

Books of The Times

The G-Man We Already Knew

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

J. EDGAR HOOVER. *The Man in His Time*. By Ralph de Toledano. 384 pages. Arlington. \$8.95.

One can say what one wants about Ralph de Toledano's "J. Edgar Hoover: The Man in His Time"—and most of what one wants to say is derogatory. But at the very least one comes away from this book by a conservative journalist with a general estimation of Hoover that most of us can probably live with. To wit, that Hoover shaped and influenced the Federal Bureau of Investigation to an extent that perhaps no other man in American history has done for an arm of the Federal Government. That the first half or two-thirds of his career were covered with glory. That he was autocratic, irascible and occasionally petty-minded, and grew more so as the years advanced, but that he always remained above partisan politics (an asset we have come to appreciate even more since his death in May, 1972). And that in his final years, events went one way and Hoover went the other, leading one to the conclusion that, to put it as gently as possible, he overstayed his welcome.



Ralph de Toledano

Fair enough. But the question remains: Is it worth reading the nearly 400 pages of Mr. de Toledano's defense of Hoover to arrive at such a bland estimation of his career? The answer must be emphatically negative. For whatever virtues can be assigned to "J. Edgar Hoover"—and the foregoing paragraph pretty well sums them up—they are completely overwhelmed by its faults.

Revealing Only the Familiar

Much of what Mr. de Toledano writes is simply desultory—a filling up of empty space without the least concern for shaping cogent arguments. He reveals little about Hoover's private life (or what little there was of it) except what is familiar, trivial or unprovable one way or the other from the evidence offered—such as that Hoover was descended from a Swiss background, that he was proud of his rose garden (and was once bilked in the purchase of some fertilizer), and that he was emphatically not a homosexual (on the other hand, he was emphatically not "a womanizer," Mr. de Toledano asserts with equal indignation, thus reducing the debate over Hoover's sexual preferences to something of a Mexican standoff).

His account of the early, crime-busting years—when Hoover probably made his greatest contributions to the reputation and integrity of the Bureau—is superficial in the extreme. What he tells us about the hunting and capture of such criminals as

"Ma" Barker, Alex Karpis, the Barrows and John Dillinger has been recounted at least a dozen times before—and invariably with more dramatic urgency. (In his brief resumé of the Barrows' career, Mr. de Toledano never bothers to mention the movie "Bonnie & Clyde," whose astonishing popularity might have offered him the occasion for some elaboration on his theme of crime and permissiveness.)

Elsewhere, when dealing with the more controversial aspects of Hoover's career, he is by turns evasive, misleading and simplistic. He neglects, except in vague references, Hoover's nearly monumental talents as a public-relations man: there is no mention whatsoever of those F.B.I.-approved radio and TV programs, no discussion of Hoover's exploits as a best-selling author (were the contents of his books so trivial as not to warrant even passing comment?).

His treatment of Hoover's controversial relationships with such figures as Robert F. Kennedy, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Ramsey Clark is so reductively simple-minded as to set the debate back rather than move it forward. There is a curious reference to "the details of Bobby [Kennedy]'s involvement with Marilyn Monroe and the causes of her suicide," but no elaboration of those details." All Mr. de Toledano is willing to offer us is that those "details" confirmed Hoover's "opinion" of Kennedy's "lack of moral fiber." And yet the back-ad of the book's dust jacket has promised to tell us "why she killed herself."

Sources Remain Undivulged

Worst of all, Mr. de Toledano, despite his credentials as a former Newsweek reporter and a knowledgeable friend of the F.B.I., refuses entirely to divulge his sources, to document his claims, to footnote or to acknowledge. In fact, he doesn't even admit it openly when he borrows from books by Ladislav Farago ("The Game of the Foxes"), John Toland ("The Dillinger Days") and a dozen other writers whose works echo in these pages, not excluding Mr. de Toledano himself, some of whose earlier books he rips off for the second or third time (see particularly his account of the Alger Hiss case). So it is difficult to believe his claims even when there is no obvious reason not to believe them.

One could go on and on. But the controversies that surround Hoover are all too familiar by now, and it should suffice to say that Mr. de Toledano does little to resolve them. What the substance of his case in defense of Hoover finally boils down to is that the Director hated Communism and loved America, and no one is going to debate that—except perhaps to point out that worse men have hated Communism harder and loved America more. In the meantime, Mr. de Toledano almost inadvertently reminds us of the Hoover we all knew—the conscientious if puritanical public servant who built the F.B.I. and then stayed around too long. If it requires 400 pages to remind you of that Hoover, then by all means read this book. Otherwise, forget it.