting a chapter to those he deems worthy, and thumb-nail sketches to others. His own war poetry is a conspicuous absentee, but its place is taken by the testing of other men's poetry against his own military experience, and by a commitment to illustrating the merits of the period with Messianic fervour. Almost every essay is bracketed by appeals for the poets to be taken as seriously as those of the First World War. The conclusion to his chapter on Douglas is characteristic:

So do I, but to phrase it thus, and to repeat similar claims as regularly as he does, is to blur the distinction he (rather too briefly) makes between the character of the two wars, and to prolong the process of comparison which did so much to delay a true evaluation of the poetry of the second. Poets of the First World War were static, expressing a sense of isolation from their country, and speaking for a public largely ignorant of the details of life at the front line. Those of the second were mobile, expressing social rather than national isolation, and guiltily conscious that others at home in the Blitz were having a rougher time than they were. Douglas actually had to desert to see action, and Alun Lewis and Roy Fuller were marooned for long periods in training camps, or abroad but away from scenes of conflict. When Fuller looked at a map of the world on the wall of his YMCA writing room he saw not a field of potential glory, or even imminent atrocity, but only

From one of these 'series of scenes' Lewis confirmed his impression:

All day it has rained, and we on the edge
of the moors
Have sprawled in our bell-tents, moody
and dull as boors,
Groundsheets and blankets spread on
the muddy ground.

It is precisely this kind of sterile inactivity on the one hand, and the consequent struggle to preserve personal identity on the other, that concerns so much of what is the best Second World War poetry, and it is this too which distinguishes it so crucially from the poetry of World War I.

Geographical isolation is complemented by another, more complex kind of distancing in Douglas's work. Until his death in 1944 he saw more action than Lewis, Fuller and Sidney Keyes put

together, but his attitude to it appears to be closer to the relish of Grenfell's 'Into Battle' than their disillusioned reluctance. But when Scannell refers to this relish as 'the apparent heartlessness that many, if not all, artists to some extent possess', he mistakes a special kind of isolation for mere toughness. John Carey pointed out in his review of Desmond Graham's biography of Douglas (*TNR* Vol. 1 No. 5) how frequently Douglas converts himself and other people into objects in his poems, and allows his compassion to operate under their cover. This characteristic device is not employed simply to protect him from becoming sentimental; it develops, as his work develops, into a reticent confession of the difficulty he finds in articulating an adequate response to the circumstances that surround him. It is not so much that he himself is failing to be compassionate, but that there is no compassion equal to the events. This hiatus is exacerbated by the fact that his weapons isolate him from the actions he undertakes. 'How To Kill' is typical: where Owen and his enemy met hand to hand and 'parried but my hands were loath and cold', Douglas sees his through the neutralising glass of his rifle sights:

Now in my dial of glass appears
The soldier who is going to die.

The more marked the tone of detachment, the more it suggests his own involvement, while simultaneously recording the macabre unreality of his situation. It is a tone of extraordinary subtlety; a fine balance of disinterest and anxious commitment which is absolutely in accordance with his own intentions:

To be sentimental or emotional now is dangerous to oneself and to others. To trust anyone or to admit to any hope of a better world is criminally foolish as it is to stop working for it.

Just as Douglas's sense of isolation from an adequate response to life and death led him to record the dehumanising effects of war, so Fuller's and Lewis's isolation from home produced an awareness of the depersonalising effects of training, waiting and travelling. One of the most conspicuous of these was sexual deprivation. In contrast, Douglas not only saw a great deal of military action, he also led an ambitiously full sex life. Girlfriends loll across the pages of his biography with spectacular frequency. For Lewis and Fuller, however, enlistment meant leaving their wives, and both men respond with moving records of their separation. Fuller finds 'a whole world's pull' exercised against the retention of love and individuality, and Lewis is driven to a calculated search for what seems durable in the knowledge that even substantial things are made transitory by his situation:

I put a final shilling in the gas,
And watch you slip your dress below your
knees

This frustrated pursuit of stability was intensified by the regular movement from place to place recorded in such poems as 'On Embarkation' and 'The Jungle', but it was this too which compelled him to form a more independent style: indefinite rhetorical flourishes were rejected in favour of the fixed and specific. The effects of war accelerated his attempts to 'abandon the vast for the particular, the infinite for the finite, the heart for the eye', and in doing so established his individuality as he described threats that war made to erase it.

Sexual deprivation also produced a persistent, nagging eroticism in military life. Henry Reed captures its wearying innuendo perfectly in 'Naming of Parts', not only in the title, but in the training process it describes:

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this
Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it
Rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this
Easing the spring.

Fuller similarly speaks with the voice of Eversoldier when he says 'The photographs of girls are on the wall', and the desolation which lies behind his remark is echoed throughout the work of Lewis. It is a far cry from the war poetry that they were brought up on, and a scrupulous account of the replacement of the admonitory patriot by the disaffected conscript.

Keyes recorded no such development. While Douglas, Fuller, and Lewis assiduously pruned the expectations surrounding war poetry, Keyes's conscious intention was, as Scannell says, 'to mythologise his observations and experiences'. The result is hardly worth the full chapter Scannell give him. Keyes's adolescent preoccupation with death achieved more graphic utterance in his 'Elegy (In Memoriam SKK)' when he was sixteen than it ever did after he had arrived at university and the Rilkean exercise of finding 'equivalents' for objects in a deeper metaphysical reality. His Elegy's contact with the arresting reality of his loss ('We know, by some recurring word/ Or look caught unawares, that you still drive/ Our thoughts like the smart cobs of your youth') is replaced by flatulent gesturing ('I am the fabled and symbolic tower/ Peopled with eagles and the deadly/ Bird-calling lighthouse in a storm of war'). Had he seen more than the fortnight's active service before his death, these poses might have been disciplined into something more worthwhile; as it is, the infrequency of lines concerned with the reality of war in his work defines him as a 'war poet' in a temporal, rather than a material sense.

Alan Ross and Charles Causley can be defined in both senses, and both survived — the former above deck, the latter

below. Causley is unfortunately not seen to his best advantage as a war poet; although he was in the thick of it for so long, there is a persistent evasion in his work of what Scannell calls 'material with which most war poetry deals'. It is not the almost wholesale disguise that Keyes goes in for, but rather a lyrical decoration: 'Oh mother my mouth is full of stars', says a dying gunner, and elsewhere war is described as 'a bitter bugle', and 'a casual mistress'. On the other hand, the dozen poems that Ross has preserved 'out of 100 or so', while being written further away from the ranks of which Causley was a member, come closer to capturing the details of their situation. Nevertheless, with Ross too there is a recurrent tendency to suffocate his observations with images that sometimes look as if they have come from a Manual of Descriptive Writing: 'Hammocks swing, nuzzling in tight/Like foals into the flanks of mares'; in 'Night Patrol' the sailors 'sniff greenness,/ Trembling like racehorses'; and elsewhere a threadbare leopard and dove are produced to perform their customary symbolic act.

Scannell rounds off his assessment of the British contribution with a sprint through 'the lesser but genuine poets'. Despite their numbers, it is not the range of their achievement which stands out but the regularity with which so many — F. T. Prince, Jocelyn Brooke, R. N. Currey — withdrew behind the covering of metaphysics or romance rather than face up to their experiences. Ironists such as Gavin Ewart and Norman Cameron emerge from the mêlée with refreshing incisiveness, but the mêlée itself simply illustrated that the Second World War produced as much inert poetry as the First, as well as how great is its volume beside the Collected Poems of Douglas and Lewis.

The more leisurely examination of American poets with which the book is concluded is of greater value. Lincoln Kirstein receives closer attention than the more familiar work of Simpson, Jarrell, Eberhart and Shapiro, and he returns Scannell to the theme of sexual melancholy, offering a more stylish and energetic frustration than his English counterparts. Instead of writing rooms and soggy bell-tents he has whores, drunken commanders, homosexual troops and solitaires masturbating during bombing raids. But comparison between the American and English poets helps to define the ways in which poetry of the Second World War differs from that of the First. If what is new in the poetry of the Second derives solely from the different character of the conflict, we might expect its English and American poetry to be very similar in tone. Yet the work of the Americans — Jarrell and Simpson particularly — comes perceptibly closer to repeating the more outspoken protests of Owen and Sassoon.

This may in part be due to national and individual temperament, but it also owes something to the cultural and geographical distance between them and the poets of the First World War. The English poets could not help but see themselves in direct descent from their poetic fathers; indeed, they acknowledged their complete authority. Douglas even went so far as to write 'Rosenberg I only repeat that what you were saying', but both he and his confederates found themselves in a situation where the responses of the First World War were no longer entirely appropriate or adequate. Now that Scannell has made his thorough, if sometimes rather foot-slogging, march through the period, perhaps closer analysis of their own less rhetorical, more reticent, forms of response will be made. There is a much more interesting book behind *Not Without Glory*, waiting to be let out.

A. Banerjee has, however, not written it, although he shares Scannell's enthusiasm: the survey of Douglas, Lewis and Keyes which occupies the latter half of *Spirit Above Wars* gives praise to all three in varying degrees. But this is preceded by an appraisal of First World War poetry which is alarmingly simplistic both in essence and execution. His thesis is that while poets of the Second war tended to see their conflict as an indivisible part of 'modern poetic experience', those of the First were 'confined to a few themes and specific events of the time'. From this premise Banerjee calumniates or exalts as his argument directs. Douglas, for instance, is praised because 'war entered his poetic experience as a symbol of life's pains and frustrations,' and Keyes because of his 'ability to relate history to the problems of contemporary living'. Sassoon, on the other hand, is 'unable to lift his poetry above reportage'; Owen 'lacks imaginative ability'; and Edward Thomas is made to share in the 'sense of exhilaration and freedom which was in the air' during 1914 by quotation from his poem 'This Is No Case Of Petty Right And Wrong' as well as from a letter to Bottomley in which he says 'I have given up groaning since the war began'. (Thomas gave up groaning because the war unexpectedly freed him from the shackles of journalism, not because he was fired by nationalistic enthusiasm, and 'This Is No Case Of Petty Right And Wrong', which rejects jingoism in favour of balanced, organic patriotism, was not, in fact, written until December 26, 1915 anyway.)

Only Rosenberg escapes this barrage, because in his work Banerjee finds the individual character of the First war eroded, and the unique place of the soldier in the trenches taken by the archetype who 'belongs to the long line of warriors that stretches back to the ancient history of Western civilisation'. If he had looked harder at Thomas's poetry

he would have found this quality there too. In 'The Sun Used To Shine' Thomas describes how he and Frost watched the moon rise over France from Gloucestershire, and

Could as well imagine the Crusades
Or Caesar's battles.

Here the overlapping of past, present, religious and imperial wars suggests precisely that sense of continuity that Banerjee cannot find in First World War poetry other than Rosenberg's.

But even if all wars are similar in essentials, they are not in duration, circumstance and intensity. The First World War was waged on a particularly large and horrific scale, and the response of its poets at their best was not the unimaginative reportage that Banerjee would have us believe, but a definition of the very circumference of their lives. Banerjee deals with their successors in the Second World War with surprising insight and authority, but by the time he reaches them he has sown such a wilderness of misinterpretation and misunderstanding that, even while agreeing with his assessment of their worth, it is hard to trust his judgment.

ANDREW MOTION

New Stories

Passions

And Other Stories
ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER
Jonathan Cape £3.95

A Dove of the East

And Other Stories ✓
MARK HELPRIN
Hamish Hamilton £3.50

The Sun's Net

Stories ✓
GEORGE MACKAY BROWN
Hogarth Press £3.75

Here are books by three minority writers (two Jews and an Orkney Islander) who have revived the folk tale and enlarged their fictional world by letting the supernatural implode into it. Breaking with realism, the three look behind it for older narrative techniques. It is true that Mark Helprin does this in only one story — his best — and that the other two exploit the terrain to different effect. Nonetheless, it is interesting that they and one or two others — John Barth, Cynthia Ozick and Malamud come to mind — should be doing this at the same time. Writing about the irrational — as about minorities — has a resonance now which it