

Advise and Fictionalize

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

THE COMPANY. By John D. Ehrlichman. 313 pages. Simon & Schuster. \$8.95.
THE CANFIELD DECISION. By Spiro T. Agnew. 344 pages. Playboy Press. \$8.95.

Besides being a slickly plotted, fast-paced, all-around professional job of novel-writing, "The Company," by John D. Ehrlichman, the former assistant to the President for domestic affairs, has two things in particular going for it. First, it's a roman à clef—that is, a novel in which the characters seem to resemble certain actual people—and an especially clever one at that, because not only do the characters wear sandwich boards that make them as easily identifiable as people in a Jacqueline Susann story, but they also bear little labels that give you the feeling you are being let in on a secret by one who knows. For instance, President Richard Monckton, the character in the story who sets up his own intelligence team to plug up White House leaks, has the habit of slamming the telephone receiver into its cradle as hard as he can whenever he finishes a conversation. "For years this unintended punctuation had brought him some subjective affirmation of his superiority over those mechanical and technical empires which he neither controlled nor understood." I don't know whether this detail is based on anything actual or not, but it sure sounds plausible enough.

A Substance of Reality

So it doesn't matter that Mr. Ehrlichman's characters have silly political-novel names such as William Archer Curry (a wealthy young President who was killed while still in office), or Esker Scott Anderson (Curry's Vice President and successor, a former power in the Senate), or Dr. Karl Tessler (Richard Monckton's assistant for national security affairs, out of Harvard). They could be called Bushy, Bagot and Green, and they'd still assume a substance of reality uncommon to most novels of this sort.

Second, Mr. Ehrlichman sucks in the reader and sets up his expectations in a way that is especially cunning. The main-spring of his novel's plot is a Central Intelligence Agency director, Richard Martin, who is trying to cover up a dirty little errand he ran for President Curry in aborting "the Rio de Muerte Operation" (an amphibious military landing in the Caribbean that failed disastrously for reasons not known to the public). Curry's successor, President Anderson, or E.S.A., as he is commonly called, has used this dirty little errand as blackmail to compromise the "company's" independence from the Oval Office. So halfway through "The Company" you are certain that what Mr. Ehrlichman is about to demonstrate is that while President Monckton may have played a dirty trick or two on the United States Constitution, he was forced to do it by the fact that his predecessors played even dirtier ones.

But that's not the point at all. The point, as it turns out, is not that Curry and Anderson were just as bad as Monckton,

but that Monckton is just as bad as Curry and Anderson—only dumber. And funnier too. Whether we're witnessing Monckton slamming down the phone receiver after a conversation with his mother; or Monckton on the eve of his election saying to his chief of staff, Frank Flaherty, "By God, Frank, that's the first time anyone has called me Mr. President. You may want to make some little note of that; the question may come up later. The press likes to know those little things. Footnotes to history."; or Lars Haglund, White House operative, opening up a box of cuff links he has just received from Monckton ("I have these specially made up for my visitors, you know. But you don't have to worry—they are worth less than ten dollars, so you don't have to declare them"), only to find the box empty—we have to laugh at Mr. Ehrlichman's wickedness.

I'm sorry, too. I'm no more an admirer of the author than you are, in case you happen not to be one of his most fervent admirers. But let's face it: He has written an extremely entertaining book, and no one, not even the Federal Court of Appeals, can take that away from him.

Inflammatory Potboiler

It's a whole lot easier to dislike Spiro T. Agnew's novel, "The Canfield Decision," about a Vice President who tries to jump on American exasperation with détente to bounce his way to the Presidency. For one thing, Mr. Agnew's potboiler is based on the inflammatory premise that "American Jews exert an influence on American opinion that is far heavier than their numbers would indicate. They are the strongest single influence in the big media—the media with worldwide impact. They control much of the financial community. Therefore, they heavily affect, through propaganda, the majority of the Congress. Oh, they scream anti-Semitism whenever anyone mentions this power, but it's true." (Of course, it's an Iranian terrorist who utters these words in the novel, so one can't quite "scream anti-Semitism" at the author, even though the plot of "The Canfield Decision" bears the terrorist out.)

Worse, at least from an artistic point of view, the story is overdetailed, the dialogue overexplicit, the characters overclichéd, and the work left to the reader's imagination overlooked. Indeed, where most writers trying to construct a plausible story experience the sensation of sawing away at uneven table legs until there is nothing left but slab, Mr. Agnew appears to have gone about his carpentry by adding on to the legs until whatever it was he was trying to support has disappeared from sight—everything, that is, except his theory about overinfluential Jews.

But one positive thing you can say for "The Canfield Decision": Despite all the speculation to the contrary, Mr. Agnew appears to have written it all by himself. In fact, it is an insult to the writing profession to suggest that anyone was paid to help perpetrate this bilge.