

BOOKS

The Big Attrit

FIRE IN THE LAKE

by FRANCES FITZGERALD

491 pages. Atlantic-Little, Brown.

\$12.50.

This is the Viet Nam book for people who do not want to read about Viet Nam—the lip-service hawks and doves who don't know Quang Tri from An Giang and don't care how the war ends as long as it is soon. *Fire in the Lake* is about the nature of the Vietnamese character and its encounter with the West. In one form or other, scholars, journalists and Government officials have said most of what Frances Fitzgerald has to say. But she may succeed better than they simply because she delves into culture, history and politics

FRANCES FITZGERALD IN NEW YORK



JILL KREMENTZ

with so fresh a blend of compassion and intelligence.

A protégée of Yale's Southeast Asia scholar, the late Paul Mus, she worked under his direction for two years, and on two visits spent 16 months in Viet Nam. She is also a good writer and a cool one; there are no moral tantrums or cast-iron ironies here. What she undertakes is a social history of a remote and truly enigmatic world, beginning with a fascinating, leisurely description of traditional Vietnamese society. Life centered totally on the village or hamlet where a man had a fixed place and derived his whole identity from his link to the village and the worship of his ancestors. Says Fitzgerald: "Americans live in a society of replaceable parts—in theory, anyone can become President or sanitary inspector—but the Vietnamese lived in a society of particular people."

Confucianism was the very foundation of that society. A basis for religion, ethics, philosophy and statecraft, it seeks a complete interpretation of events. It holds that there is one and only one correct way to do things. The book tells the story of an American government professor in Saigon whose class erupted when, having finished discussing Machiavelli, he went on to the ideas of Montesquieu. "What do you mean," the students demanded, "teaching us one thing one day and one thing the next?" Similarly, the Vietnamese do not naturally imagine, let alone yearn for, change or progress. Even their conception of the supernatural is a shadow version of present reality. Fitzgerald compares it to "one of those strange metaphysical puzzles of Borges: 'An entire community imagines another one which, though magical and otherworldly, looks, detail for detail, like itself.'"

Until the French arrival in the 19th

century, Vietnamese society was a closed world of autonomous villages. The French began a centralizing process, building up market cities and large landholdings, and dislocating the peasantry. Yet even in their current almost vestigial condition, villages are the basis and support of the National Liberation Front, and the nightmare of American troops. Fitzgerald describes an American search for a supply tunnel network in a typical village, where the soldiers are "clumsy as astronauts walking over the political and economic design of Viet Nam." Despite its use of terrorism and reprisals, the N.L.F. has enjoyed success, she argues, because it operates from the villages and engages the peasants on their own home ground—digging the tunnels, making land mines and small weaponry. By contrast, American programs, except in the most secure areas, have involved uprooting people who feel that they are literally leaving their souls in their native hamlet.

If the French impoverished the villages, the current war—particularly the U.S. pacification program—has practically decimated them. Almost a third of South Viet Nam's people are now refugees. The last part of *Fire in the Lake* describes the effect of uprooting on Vietnamese society. The moving of the population began in earnest in 1966. It aimed at depriving the enemy of sustenance or, as General Westmoreland's civilian deputy, Robert Komer, put it: "If we can attrit the population base of the Viet Cong, it'll accelerate the process of degrading the V.C."

Thirty Years' War. That big "attrit" has proved incredibly long and costly. With its war-swollen cities, South Viet Nam now has the population distribution of a highly industrialized country—but there is almost no industry in Viet Nam. There are still artisans, out in what American soldiers call "Indian country," using their centuries-old skills to fashion land mines. Saigon has become an arsenal of U.S. consumer goods, from prefab houses to athlete's foot powder, ordered and sometimes resold by Saigon officials. Since U.S. personnel changes roughly every twelve months, Americans tend to maintain a kind of earnest, timeless sangfroid, but around them have gathered "professional beggars, pimps, drug dealers, thieves—a Brechtian cast of characters in the midst of a new Thirty Years' War."

The author quotes Henry Kissinger as saying it is "beyond imagination that parties that have been murdering and betraying each other for 21 years could work together." But according to Fitzgerald, the biggest recent change in Viet Nam's mood is the intensifying hostility not toward each other but toward all foreigners, especially in the packed, volatile cities. Arguing historically, moreover, she thinks that it is not a bit beyond imagination that the Vietnamese can reach accommodation with

VIETNAMESE LIGHT CANDLES BEFORE BONES OF VILLAGERS KILLED BY VIET CONG IN 1968



FRANK DE SIMONE

each other in a search for the "correct" way to live and order their life as a nation.

■ Martha Duffy

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In the days of Cathy Leroy and Michele Ray, girl reporters in Viet Nam seemed to be trying to out-tough Hemingway. Frances FitzGerald's voice is low and her style quiet, though she is known as Frankie. There is even a trace of the debutante she once was in the way her eyes dilate when she wants to emphasize a point. That observation would irritate her. Days at the fashionable Foxcroft School now seem "too dreadful to talk about." Radcliffe was better—"one learned to think in long phrases." She graduated in 1962 with a *magna* in history, writing a thesis on King Faisal's government in Syria in 1920.

Though Paul Mus thereafter became her inspiration in Asian studies, other things in her background pointed toward the five-year project she has just completed with *Fire in the Lake*. Her late father, CIA Deputy Director Desmond FitzGerald, was an old Southeast Asia hand who learned about the problems of working with Asian troops when he trained a Chinese unit to fight in Burma under General Joseph Stilwell. Says Frankie: "He never knew whether they would follow him into battle when he gave the order." Her mother, former U.N. Delegate Marietta Tree, contributed some nuggets of worldly observation: "Never mistake a politician. Anyone who has been elected dog catcher thinks he can be President."

Frankie first went to Viet Nam in 1966 on assignment from the *Atlantic Monthly*. She planned a month-long stay which actually lasted a year. "It was a rare instance in which you could really come close to reality." Her excellent French served her in the cities; for the villages she joined forces with a Vietnamese girl from a strict Confucian family who had just graduated from the University of Tennessee. They were only allowed to go to "secure" villages with Marines, but on arrival it was easy to give them the slip. "The villages are shaped like honeycombs, with each house at a different angle. It was very hard for a soldier to keep his bearings."

When she began writing her book she thought it would surely be a kind of history. One of her achievements, in fact, is the sense of historic perspective that she brings to a roiling subject. But as has happened to many others who have reported it, Viet Nam has taken over her life. Though she now lives on Manhattan's Upper East Side, she still reads military bulletins the way a horse player studies the form. She knows why the B-52s are striking certain targets. When she gets together with other veterans of Viet Nam reporting like Gloria Emerson, David Halberstam and journalists on leave from Saigon, she says, "The conversation is like talk among butterfly experts—a fraternity of people with the same obsession."

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