

Book World

Nabokov 3
Death of the Car 6
Recordings 11

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The Best and the Brightest

By David Halberstam
Random House. 688 pp. \$10

By RONALD STEEL

LIBERALS CALL IT a horrible mistake, though inspired by noble motives. Conservatives say it failed because the military did not have a free hand. Radicals view it as an example of voracious imperialism. Everyone agrees that whatever its causes, it must never happen again. Which is precisely what they all said after Korea.

So the argument over Vietnam goes on. We pick at it obsessively, trying to understand how our good intentions and generous instincts could have led us to such a tragedy. Eight years of war, 60,000 Americans dead, some four million Vietnamese casualties—and for a purpose that few can understand and even fewer explain. The end of the war will not lead to a cease-fire in the search for explanations, for we have to know what went wrong and why we allowed Vietnam to become a national obsession. Like our own Civil War, it cannot be put to rest because it contains some dark and essential truth about our character.

David Halberstam made his reputation on Vietnam, and in one form or another has been writing about it ever since. This latest book, which is a massive group portrait of the key men behind the war and the decisions they made, is as ambitious as it is lengthy. His purpose is to tell us not only who the decision-makers were and how they got there, but how they responded to power and why they waged the kind of war they did. In trying to find out why Vietnam happened, he explains, he was led to write "a book about America, and in particular about power and success in America."

The men who flocked to Washington under Kennedy and stayed on with Lyndon Johnson were touted as being the ablest to serve the nation in this century.

RONALD STEEL, the author of *Pax Americana and Imperialists and Other Heroes*, is working on a biography of Walter Lippmann.

They were the best and the brightest of their generation. Smart, dedicated, efficient and socially adept, they went to the best schools, held prestigious jobs in business, law and academia, and married into the right families. If ever men were trained for leadership and counsel, surely it was the dazzling team that came to Washington in the early 1960s.

Yet they failed. Not only were they personally discredited, but they undermined the prestige of the very class they represented—the intellectual and political elite which presumably possessed the wisdom and the training to govern the country. They failed not because they lost an unwinnable war, but because they falsely perceived the two societies they were trying to manipulate: the Vietnamese and the American. They fought a colonial war against a country determined to prevail over foreign domination. And they tried to sell that war to the American people without ever truthfully explaining what they were doing or why they were doing it.

They even fell short in the one thing

they had been hired to provide: intelligence. Long after it became apparent that bombing would not work, that sending combat troops would be to follow in the footsteps of the French, that we had intervened in someone else's civil war, that the domino theory had been made irrelevant by the Sino-Soviet split, and that it made no difference to the security or welfare of the United States what kind of regime ruled in Saigon—the decision-makers clung to their illusions and their statistics.

This is an angry and disillusioned book, one haunted by the theme of misplaced faith and soured idealism. Like many liberals who were caught up in the Kennedy myth, Halberstam looks back on that period with something like a feeling of betrayal. "The main literature of the era," he writes, "was liberal and in it there is no note of how Kennedy manipulated the liberals and moved for the center, partly because of a reluctance to admit that it happened . . . and partly to claim Kennedy for history as liberal."

The liberals, of course, feeling their hour had come, allowed themselves to

be manipulated because they relished proximity to power and they were seduced by images that were self-flattering. Those who realized they had been used drifted or broke away; the others stayed on, clinging ever more tenaciously to the remnants of power. These are the ones. Halberstam settles on with a juggernaut grip.

Robert McNamara was "intelligent, forceful, courageous, decent, everything, in fact, but wise . . . the embodiment of the liberal contradictions of that era, the conflict between the good intentions and the desire to hold and use power. . . ." William Bundy, like his brother, is seen as archetype of a social class, a man of education and intellectual background who believed that "only certain people could be trusted and they had to have certain credentials, and those credentials would turn out increasingly to be breeding and a fondness for the use of force." In this world there is no place for "serious, ponderous Chester Bowles, given to long answers to short questions, reeking of good intentions" (Continued on page 2)



Poetic Justice

THE NEW OXFORD BOOK OF ENGLISH VERSE: 1250-1950

Chosen and edited by Helen Gardner
Oxford, 974 pp. \$10

By W. H. AUDEN

AS A FELLOW anthologist, I cannot, of course, read this book without wondering what I should have done had I been in Dame Helen Gardner's shoes. At least I know the difficulties. The Oxford Books of Verse are intended to be official and standard works. This means that the anthologist must subordinate his, or her, personal literary taste to his duties as a literary historian.

For example, in his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* Yeats was far too self-indulgent. He happened to dislike the poetry of Wilfred Owen, but he should not, on that account, have left him out. This error Dame Helen never makes.

W. H. AUDEN's most recent book is *Epistle to a Godson, and Other Poems*.

The Best and the Brightest

(Continued from page 1)

and good thoughts, sermons really, among lean swift young men who thought it quite acceptable to have idealistic thoughts and dreams just so long as you never admitted them."

In Maxwell Taylor, the soldier-scholar who joined the scholar-bureaucrat Walt Rostow in selling the Vietnam commitment to Kennedy and the bombing campaign to Johnson, he finds the embodiment of an era: "If the Kennedy administration had come to power to be the rationalizers of the great new liberal Democratic empire, then they had found the perfect general; their social and academic hubris was matched by his military self-confidence."

Halberstam is vitriolic with his villains—Taylor, the Bundys, Dean Rusk, Rostow, Lyndon Johnson, John Kennedy; patronizing toward those he considers fools—Ambassador Frederick Nolting, General Paul Harkins, General William Westmoreland; a bit sentimental about his heroes—Bowles, Averell Harriman, General Matthew Ridgway, George Ball; and unforgiving toward those few tortured officials who defended the untenable even after they ceased to believe in it themselves—McNamara and John McNaughton.

The real villain, however, is not any single individual, but an entire social class: the establishment and the intellectual elite that presumably serves it. That

I suspect, though I cannot, of course, be certain, that she takes as little pleasure in Shelley's poetry as I do, but he is adequately represented. The only change in her selection that I would have made would be to substitute for "To Maria Gisbourne in England, from Italy" an extract from "The Triumph of Life," which seems to me his best poem. Sometimes one has the good luck to find one's personal taste and one's sense of a poet's historical importance in agreement. Dame Helen, for example, obviously loves Yeats and Eliot, and her selections from them could not be bettered.

Secondly, an anthologist has to be constantly on his guard against being a slave to the taste of his age. This Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch failed to do. In 1900, the Metaphysical poets had been forgotten and most critics still agreed with Matthew Arnold's description of Dryden and Pope as "Classics of our Prose." Dame Helen has corrected that. In 1900, too, the most popular modern poet was Swinburne. Today, I suspect hardly anyone reads him, but Dame Helen has not omitted him on that account: indeed, she prints one more poem than Quiller-Couch did. Again, also, I believe, under the influence of Matthew Arnold, comic or nonsense verse was considered unworthy company for "serious" poetry. Miss Gardner knows better and has included excellent selections from Lear and Lewis Carroll. I am surprised, therefore, by her selection from Thomas Hood. Hood's "serious" poems, which are all she prints, seem to me Keats and water, but his comic verse entitles him to the rank of a major poet.

Then every anthologist knows that, due to the exigencies of space, an anthology is weighted in favor of the writer of short lyrics and against those whose ma-

for achievements are in long poems, dramatic or narrative. It is possible, for instance, to do justice to Clare, but not to the Elizabethan dramatists or Milton or Wordsworth or Byron. Quiller-Couch included no extracts from long poems; Dame Helen has, though she does not, and I think wisely, print passages from plays.

Of her 945 pages, she devotes only 24 to the age between Langland and Skelton. Langland only gets eight lines, and the only Scottish poet of the period represented is Dunbar; there is nothing from Henryson, Gavin Douglas or King James I. Aside from the problem of space, I imagine she felt, probably rightly, that the average reader would not understand Middle Scots and that it is impossible to modernize the original text.

Like every lover of poetry, I have my special private pets, and I looked eagerly to see what she had done with Campion, George Herbert and William Barnes. Her Campion and Herbert selections seem to me admirable, though, in the case of the latter, I was sorry that she did not have the space to include his longest poem, "The Sacrifice," which also seems to me his greatest; in the case of Barnes, however, I feel I could have done better, but, then, one is always jealous about one's pets.

For obvious space reasons, Dame Helen has limited her list of poets writing in English to those who were or are British citizens. However, she makes an exception in the case of Ezra Pound. It is true, of course, as we all know, that he did enormous services to British poets, but so have some other Americans. I know, for instance, how much I owe to Robert Frost and Marianne Moore. T. S. Eliot is a problem. Though for many years a

British citizen, was his poetic sensibility really British? I should be inclined to say no. The opening words of "The Waste Land"—"April is the cruellest month"—could not possibly have been written by someone who grew up in England.

Every poet, I suspect, resents being anthologized. In his introduction Quiller-Couch wrote:

Having set my heart on choosing the best, I resolved not to be dissuaded by common objections against anthologies—that they repeat one another . . . or perturbed if my judgment should so often agree with that of good critics. The best is the best, though a hundred judges have declared it so.

The kind of anthologist a poet hopes for is someone who, faced with two poems of equal merit, will print the less well-known. Alas, this rarely happens. Of the six pieces of mine which Dame Helen prints, three are old warhorses which have constantly been anthologized. For all I know or care, they may be quite good, but I never want to hear about them again. I must not forget, however, that, like all poets, I am vain.

But of all modern poets, the one who has been most shabbily treated by anthologists is Walter de la Mare, and I am sorry to see that Dame Helen has followed her predecessors in only printing some of his earlier poems. Surely, she should have included extracts from "Time's Winged Chariot," in my opinion his greatest poem. This would not have been difficult since, though long, it is, like "In Memoriam," a sequence of lyrics. Still, Dame Helen has undoubtedly done an excellent job.

London Observer

class is exemplified by Robert Lovett, "a man who not only symbolized a group, the Establishment, and was a power broker who carried the proxies for the great law firms and financial institutions, but was also tied to a great and seemingly awesome era," the early days of the cold war.

The book opens with Kennedy, a few weeks before his inauguration, trying to persuade Lovett to accept the post of either secretary of state or secretary of defense in his administration. The offer was politely declined, but Lovett provided a list of approved names, and the establishment's brightest young men moved into positions of command—Rusk, McNamara, the Bundys and a host of lesser-known luminaries duly stamped and approved by the Council on Foreign Relations.

The young men under Kennedy shared many of the assumptions of the older generation of legendary figures—Dean Acheson, John McCloy, James Forrestal—who choreographed the cold war. "These men were all from the big investment and banking houses, or lawyers for them; they and their class had long harbored an abiding suspicion not so much of Russia as of Communism . . . To them it was an ism, not just two new great powers struggling to find their balance. Thus the men who defined postwar American foreign policy defined it in ideological, not national terms."

From that definition flowed the containment policy, the global commitments of the Truman Doctrine, and almost reflexively the decision to intervene in Vietnam. To those weaned on the cold war and intoxicated with the awesome power at their command, Vietnam seemed like the arena in which America's will to resist communism should be demonstrated. As John Kennedy told

James Reston after his disastrous meeting with Khrushchev at Vienna in 1961, "now we have a problem in trying to make our power credible, and Vietnam looks like the place."

It was the place not because a Vietcong victory represented a security threat to the United States, but because an image was at stake, and the preservation of that image had become the higher reality. If ever two words are put on the epitaph of the Kennedy administration they should be "credibility" and "image." Better than any poem by Robert Frost they sum up the style and the preoccupations of that moment in Camelot.

In his disenchantment with the Kennedy intellectuals and his disgust with the war, Halberstam tries to spin a web of causality that his evidence does not support. It is undeniable that these members of the elite who planned and executed the war brought no credit to themselves or the country. But they were only part of an elite which was itself torn from within. The real argument was not merely between the elite and those on the outside, but within the intellectual elite itself. For every Walt Rostow there was a Daniel Ellsberg. For every Joseph Alsop and Dean Acheson there was a Walter Lippmann, an Averell Harriman, and ultimately a Clark Clifford. The real diehards were the politicians, like Johnson and Nixon, who remained committed to the war even after the elite had turned against it.

What defined the war liberals was not their background or their brains, but their seduction by the temptations of power. Convinced of their infallibility, they shut themselves off from their critics and lived in a self-contained world of their own creation. The word *hubris* reappears like a litany throughout Halber-

stam's book, and it is not misapplied. But neither is it a quality confined to the elite.

The search for a common thread that unites the disparate decision-makers leads Halberstam into lengthy forays into their backgrounds and even their childhoods. In some cases, such as the celebrated portraits of Johnson, McNamara, and McGeorge Bundy, these are richly rewarding. But with such colorless and relatively minor figures as Westmoreland this method is distracting and makes even more diffuse a book which is considerably too long and not clearly in focus. The reader tends to get lost in the interminable accounts of what it was like growing up in Texas, or South Carolina or Minnesota.

But then this book is not an analysis to be pondered so much as it is a chronicle to be savored, a fascinating tale of folly and self-deception with a cast of characters of the kind that misdirected every empire. Halberstam is no Gibbon, or even Wright Mills, but he is a superb reporter and he has done his work well. His portraits of those who made the war are beautifully drawn, and reveal how intelligent men became victims of a machine they created and blinded themselves to a truth they could not face.

These men were sleepwalkers, their eyes fixed on their goal and oblivious to the sand sinking beneath their feet, brandishing their terrible weapons of destruction, penning their make-believe scenarios, worried about credibility factors and national virility, and obsessed by problems of image. Halberstam is not much of a social historian, but he is a skilled portraitist and he has brought them all to life in this absorbing, detailed, and devastatingly caustic tale of Washington in the days of the Caesars.