



What It Takes

by James Bowman

Some three hours into *Gettysburg*, the new four-hour-plus Civil War epic from Ted Turner Productions, J.E.B. Stuart, hitherto AWOL, turns up with his cavalry after two days of battle. Robert E. Lee, played by Martin Sheen, tells him that there are some officers who are of the opinion that Stuart has badly let the side down. "If the general will please give me the names of those officers . . ." begins Stuart before Lee cuts him off: "There isn't time for that," he says, referring to Stuart's obvious intention to seek satisfaction for the insult. The weary viewer, however, is inclined to ask: Why not? Why isn't there time? There seems to be time for everything else, including fine-sounding speeches about what they are all fighting for, several instances of disagreement between General Longstreet (Tom Berenger) and Lee about tactics, and at least three reminders that Col. Joshua Chamberlain (Jeff Daniels) is holding the flank of the Union army on Little Round Top. There is even time for General Stuart to come up with something else (his resignation) that Lee tells him there isn't time for.

This leisurely unfolding is not necessarily a bad thing. The film is in effect an attempt to translate into cinematic terms that great masculine art form, the military epic, which saw its best days—in mainstream Western culture anyway—well before Columbus sailed the ocean blue. Great epic poems like the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, *Beowulf*, or *The Song of Roland* achieve their effects not by the concision that most other poetry aspires to but by something like its opposite. Epic time is slow time. As in opera where the characters have to sing for ten minutes before they do anything—including, usually,

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dying—epic heroes wind up for a good long speech before and after they smite or are smitten. The speed with which events happen in battle has to be slowed in order for each nuance of significance to be teased out of them.

The trouble is that epic just does not work very well on the silver screen. Movies are too realistic a medium. They resist the kind of heavy stylization that is the essence of epic conventions. Ted Turner's movie (directed by Ronald Maxwell) is itself a little like Pickett's charge: a noble effort in a losing cause. But it could have been made more successful, more interesting anyway, if it had had a little more the courage of its conventions. No doubt epic speeches about obsolete politics (saving the Union versus states' rights) are necessary, but could we not also hear some on the sense of honor that has always been the epic hero's defining characteristic and that still is principally what makes men willing to risk death in battle?

Probably not. The whole panoply of distinctively masculine and military values has fallen on hard times. You only have to look at the casting of Jeff Daniels as Chamberlain. Looking even more hang-dog than usual with a silly walrus mustache, he harangues a company of Maine volunteers who have mutinied and whom he is trying to graft onto his own Maine regiment with a kind of New Age version of soldiership. Here is none of the ethnocentric, racist, sexist, and probably fascist talk of Henry V before Harfleur—no appeals to Maine patriotism or the warlike qualities of Maine men or the chastity of Maine women; here are no exhortations to show their manhood. Instead, he bolsters their self-esteem by sympathizing with their grievance, tells them that he's not going to shoot them, and assures them that, "whether you fight or not, that's up to you." He goes on to say, sounding like

Wilfred Brimley pitching breakfast cereal, that some men go to war for adventure and some because they're ashamed not to but most because it's "the right thing to do."

Humbug! People *talk* about going to war for adventure or high ideals, but when it comes down to stepping out in front of the musket balls and the canister shot, *everybody* does it because he's ashamed not to—which is another way of saying to avoid dishonor. The only other person in the whole of this long film to make any reference to this universal soldiers' motivation is one of the last of the recalcitrant Maine mutineers, who finally agrees to join the fight by saying, "Nobody's going to call me a coward." J.E.B. Stuart attempts to stand on his honor, but he is a ridiculous character and is cut off before he can get the word out of his mouth. There isn't time for any of that.

But what happens to our society when honor is treated dismissively, when it is no longer a shameful thing to be called a coward? Jeffrey R. Snyder in a splendid piece called "A Nation of Cowards" in the current issue of the *Public Interest* thinks that that time has already come. For the response of both our liberal and conservative elites to the threat of violent crime is to insist that we who are threatened should disarm ourselves and give the criminals what they want. We are urged to leave any timid remonstrance we might think it permissible to make against those who would kill, rape, or rob us to those who are charged with looking after such things—the professionals in the police and the criminal justice system.

Maybe this is what Joel Silver and Marco Brambilla had in mind when they made the Sylvester Stallone vehicle *Demolition Man*. In many ways a typi-

cally Hollywoodish amalgam of H.G. Wells and Aldous Huxley (the heroine's name is Lenina Huxley—they don't care if you know whom they're ripping off), this film presents a world, supposedly only forty years away, that "has become a pussy-whipped, Brady Bunch version of itself." The people have become so docile and unused to violence that one man with a gun (Wesley Snipes) can destroy their whole society. It is a good idea, but the film isn't really all that interested in it. Instead it just wants to amuse us with its politically correct utopia where people can't smoke, drink, eat meat, or "exchange fluids" and the popular music is old commercial jingles. This a lot of fun, but when the lone gunman has to be disposed of, the gentle future folk have to call a cop from the past (Stallone) to do it for them.

There are a lot of films out now about the masculine ethos. *Judgment Night* is about four middle-class Chicago suburban guys who achieve their manhood (sort of; they still seem pretty wimpish to me) while being chased through a desolate urban landscape by a gang of vicious killers, but it is too far-fetched, the acting too poor, and the bad guys too ludicrously caricatured to say anything useful or interesting. *Rudy* and *Cool Runnings* are both heartwarming stories about lovable individuals, but neither the warriors of the Notre Dame football squad in the first nor the severe fellowship of the world's top bobsled-ders in the second are of much interest to the filmmakers. The real competitors are there only to turn aside from making war long enough to become sentimental about Rudy and the Jamaican bobsled team and to grant them a kind of symbolic, mascot status. That's a kind of honor, but not the kind we need to be more concerned about.

The Program is really much more about corruption in college football than it is about what it takes to win or the rite of passage to manhood, but there is one scene that has achieved a certain notoriety. The quarterback (Craig Sheffer) proves his guts and thus his title to leadership by lying down on the center line of a busy highway and daring the team's hotshots to join him. It is a rather extravagant and silly way of making the point anyway, but it has had to be cut by the studio because a couple of dimwits

out in the real world tried the stunt and got run over. So it goes these days with what used to be one of the storyteller's two or three biggest subjects: what it takes to be a man. The very idea is alien to Hollywood, which tends to see sex roles in the same way that the makers of *The Crying Game* and, more recently, *M. Butterfly* see them.

In both those films, being a man or being a woman is not part of nature's destiny but a question of personal choice—that and a lot of really good make-up. It is just a matter of which mask we put on. As Jeremy Irons admits in *M. Butterfly*, the mystique of sex is a lie, but a lie that we want to believe. There is some truth in this view. The injunction to "be a man" would have no meaning to us if sex were merely biological. What else could an adult male per-



son be? But we still have a residual cultural sense that one acts the part of a man by, for example, being brave in battle. Acting is lying—and you could say that cowardice is a kind of honesty about and hence indulgence of our feelings of fear. But if courage, like masculinity itself, is always to some degree a masquerade, it would be wrong to believe that it is only a masquerade.

At times that seems to be the view of *Farewell My Concubine* by Chen Kaige, our Movie of the Month and the second film about Chinese opera I saw in as many days after not having seen one in all my life before. Both it and *M. Butterfly* depend

on the fact that it is traditional in Chinese opera (as it was in Elizabethan drama) for males to play female roles, and both exploit this fact in order to examine the whole question of sexual identity and its relation to love and loyalty. *M. Butterfly* is intriguing and well acted but it has a left-wing axe to grind and is too wrong-headed in its premises to hold a permanent place in our affections. *Farewell My Concubine*, however, uses the historical backdrop of revolutionary China to much better effect.

I am always a sucker for these *Dr. Zhivago*-style movies about ordinary individuals who are caught up in the sweep of vast historical events. The Chinese opera, like epic, is about heroism, and the opera of the title is about a defeated emperor's concubine who remains "faithful unto death." Does that heroic image bear any relation to the real world? The answer of the film seems to be that it does not. All three of the main characters, the Chinese opera stars Cheng Dieyi (Leslie Cheung) and Duan Xiaolou (Zhang Pengyi) and Xiaolou's wife Juxian (Gong Li) betray each other more than once. Faithfulness of any kind, let alone faithfulness unto death, seems a joke, as one set of demanding political masters succeeds another up until the enigmatic and not very satisfactory ending.

Yet Dieyi, who is personally the most treacherous of the three, does understand one sort of faithfulness: faithfulness to his art which, through all the vicissitudes of Chinese culture in the twentieth century, has kept alive the impossible heroic ideal. Moreover, the film's early scenes in the sadistic training school for performers in the opera (who, when successful, are treated like film stars in China) show what he has sacrificed for his art. "What does it take to become a star?" asks Dieyi as a young boy: "How many beatings? When will I ever enjoy such fame?" It is then that we know he has determined to do whatever it takes. And Roland or Beowulf would have understood the nature of that craving for fame, which is also called honor. Paradoxically, part of what it takes is the sacrifice of his masculinity, as he is required to play the female parts. Yet there are few characters in the movies today who know better what it means to be a man. □

Reading about the Left Book Club in Isaac Kramnick and Barry Sheerman's *Harold Laski: A Life on the Left* took me back to forty years ago. From 1936 until the club folded in 1948, Laski, together with his two Oxford classmates and fellow Marxists, John Strachey and Victor Gollancz, had had the job of deciding which manuscripts it would publish, and I vividly remember coming across their selections among my father's old review copies. They had flame-colored dust jackets and tocsin-sounding titles such as *The Coming Struggle for Power*, *The Battle for Peace*, *Forward from Liberalism*, and, most famous of all, *Soviet Communism: A New Civilization*, minus the question mark Sidney and Beatrice Webb had originally ended it with. I also remember coming across some of their authors. All of them were apparently well-connected members of the upper middle class. We used to drive over to lunch with them, and they with us, at our respective summer places. At least one of them had a butler. R.T. Fyvel—who, as literary editor of *Tribune*, Britain's reddest newspaper after the *Daily Worker*, necessarily moved in their circle—once asked my sister and me to his daughter's Hunt Ball.

I have no memory of lunching with Harold Laski. He must have summered in a different county, for, as Kramnick and Sheerman make clear, he was a faithful participant in the rituals of gentlemanly far leftism. He fulminated against capitalism and delighted in the company of rich men, blasted privilege and fawned on those who dispensed it with an assiduity that few of his fellow country-house Communists could match. Moreover, unlike most of them, he really does seem to have looked up to his social superiors. Aristocrats in particular brought out the vassal in him. In describing to his friend, Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, the moral impression Lord Robert Cecil, for example, made on him, he said: "I went

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HAROLD LASKI:
A LIFE ON THE LEFT

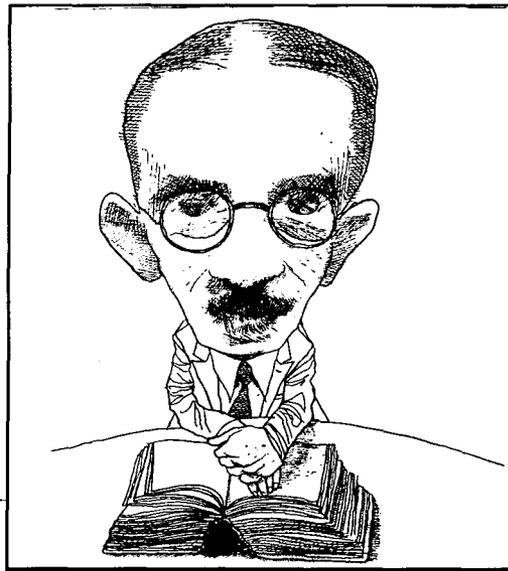
Isaac Kramnick and Barry Sheerman

Viking Penguin (An Allen Lane Book) / 608 pages / \$35

reviewed by JOHN MUGGERIDGE

out feeling cleaner by contact with him."

Laski came to upper-crust socialism as an outsider. Hence, perhaps, the earnestness with which he propounded it. His father, an anti-Zionist Jewish textile millionaire from Manchester, had Harold educated with local gentiles to prove that he could hold his own among them. He more than held his own. His first non-Jewish headmaster, a Victorian campus leftist, converted him to socialism. By 17, he had moved on to birth control and women's rights. Meanwhile, the *Westminster Review* published his "The Scopes of Eugenics" which urged governments to promote fertility in clever, healthy couples and sterility in stupid, sickly ones. A year later, he secretly married a new woman who had gone to Sweden to study physiotherapy and discuss free love. They joined the suffragettes, in whose interest he tried unsuccessfully to blow up a suburban railway station. Weatherman-like, he fled abroad until the incident blew over. Finally,



at Oxford, under the tutelage of H.A.L. Fischer, the most famous liberal historian of the day, Laski became what he remained for the rest of his life, a believing Marxist Whig.

But all of this belongs to a forgotten past. Who even remembers Laski, let alone his political philosophy? Certainly not the makers of modern history. Kramnick and Sheer-

man list six books and a dozen learned articles about Laski that have appeared since his death forty-three years ago. He gets mentioned in memoirs, often smilingly, but most often with references to his lifelong habit of lying—which Kramnick and Sheerman charitably call "myth-making."

A.J.P. Taylor, in *English History, 1914-1945*, makes three brief references to Laski, the longest and least scathing of which includes him among "the new enthusiasts for communism" in the thirties, who, "whatever their background . . . were highly educated intellectuals whose ideas and writings appealed to others of the same sort," while in *The Age of Roosevelt* Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., though admitting the importance of Laski's influence on Marxist thought in America, banishes him to the unvital periphery.

But according to Kramnick and Sheerman, Taylor and Schlesinger have got Laski wrong: he *isn't* peripheral. He belongs at center stage, and Kramnick and Sheerman, as they tell us in the prologue, mean to put him back there. In other words, they mean to rewrite modern British history.

Also modern U.S. history. Kramnick and Sheerman hark back to a time before the far left went anti-American. In Laski's day it was perfectly acceptable, even fashionable, for British radicals to admire the United States and believe that the prospects for socialism were brighter there than in their own country. Laski himself, who once claimed that FDR's gift for leadership was second only to that of Lenin, put his money on the New Deal. Kramnick and Sheerman have set themselves the task of proving that on both sides of the Atlantic, Laski's role in