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# Travels Through Darkest America

*INNOCENTS AT HOME: America in the 1970s.* By Tad Szulc. Viking. 337 pp. \$10

By GODFREY HODGSON

TAD SZULC came to the United States in 1947, from Poland by way of almost everywhere else, and he became an American. He did the thing thoroughly, too: He married a girl from Akron, Ohio, and he went to work for The New York Times.

But until five years ago, most of his career had been spent, either as a foreign correspondent—he spent sustained periods in Latin America, Eastern Europe and Spain for The Times—or in Manhattan and Washington, which in the opinion of a large number of American citizens are places as exotic as Lima and Sarajevo and more pernicious.

And so in 1969, when he came home to Washington to work for The Times bureau, it felt like coming home—to a foreign country.

He decided to turn himself into an American foreign correspondent, exploring America by doing all the things that foreign correspondents do abroad.

With his wife and children he logged 17,000 miles through darkest Middle America. He experienced the numbing impact of the culture of the interstate highway with all the shock which a foreigner would feel. But he also turned off and poked about with a reporter's curios-

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ity among the hollows of Appalachia, the ranches of Wyoming and the family farms of Iowa.

He pored over the Census Bureau's statistics, and he talked to taxi drivers and waitresses. Those two time-honored sources did not let him down: Two of his best quotes came from a cabbie in Philadelphia (class bitterness) and from a waitress in Cheyenne (the drift to the city).

His assignments for The New York Times were so varied that he must have confessed his book plans to a cooperative news editor. An interview with George Jackson in San Quentin, shortly before Jackson's death, helped Szulc understand the roots of black despair and black pride.

But above all he looked at the pieces of his own life, as a foreign correspondent learns to look at every contact he makes with the host society, as so many pieces of evidence about it. His own mortgage and the tax relief he got on it helped him to understand how federal tax policy distorts housing patterns, for instance; his Polish background gave him an entry into working-class circles in Pennsylvania; his ability to speak Spanish, a knowledge of *chicano* politics; and so on.

But his most advanced tutors turned out to be his children. His daughter, a college student when her mother and father came home in 1969, seems to have gone through the whole experience of her generation: radical politics in Washington and Berkeley, first the war, then the environment, an early marriage, an early divorce, even a car crash which taught Szulc what doctor's bills can be like. The son, in poetry and music, was trying to understand a painful world, and then, as a volunteer in ghetto programs, trying to do something about it. Instead of getting stuck on the far side of the generation gap, Szulc tried to understand them, and in return he got an understanding of the restless, ambitious, disappointed mood of the children of people like him in America.

"My notion," he writes, in fact, "was to write a book as if I was a foreign correspondent from a faraway country engaged in the process of discovering this land." On the whole, he has succeeded in writing a book such as a foreign correspondent might write. And the result is only partially satisfactory.

He has a voracious appetite for fact, not all of it accurate: (Continued on page 4)

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for example he dates the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, a very important moment in the history of the '60s, in 1965 instead of 1964, and he underestimates the proportion of blacks in the population of Detroit by a factor of roughly three.

His eye for significant detail is sharp. On youth, on the suburbs, on poverty, on the mounting class consciousness of the white middle class,

compassion to his reporting. It is not a book of analysis, and it suffers from three rather serious weaknesses.

The first—and it is perhaps inherent in the device of writing about a country for its inhabitants as if it were a foreign country—is that the author seems uncertain of the level of information which he can assume in his readers. Sometimes he rehearses facts in outline which must be known to most of them, without going into the detail which might give them a new understanding; at other times, he assumes knowledge which they may well not have.

Second, the book lacks structure. Formally, it is divided into four sections—"At Home in America," "Youth

in America," "Society in America" and "Power in America"—which are uneven in length and quality. The section on youth is excellent, even if it perhaps overstresses, as it is hard not to do, the stance and problems of upper-middle-class youth. The fourth section, I suspect, was an afterthought—perhaps a publisher's afterthought, inspired by some ill-thought-out notion that "you must have something about Watergate."

In general, section follows section without the drive which comes from tight, logical construction. I am tempted to borrow the *mot* of Winston Churchill, which I saw recently used by another reviewer about another book. "Waiter," the old man is supposed to have said about a dessert, "take this pudding away, it has no *theme*."

his judgments seem to me shrewd, and they are well illustrated and often pitifully put.

There are several digressions, or what seemed at first to be digressions—on new towns like Reston and Columbia; on Virginia Beach, the fastest growing city in America, apparently, and on the military society of Colorado Springs. My first reaction was that these had been chosen at random because they were places Szulc happened to know; on reflection they strike me as interesting examples of the variety of unknown America.

In its essence, this is a book of opinion: the informed experience of an intelligent, exceptionally well-traveled man who brings benevolence and

What Szulc's book seems to me to lack, though, is not so much a theme as a coherent intellectual position. His stance is that of a skeptical liberal who is emotionally attracted by some radical critiques of American institutions, but is not willing to test them by following them through to their logical conclusions.

At times he comes close to the hand-wringing which keeps the lingerie ads apart in *The New York Times Magazine*: At one point he does actually ask "What is this society doing to itself?" and he is free with adjectives like grotesque, gruesome, sinister in their metaphorical meanings.

Occasionally, and abruptly, this generally pessimistic, problem-oriented tone is interrupted by heartfelt professions of patriotism and optimism. "America is full of . . . men and women of courage and principle," he writes. "I retain the faith that perhaps even in our time, Americans shall overcome it all."

The trouble with this is that social problems have social causes, in institutions, interests, ideologies. When one understands this as shrewdly as Mr. Szulc does, one is no longer allowed to hope that they will go away because of the (undoubted) presence of men and women of courage and principle.

Still, it would be a brave man who could claim to have constructed a coherent intellectual position that would explain the baffling contradictions of American reality in all its mind-stretching multiplicity and changing as it does at the speed of light in four dimensions.

Mr. Szulc has brought to the task a generous heart, a sharp eye and the honesty to admit that things are not simple. He has written a book in which few will fail to find facts and ideas that will stimulate their own thinking about the great riddles of American government and society. □