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Attica: History as a Novel

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

A TIME TO DIE. By Tom Wicker. 342 pages. Illustrated. Quadrangle. $10.

I guess I find it troubling that I want to discuss and praise Tom Wicker's "A Time To Die" in terms of its form. After all, something keeps insisting, it's a book about the 1971 Attica Prison rebellion, whose wounds are still too gaping to be talked about as if they were art. After all, what rivets our attention as we read "A Time to Die" are issues that still overleap esthetic considerations: whether the observers' committee of which Mr. Wicker was a member did the most effective job it could have done under the circumstances; whether 43 inmates and hostages really had to die; whether a compromise between the inmates and the prison authorities couldn't have been negotiated if more time had been allowed ("There's always time to die. I don't know what the rush was," said Mr. Wicker's fellow observer Herman Badillo shortly after Attica had been "re-entered."): whether then-New York State Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller shouldn't have gone to Attica and talked with the inmates; and whether the amnesty that the rebels were demanding was really nonnegotiable in a society of law, as Governor Rockefeller insisted.

Tom Wicker

And after all, what one comes away with are impressions that transcend matters of form — namely, Mr. Wicker's conclusion that racism was the issue that underlay Attica but that it was never so acknowledged by the authorities; that their failure to do so was in large part responsible for the rebellion's bloody conclusion; and that the whole thing was largely for nought, since few of the needed reforms have been instituted in the meantime, and little done to pluck out the roots of the rebellion.

Multitonal and Textured

Still, regardless of the validity of these impressions and conclusions (or their invalidity if you happen not to be impressed by them), the book that presents them could have been a broadside or a polemic, and as such could have been monotonous and shrill. Indeed it is all too often the case these days that the more momentous and newsworthy the occasion written about, the more tedious it is to read about it. So what remains finally most impressive about "A Time to Die" is the form in which it is cast. For it is neither broadside nor polemic, neither monotonous nor shrill. Instead it is three-dimensional and multitonal and textured. It is tragic . . . in shape as well as subject matter. It is history as a novel, to borrow Norman Mailer's description of the first section of "The Armies of the Night." Which seems appropriate enough, since Mr. Wicker has borrowed Mr. Mailer's form.

True, it takes a while to grow accustomed to this borrowing. When Mr. Wicker calls his hero "Wicker," it cannot help but recall the "Mailer" who witnessed the 1967 march on the Pentagon — that gloriously egotistical persona who by anticipating the reader's scorn begged (and won) his indulgence. There was rich irony in Mailer's personification of himself; by blowing himself up so big he seemed to be ridiculing how little it mattered what one thought: events unfolded and history took shape irrespective of what the chronicler might wish. In contrast, Wicker is simply Wicker, the third-person objectification of the participating narrator—a polite way out of using too many "I"s. At first you think it isn't going to work.

A Deepening Involvement

But gradually this Wicker gets interesting in a different way. When called away from a sumptuous lunch in Washington by the news that he has been designated an observer by the Attica inmates, Wicker accepts the assignment on nothing more than a newsman's instinct to go where the action is. But as his involvement deepens —as he realizes he may be in over his head and sights as the island toward which he will swim the objective that nobody will get killed—he probes further and further into the personal history that brought him to Attica. And what gradually takes shape from this probing is a character with which all readers can identify (or if not identify, then certainly orient ourselves): a Southern liberal with faith in the system, who sees the system failing before his eyes; a humane man who understands why revolution against the system may be necessary, yet who clings desperately to the principles of that system.

And when the deal goes down and the guns open fire, that character Wicker (though not the author Tom Wicker) simply vaporizes in a cloud of despair. It is interesting. It is history as a novel. It salutes Norman Mailer's innovation. It works. And thus are we permitted to feel the greatest possible outrage over Attica—which polemic or broadside might not have accomplished.

One sidelight we learn about this character Wicker: He had always desired passionately "to signify" as a novelist, had been inspired by a friend's lecture "on the beauties and intricacies of *Ulysses*" to lust "for nothing less than the achievements of a Faulkner or a Melville." But after he had written half a dozen or so novels, his writing did not seem to him to amount to to very much. Perhaps not, but they were no waste of time. For by combining fictional technique with his abilities as a reporter, he has produced a book that signifies. To say the very least.