

citing farm life into "dull, unvaried" factory jobs. Expansionary industrialism destroyed their spirit of opportunity—only those craftsmen willing "to obtain loans or political subsidies, to accept capitalists as partners, or to form a corporation" could open their own shops. Expansionary industrialism wrecked custom and traditional social ties. Americans responded by drinking. They drank a little more, and they drank it differently: They drank alone or surreptitiously. Official acceptance of communal drinking had waned—"men who chased dollars naturally disapproved of liquor"—so more drinking had to be done on the sly. And those "hard-hearted materialists whose repression of their feelings enabled them to believe that all difficulties would be resolved... through orderly industrial devel-

opment" increased their efforts to deny workers the only available respite.

There is an unpleasantness about Rorabaugh's work. Initially he writes that "enthusiasm for distilling had shown a lack of economic imagination" that prevented businessmen from developing capital. Yet when capitalists encourage thrift, they are described as exploiters. Pre-industrial life was boring and monotonous, but industrialization just made things worse. Reformers were morally flawed manipulators seeking to enhance their own authority. It is all very depressing, and books about booze should not be depressing.

For 15 dollars you can buy this book and read about other people drinking; for the same amount you can buy two fifths of bourbon and do it yourself. Who needs a book? □

GIVING GOOD WEIGHT

John McPhee / Farrar, Straus & Giroux / \$9.95

Joshua Gilder

How one reacts to *Giving Good Weight* may depend to some extent on how one feels about vegetables, not simply because vegetables are the subject of the title piece, or because an intense interest in cabbage may be needed to carry one along, but because John McPhee's writing is about as close as you can come to a literary equivalent of vegetarianism. While reviewers consistently applaud McPhee for shunning the "sexy" topics that, it is suggested, are such easy game for those other journalist-novelists, the reader may find his prose a very bland diet. My own tastes run more to the carnivorous (Mailer), the omnivorous (Wolfe), even the anorexic (Didion), than to the macrobiotic McPhee.

As well as 70 pages on vegetables, this new collection includes "The Atlantic Generating Station," about a plan to float a nuclear power plant off the New Jersey coast, a piece of reporting that in the aftermath of Three Mile Island (if that was really necessary to clue you in) seems depressingly simple-minded; "The Pinball Philosophy," a piece so slight it is almost invisible; "The Keel of Lake Dickey," about a canoe trip (a McPhee staple) down the St. John

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River during which he scores some valuable points for conservation; and the famous (if you follow these things) "Brigade de Cuisine," the author's paean to the mysterious chef and culinary artiste, Otto, who, when finally tracked down by the *New York Times* food critic, turned out to serve "inedible" artichokes.

The individual stories in this collection, like all of McPhee's works, first made their appearance as extended articles in the *New Yorker*. McPhee's affinity with the magazine, for which he works as a staff writer, is evident. His stories bring to mind every reason one never finishes those talky, flaccid articles that meander endlessly from impression to impression, punctuated with occasional tidbits of conversation.

McPhee is full of impressions. Missing in his work is any sense of a mediating intelligence behind the chatter. A passive observer, he floats through his stories on a continual stream of facts and anecdotes that ultimately contrive to say nothing. The trivial is given equal time with the important, with no suggestion that there might be a hierarchy of issues and ideas.

To compensate for a lack of substance, McPhee bloats his chronicle of the mundane with a false poeticization. Every other moment becomes

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penultimate, as in this example from *Pieces of the Frame*: "I had never been in the presence of a red-tailed hawk, and at sight of him I was not sure whether to run or to kneel." Sometimes he's tiresomely cute: "Fedeler shrugs. He scratches his cheek, which is under a mat of russet beard... He would resemble Sigmund Freud, if Sigmund Freud had been a prospector."* Often descrip-

tion will degenerate into lists. Here is a small sample from the title essay, "Giving Good Weight": "...Burpless cucumbers. Cranberry beans. Silver Queen corn. Sweet Sue bicolor corn, with its concise tight kernels, its well-filled tips and butts. Boston salad lettuce. Paris Island romaine lettuce. Ithaca iceberg...."

* From *Coming into the Country*.

McPhee's failure to explore below the surface is most apparent in his inability to deal with the subject of class: the social forces, the economic and cultural histories, that to a great extent determine who we become. This is the stuff of journalism, the touchstone of social observation. It is, ultimately, *the* subject of his colleagues, the New Journalists, certainly a matter Wolfe and Mailer

attack with gusto. Even Joan Didion contemplates the vagaries of privilege, seen as she lounges behind dark glasses on a beach chair at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. McPhee seems distinctly uncomfortable with the idea of class, as if he wished the whole subject would just go away.

This may partly explain his fondness for canoe trips in remote wildernesses, though in "The Keel of Lake Dickey" we find Tom Cabot among the company. That's Tom Cabot, we are told, of the Cabots and Lowells and Boston and Old Money. But old Tom, he's just one of the boys: "Tom Cabot, who has been everything from a Harvard Overseer to Director of International Security Affairs in the Department of State, will walk and talk with anybody."

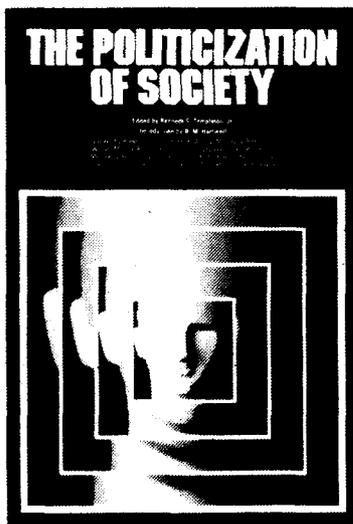
A good deal of *Giving Good Weight* is devoted to proving that except for our little eccentricities (such as an obsession with pinball), we are all really the same. Farmers really like New York City, blacks in Harlem are really nice guys, just like you and me, except perhaps a little less stingy.

Levels of the Game—a blow-by-blow account of the championship tennis match between Arthur Ashe, who grew up black, poor, and Southern, and Clark Graebner, a middle-class dentist's son from Cleveland—seemed more hopeful in this respect. Not only would McPhee give us their personal histories, the shaping influences on their lives, but the drama as these were revealed in their play (Ashe had remarked that Graebner's middle-class background determined the kind of game he plays). We wait expectantly for this to materialize, but it never does.

Reviewers speak of the triviality of McPhee's subject matter (oranges, canoes, blimps, tennis games) as if it conferred on him some special virtue. It doesn't. Neither is inconsequential subject matter an excuse for inconsequential writing. To put the matter in perspective, one need only look as far as Joan Didion's essay "Many Mansions" in *The White Album*, describing California's new residence for the governor, built during the Reagan years but as yet untenanted. In depicting its style and furnishings, she gives a brilliant dissection of class and its particular Californian manifestations. Certainly a house is a small enough subject for McPhee, and it's not too "sexy," but one cannot imagine him writing anything so penetrating and perceptive.

McPhee's writing is a great leveling machine. It crunches its way through experience—through a world that, after all, must bear some re-

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semblance to the one you and I live in (the one in which not everybody is nice)—chews it up, digests it, and it all comes out innocuous and remarkable in its sameness. Though reviewers have commended McPhee's ear for dialogue, in truth it all sounds like McPhee, whether it's blacks in

Harlem buying vegetables or conservationists canoeing in Alaska. His meticulous descriptions of people always fail to characterize. They will "walk and talk" with anybody because they all walk and talk the same.

McPhee's writing slips by like a

skillfully paddled canoe on a placid lake—silently, hardly causing a ripple on the water's surface. It moves on out of sight and vanishes as easily from the mind. There is nothing memorable in his work, but neither is there anything troubling or disturbing, and this must explain his popu-

larity. He makes no claim on the reader, asks nothing of his intelligence, and in no way affects his feelings. Finish the book or don't. Read it backward, forward, or upside down, it makes no difference. It is simply a way of filling empty time with empty words. □

C O R R E S P O N D E N C E

Carter's Hostages

I thank you, R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr., for showing me the way to go home in your January editorial, "America Last"... I have tramped through America and many foreign parts embarrassed by my President and government—who believe America should walk humbly in the world, ashamed of our great wealth, power, and imagination—and I found few friends.

I have read the *Spectator* for over a year, each month growing more satisfied with its expression of a neo-conservative philosophy. But it required your summary of the idiocies of our current leaders in "America

Last" to convince me that I had finally found my compatriots in your band of rebels. I have a good friend among the Tehran hostages. I have seen the misery visited on him and on his family by the Persians and by my President. After only a few years living and working in Iran, I cannot understand why my President's more experienced advisors have not told him that Persians regard his decency as a character flaw and fair play as weakness; that a 13th-century mullah cannot be treated as a 20th-century liberal; that Persians will ignore any power that is not violent, overwhelming, and absolute; and that if my President would free the hostages

soon he had better act more like the Shah.

"America Last" has shown me why today [Jan. 20] is the 78th day of captivity for my friend—he is less a prisoner of the Persians than of a President and government who have ceased to believe in America.

*Name Withheld
State Department
Washington, D.C.*

Put Up or Shut Up

The editorial, "America Last" (January 1980), by R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr., is an example of the kind of journalism I have come to expect since reading *The American Spectator* for the past year. The tactic of using derogatory remarks to make a point is something I am not used to seeing in the other publications I read.

Regardless of what one thinks of certain people, is it cricket to say of Khomeini that he is a "dyspeptic Holy Man," or to speak of his "ancient ruin of a brain," or to refer to the "buzz between his ears"? Likewise, you referred to Ramsey Clark, Richard Falk, and Don Luce as "these three meatheads." Such tactics are the product of an immature mind. It is writing of this kind which is sometimes found in high-school newspapers when the staff is not closely supervised.

After you have thoroughly squelched those responsible for our foreign policy with such sophisticated jargon as "idiot," "one has to be an idiot and a drunk," and "Wonderboy," you finally treat your readers to your profound and learned conclusion: "Our government must cease rendering itself contemptible to the world and must respond decisively and punitively to those who violate our rights." Then, to emphasize your inane rhetoric, you offer not one thing "Wonderboy" could do to respond decisively and punitively.

I suggest, Tyrrell, that you either put up or shut up.

*Herbert E. Steingass
Chesterland, Ohio*

The Young Mencken

Tyrrell—You are indeed another Mencken—when he was 17 years old.

*Robert McCall
San Francisco, California*

Free Yuriy Shukhevych

The life of Yuriy Shukhevych, son of the leader of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army and head of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, is in grave danger.

Born in 1933, Yuriy Shukhevych has experienced persecution at the hands of Soviet authorities for almost his entire life. In 1944, his mother was sent to a Siberian camp. In 1948, at age 15, he was arrested and subsequently imprisoned for the "crime" of being the son of a famous Ukrainian nationalist. In 1950, his father died while in the custody of the Soviet secret police.

In 1958, on the eve of his release from prison, Shukhevych was visited by KGB officials who demanded that he renounce his father and publicly condemn the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. He repeatedly refused this demand and was sentenced to a ten-year prison term for "anti-Soviet agitation among inmates."

In 1968, Shukhevych was set free but was denied the right to live in the Ukraine. In 1970, he signed a joint statement in defense of persecuted Ukrainian historian Valentyn Moroz. In 1972, he was sentenced to a ten-year term of confinement in a concentration camp.

Today, Yuriy Shukhevych continues to languish in a concentration camp. He suffers from an intestinal ulcer and is denied medical attention.

It is important that citizens of all persuasions protest this gross violation of human rights by the Soviet Union. Please write to President Carter and urge him to intercede with Soviet authorities for the release of Yuriy Shukhevych.

*Mark Weber
Cleveland Heights, Ohio*

CAPITOL IDEAS

(continued from page 6)

tente was that Americans were encouraged to believe that they were no longer confronted by an external threat, or enemy. This is of course a comforting thing to believe. Unfortunately, the whole concept of nation probably depends on an externally directed mistrust. When the external enemies disappear, they "reappear" internally: In the U.S. they reappeared in the form of "Watergate," Richard Nixon, J. Edgar Hoover, Richard Helms, and others. Those antagonistic to the idea of nationalism—many of them bravely wielding pens inside editorial offices and almost daily quoting Dr. Johnson to the effect that patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel—therefore welcomed detente, rushed to embrace the Soviets, and soon enough found themselves denouncing a variety of "injustices" in America.

I seem to have strayed rather far from the Lefever/Godson volume, but not really, because it is, in part, a report on this dismal period. Godson has useful chapters on Congress and the so-called "pressure groups," the latter chapters including much interesting information on the Institute for Policy Studies, the Center for

National Security Studies, and other such outfits, primarily anti-American in nature, staffed for the most part by Soviet apologists and unavowed Marxists who find that in their personal lives they prefer the comforts of Washington to the potential rigors of Gorky.

In a study of television evening news, Lefever reports that in the period 1974 to 1977 "slightly less than 5 percent of the intelligence news on network TV was devoted to Soviet-bloc agencies, while slightly more than 95 percent was focused on the CIA. The result was a distorted view. The CIA appeared to be operating in a political and moral vacuum devoid of threats and adversaries. It was a villainous Don Quixote tilting at vaporous windmills." That's it. With detente, there is no adversary. The enemy is us, in the banal and oft-repeated judgment of a cartoon character whose name escapes me.

Well, that is over now, thanks to some rather incautious moves by the Soviets, who can be expected to move into a dynamic phase in the 1980s. With detente behind us, and our old enemy back, America should reunite. All to the good, of course, but it is rather depressing to consider that the gullible peanut farmer from Georgia should be the fortuitous beneficiary of this tidal change. □