

Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary

THE SEVENTEENTH DEGREE: How It Went; Vietnam; Hanoi; Medina; Sons of the Morning. By Mary McCarthy. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 451 pp. \$7.95

THE MASK OF STATE: Watergate Portraits. By Mary McCarthy. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 165 pp. \$6.95

By GLORIA EMERSON

THE FIRST 56 pages of *The Seventeenth Degree* surely must have been written by Mary McCarthy in a futile attempt to thicken a collection of two old pieces on the Vietnam war, her account of the 1971 Medina trial and a book review of *The Best and the Brightest*. It is a punishing chunk of lard to swallow.

Anyone in this country who has the slightest interest in the most obvious costs, only to us, of the Vietnam war—even if it is just a recognition of the 56,552 American dead, more than half of them under 22—might have the same response to these pages as I did. It was a slight gagging.

The "lard" is a preface called "How It Went," which describes in sentimental detail the so-called personal costs that lay behind two fast trips to Indochina to write *Vietnam* and *Hanoi*. McCarthy went to South Vietnam in 1967, staying there a month, and to Hanoi in 1968, where visitors could not stay for more than 14 days.

If it is true, as she writes, that a genuine desperation to do something to widen American opposition to the war was the reason she made two trips, how curious it now seems to read her own bitter comments and unhappy suspicions as to why neither book was widely available, sold well or was reviewed by the publications that never before dared to ignore her. They were published in what she calls pamphlet format, cheaper than hard-cover books, bigger than paperbacks, to have the widest possible distribution.

But they went largely unnoticed and years later she has not reconciled herself to it. Those "personal costs" refer to her husband, James West, a Foreign Service officer rooted in Paris who was loaned to

OECD. He felt he might have to resign, or would be fired, if she went to Vietnam in early 1966 to write critical pieces. The first assignment had been offered to her by Robert Silvers, the editor of *The New York Review of Books*. It was refused because McCarthy felt her opinions would lead to punishment for her husband, then 51, who had alimony payments and three children to support. The following January, Silvers asked her again to go to Vietnam. Much had changed. West at last wanted his wife to go to Vietnam.

It is nice that Miss McCarthy loves her husband but the truth is that he had probably not become a braver man, or more sickened by the war. It was easier in 1967 for him to see that his career might not be hurt by her, for even inside the White House there were powerful opponents of the war. West even said he would not resign and that he would risk being fired. Of course he was not.

Her description of their meeting that afternoon in a Paris cafe, when the decision had just been made, might have been written by a young Evelyn Waugh satirizing the jiggings of the upper-class anti-war liberals chchering their own courage: "This time we were not at all calm but very excited. I cried for happiness. We held hands. My eyes were still wet when we saw Henry Moore, the sculptor, come up the street. He sat down at our table, and we told him that we had arrived at a great moment for both of us."

I have paid so much attention to McCarthy's long preface because it acts as a trip flare, quickly and cruelly lighting up what was not easily seen before. It is this: She imagines herself to be a journalist and is not. There are fatal flaws. She sets forth on these voyages—to Indochina, to the courtroom at Fort McPherson, Georgia, to the Senate Caucus Room for the Watergate hearings—much as a plucky and confident tourist who will put up with a little heat and a few flies to see some pyramids before going home, quite certain that it had all been absorbed and understood.

Perhaps she has the natural shortcomings of a good novelist who suddenly cannot compose her material and finds there are plots and characters to write about that she can not control. There is always a sense in each of her reporting pieces that Mary McCarthy has made herself the main character, always quite grateful to

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the nice young reporters on the story who fill her in, and always sure that intelligence, her liberal politics and a great flair for descriptive writing are what counts. She must believe it, or she would not have agreed to the publication of *The Mask of State: Watergate Portraits* which is the thinnest of all McCarthy pieces.

I am aware that McCarthy does not see herself running on the same track with Seymour Hersh, or Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, but what lessons they could teach her and how it would help! Dipping in and out, anxious not to miss a dentist appointment or a dinner party in Paris perhaps, she does not pay the price. It shows. She does not understand that there is a required drudgery, that telephone calls must be made, the mean questions have to be asked, and that it is not enough, ever, just to be there. Perhaps she feels Norman Mailer gets away with it, and so should she. Then, too, Miss McCarthy, who is a celebrity of sorts, is weighted down by an unusual conceit. She cannot resist harping on why *Vietnam* ("long, red and thin in its durable linen-treated cover piled up in the warehouse . . .) and *Hanoi* did not sell the first time around.

" . . . My reports of those trips, at the time, had a certain pioneering quality: in South Vietnam only John Steinbeck and Martha Gelhorn, among American writers, had preceded me, and, *in the North, I was the first American novelist to descend at Hanoi airport,*" she writes. The italics are mine.

Perhaps she cannot admit that better reporting and finer writing from Vietnam was done by others. Perhaps she was unnerved by all the space in the *New Yorker* given, not to her, but to less-known writers who sometimes, perhaps without her ever knowing it, produced masterpieces. In 1967 in South Vietnam, at a time when she was there, a young writer named Jonathan Schell was covering Operation Cedar Falls. He wrote a careful, dry, factual, unforgettable account of the death of a Vietnamese village whose 3500 inhabitants were moved out and made into wretched and helpless refugees so it could be destroyed as the Americans wanted. That book, *The Village of Ben Suc*, and Schell's later one called *The Military Halfachieve* what McCarthy did not and it is these books which should be again before us, not hers.

Much of what she observed in the South was valuable and correct. Her indictments were the right ones. She saw very clearly the lunacy and deceit and racism of our pacification programs, our wish to "save" the Vietnamese even if we had to move or kill them all, long before many reporters stationed in Saigon knew what was going on. But so often the scenes she describes are made meaningless by the weight of her sarcasm and contempt so that what causes the shivers and sticks in our minds is how deftly she wields the knife and not how sickening and wrong the war was. Over and over again, she pads the detail and reduces it to a spiteful note when it should have been much more. She is always getting in her own way. It is true in *Vietnam* and in *Hanoi*, although she seemed more at ease with many of the Vietnamese she met on her trip there, and her impressions of that visit are far more human and troubled.

Medina, a peculiarly fragmented and haughty version of one of the My Lai trials, is notable for the contempt and impatience of the writer who must listen to poor grammar and the stilted, dead language of the witnesses. Where are the portraits, or profiles in *The Mask of State: Watergate Portraits*, which is her partial coverage of Senator Sam Ervin's Watergate hearings? I could not find them. McCarthy did not know the Nixon White House, never met or observed any of the principals before they all sat in the same room, had no resources of her own, and the result is predictable. She was a reporter once more, reporting very little. Her attack on David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest* first appeared in the *New York Review of Books* and, perhaps in a desperate move to shore up her own book, she has included it. In any case, if she detests all else, it contains two sentences that Mary McCarthy might read and remember. She could never have written them, and this perhaps is her greatest fault.

For Halberstam, who first covered Vietnam in 1962 and 1963 and could never seem to move away from the war in the next 10 years, wrote of it: "It seems the saddest story possible, with one more sad chapter following another. Like almost everyone else I know who has been involved in Vietnam, I was haunted by it, by the fact that somehow I was not better, that somehow it was all able to happen." □