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Joyce, James, Eliot, Woolf, and others—which show this to be true. Outstanding writers are not the kind of people who would be located on the hump of a statistician's bell-shaped curve showing "normal" behavior; they would be close to the edge. Think of Johnson and Swift, those who Edel deals with, and others, from Milton to Beckett.

Something is notable in Edel's examinations because of its absence: the authors he deals with are all dead; there are no living writers scrutinized. This could be simply explained by the fact that his field of study happens to be, primarily, the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, there is another possibility. The fast and loose manipulators of post-Freudian psychology have perverted all societal norms to the point of virtual nonexistence by claiming that it is essential to "do your own thing" and by absolving all guilt for crimes commit-

ted by blaming not the responsible party but "environmental factors." It is impossible to imagine Henry James or T.S. Eliot spouting the nihilistic phrase "Do it if it feels good," yet it is quite easy to imagine those words—or a slight variation—from Norman Mailer or Gore Vidal. Whereas writers once recognized the necessity of propriety and so infused their art with their tension, many writers of today simply masturbate in public: sex, politics, acting, pugilistics, etc. Nothing is left for their literary works. Thus the vapidity of Ms. Dillard's contemporary modernists, which is most apparent when examined in the light of Edel's subjects. Of the living writers Ms. Dillard deals with at length in her book, Borges and Beckett are, perhaps, the only two who will leave behind a rich, sustaining corpus of works, which is due, in part, to their having backgrounds in which tradition means something more ancient than what happened yesterday. □

of the Church. On more local grounds, we often find conservatives comparing the current state of America to that of Rome before the Fall, while liberals compare it to that of Weimar Germany just before the rise of nazism. We all learn, it seems, our favorite lessons from history, but they are *our* lessons, not history's, in an objective sense.

A good example of how not to find lessons in history is Garry Wills's *The Kennedy Imprisonment*, a tendentious and vulgar book, albeit a high-brow one. It is, of course, about the Kennedy family, chiefly John Fitzgerald Kennedy. This is a JFK recognizable, though, only to readers of scandal mags, right-wing tracts and revisionist historians: a phony, a womanizer, a creature of his father's public-relations machinery, a man who would subject his nation to mortal danger in order to retain political power and give himself psychological reassurance. Wills has culled negative comments from sources ranging from conservative critics of his foreign policy to Judith Exner Campbell and worked them into a complex pattern of cultural and historical explanation. The book is organized into five parts: "Sex," "Family," "Image," "Charisma," and "Power," each consisting of three or more chapters. Significantly, since it spells out the message of the book, the final chapter in each part is entitled, "The Prisoner of . . ." as in "The Prisoner of Sex." Thus, the saga of the Kennedy family (especially JFK) is presented as sordid and essentially self-defeating, a venture in futility. "Johnny we hardly knew ye," indeed.

Why has Wills turned his heavily intellectualized style on the Kennedys and JFK in particular? A number of reasons suggest themselves. First, Wills has always shown an ability to take an off-centered view of a subject to show it in a new and interesting light. In this, he takes after G.K. Chesterton, whom Wills admires and often quotes, and about whom he wrote his first book. However, Chesterton, who was famous for his oxymorons and seeming non se-

## Speculations on a Tendentious Science

Garry Wills: *The Kennedy Imprisonment: A Meditation on Power*; Atlantic/Little, Brown; Boston.

James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle: *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection*; Alfred A. Knopf; New York.

François Kersaudy: *Churchill and de Gaulle*; Atheneum; New York.

by John C. Caiazza

It is a widespread belief that we can learn lessons from reading history. Of course, it is not often said *what* it is that we can learn, and historians are divided as to what the lessons of history really are. The opinion of most seems to be that we should read history in order to

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observe its ironies. That is, no general patterns, no indication of design, no final triumph or final defeat of the human spirit seems to be registered there, only the frustrations of actors working at cross-purposes, and the unintended consequences of policies once set in motion. The fact is that in reading history, people get out of it what they put into it. If history is a science, it is the most tendentious of sciences; while the facts of history may be inarguable, their meaning is not. For example, what a Marxist historian and a Catholic historian get out of their respective readings of the history of Europe's Middle Ages is not a different set of facts, but different lessons: the Marxist sees that technological, i.e., material, conditions brought about the transition from a feudal to a capitalist economy; the Catholic learns that all of Europe is a single social entity brought into being under the auspices

quirtus and paradoxes, produced a body of writing structured on strong convictions, but he also wrote for fun as well as to make a point in an unexpected way. The moving force behind Wills's writing seems to be an insatiable quest for personal status, which gives his work a smart-alecky tone that is totally lacking in Chesterton. Another possibility is that Wills, as a Catholic, is offended by the fact that John Kennedy was a patently bad Catholic. There is a final reason, however. Wills's savaging of JFK takes its place with other recent books on American presidents, particularly Ronnie Duggar's on Lyndon Johnson and Seymour Hersh's forthcoming tome on Richard Nixon. These books have two things in common: first, to a degree nearly unprecedented in serious political analysis, they relate the most sordid details of their subjects' personal lives; second, in each case the author is fiercely opposed to American foreign policy as it has been conducted since 1945. But none offers a realistic alternative. Each sees our foreign policy as anticommunist, imperialistic, dirty, immoral. While they say this at some length, what can they offer as an alternative to a policy of anti-communism? After all, there is no denying the aggressive nature of Soviet foreign policy, nor the kind of semidarkness that constitutes life under a communist regime. So writers like Hersh, Duggar, and Wills are reduced to trading in tittle-tattle on the order of the *Midnight Star* and the old *Confidential* magazine. Nixon tipsy at a Florida nightclub, LBJ afraid that college would sissify him, Rose Kennedy gamely hiding her knowledge of Joe Senior's infidelities: these are the details that make up the narratives of our new class of historians. Wills can scarcely bring himself to stop detailing the sexual escapades of the Kennedys; he even notes one about Prime Minister Asquith of England because Asquith was of a class of men—the English ruling class—that JFK admired.

The themes of Kennedy sex/family/image/charisma all merge one into an-

other and lead inevitably into the last theme of Kennedy power—American foreign policy, in Wills's view. For him they are all the same, and the only reason he can see for JFK's anticommunism is that he had to uphold the Kennedy image of cool daring and macho exploitation by going *mano à mano* with Fidel



Castro and Nikita Khrushchev. He reduces the motives for JFK's foreign policy to the personal need of Kennedy and other members of his administration to fulfill some dirty psychological necessity. The John Kennedy whom Wills describes is a man trying to establish his manhood by playing around with women and by pushing around the Russians. Such a correlation not only smacks of puny post-Freudian platitudes, but as a method of analysis it also obscures the main motives of American foreign policy since 1945 and leads Wills into contortions of interpretation. As proof of Kennedy's eagerness to humiliate the Russians, for instance, he cites the fact that we refused to dismantle our missile bases in Turkey but insisted that Khrushchev remove Russian missiles from Cuba. Why should we have missiles in Turkey when they cannot have theirs in Cuba, Wills wants to know. Missing from

Wills's discussion of the Cuban crisis is any sense that the Soviet Union has trampled into naught every previous treaty and agreement, that America is morally right in resisting communist expansion because communism is an evil and totalitarian system. Wills apparently sees that notion as proof of America's bilious pride.

There is a particular conception of power, its morality, and America's use of it behind Wills's attack on the Kennedy family; indeed, the book is subtitled *A Meditation on Power*. It is worth examining this conception because it has recently become a powerful influence in debate and discussion about American foreign policy. It is not all that new, however, for the late Jesuit scholar John Courtney Murray described it in *We Hold These Truths* over 20 years ago:

Most Americans seem to have finally awakened to the central relationship between foreign policy and force. But the awakening was to a state of moral bafflement and anxiety, insofar as it took place in the climate or moral opinion . . . [in which] a cold breath of evil more than faintly emanates from the very words 'power' and 'force.' It seems to have been a part of the American dream that this nation could go through history with clean hands by the simple Kantian expedient described in Peguy's genial phrase: 'Kantianism has clean hands, because it has no hands.' Concretely, a nation's 'hands,' wherewith it shapes the stuff of history, are its instruments of power—military, economic, and diplomatic power, together with the power of sheer presence and prestige. We have never wanted to have such hands. . . . Now we have become suddenly conscious of our hands—that they are sinewy beyond comparison, that they are sunk in the affairs of the world; that they are getting dirty beyond the wrists.

Given this attitude it becomes impossible to detect any moral difference between our foreign policy aims and those of the Russians. An anticommunist for-

eign policy starts as a moral embarrassment and becomes a psychological impossibility. This attitude has grown stronger in the last 20 years with the trauma of Vietnam, which may explain why no JFK admirer has come forward to defend him. How could they: the same people who supported JFK now claim that Reagan's budget provides too many guns and not enough butter. JFK's anti-communism ("we shall bear any burden . . .") has become an embarrassment to the liberals who once supported him.

One final point on Wills's concept of the morality of power: unlike many others who share his attitude, he is no moral relativist. Wills is a Catholic who believes that the only moral validation a nation may claim is that it permits its citizens to live in relative peace. Thus, a claim of moral righteousness can never be a legitimate basis of foreign policy, and the duty of the truly righteous among us is to recognize the moral vacuity of American foreign policy and to denounce it. Wills seems to share the idea that the United States should unilaterally renounce nuclear weapons; then, either the Russians would do the same or the Chinese would attack them. Such are the lessons of history that Wills and others on the left have learned from the war in Southeast Asia.

Of course, if anyone is expected to learn lessons from history, it is the historians themselves. These lessons would not be answers to large questions about meaning, which might provide a plan for American policies, but about the technical issues involved in the writing of history—the evaluation of certain types of documentary evidence, for example. *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection* by James Davidson and Mark Lytle explicitly intends to draw lessons on the technical questions of writing

history. Each chapter describes an episode in American history chosen to illustrate a particular problem or technique of the practicing historian. The book also has the aim of interesting readers in written history—which the authors perceive no longer appeals to people the way it once did. The story of abolitionist John Brown, for instance, is written as psychohistory to show the use of Freudian analysis in the writing of historiography; the development of the A-bomb is used to illustrate how historians must appreciate the influence of bureaucracies to understand decision-making; Andrew Jackson's career is used to illustrate how theories, in this case the frontier theory, guide the historians' selection of facts. There is a peculiar sensation in rereading about these events, so familiar to us and yet told in a new way. To see in the career of Huey Long not just the familiar story of the Southern demagogue but an illustration of the "Great Man" theory is to gain a new perspective on American history that raises it from the local and parochial to the universal. *After the Fact*, written by two young historians with Yale pedigrees, is interesting and well written and will reacquaint the reader with significant events in a new and refreshing light.

If we do not really learn lessons except in a technical sense, and otherwise tend to see only what we bring to our observation of history, then how can history be of use to us? The answer may lie in the fact that history can be a living tradition as well as a set of facts or a historical narrative, and can thus influence our thoughts and actions. This kind of history is experienced—felt, not read, or at least felt after it is read. It constitutes a "usable past" because it becomes an extension of our personal memories. Wash-

ington at Valley Forge, Lee and Grant at Gettysburg, MacArthur in the Philippines are not simply events in American military history; they form a tradition which, when imbibed, will inspire military officers in the 21st century. François Kersaudy's *Churchill and de Gaulle* gives a clear indication of how history can function in this mode by what it tells us about its subjects. It provides a clear portrayal of these men which, while concentrating on their personal relationship, also enables the reader to see the kind of men they were and the historical forces against which they worked. Churchill and de Gaulle were both deeply immersed in the histories of their respective nations, which helped form their consciousness of the role that they and their nations should play in World War II. De Gaulle's France and Churchill's England, as they perceived them, had special places as originators and protectors of the best of the Western tradition of civility. They literally *made history*, not just by learning lessons from it but by creating a historical memory for future generations. The people who only learned from history were the designers of appeasement and Vichy, for they had learned the lessons of World War I. Alas, they were the wrong lessons.

Historical knowledge is not only the knowledge of the past; it is also the kind of knowledge which enables us to use the past as guide for the future. Yet, if we do not learn lessons from it, how can history guide us? Ironically, a passage from Garry Wills's *Confessions of a Conservative* explains it:

Insofar as we steer rationally toward the future, we do so by our rear-view mirror. There is no windshield, because there is nothing to 'see' up ahead. We go forward by seeing backward. By tracing the trajectory of past events we extrapolate to future positions. . . . The best guides to the future are those whose knowledge of the past is broadest and deepest, who are most cautious and aware of complexity, least confident that they can 'see' something up ahead. □

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## Missives About Man

*Selected Letters of James Thurber;*  
Edited by Helen Thurber and Edward  
Weeks; Little, Brown; Boston.

*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien;* Edited  
by Humphrey Carpenter with Chris-  
topher Tolkien; Houghton Mifflin;  
Boston.

by Carson Daly

Today we hear a great deal about culture. To judge from what we read, it can be almost anything and can be unearthed almost anywhere. There are, for example, physical, pop, ethnic, religious, aesthetic, academic, folk, popular, teenage, European, Latin, Asiatic, and American cultures—to name just a few. Various forms of it can be spotted on Carnaby Street in London, in New York's Harlem, or under the desert sands in the royal burial chamber of the Pharaoh. Moreover, culture has been reduced to a hotly desired "commodity" that can be used to sell almost anything—houses, clothes, food, books, cameras. Culture, it seems, is de rigueur for the up-and-coming person in the 80's.

In the past, culture was generally thought to be an outgrowth of religious doctrines, historical circumstances, governmental administration, social mores, and literary, artistic, and musical developments. A cultured person was often considered to be a well-traveled individual who was broadly educated in the humanities. This person was, above all, a gentle man or woman and the product of a civilized, Judeo-Christian tradition. This view of culture and of the cultured individual has all but disappeared. It has been replaced in many quarters by the vulgar notion that culture can be acquired like objets d'art—and the proposed mode of acquisition is

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nearly as disturbing as this concept. The guiding principle of such a mentality is osmosis. One does not actually work at learning languages or appreciating art or reading the classics; instead, one reads critics on these subjects and adopts their views. Unfortunately, those critics are generally the voices of what can only be called the pseudoculture. These sirenlike voices call to the culturally deprived, offering them a chance to be among the beau monde if they but subscribe to *The New Yorker*, jog, eat health food, shop at Bloomingdale's, learn snatches of three modern languages, and memorize the Greek alphabet. This is hardly culture. It is not the glory that was Greece or the grandeur that was Rome. It is not even the authentic grime of Harlem or the grotesquerie of 42nd Street. It is the ethos of Berlitz and the ontology (such as it is) of Madison Avenue.

Yet this view of culture is disseminated throughout the media and is manifest in the degeneration of the family, the decay of social inhibitions, and in a generally fast, egomaniacal "lifestyle." The kind of ersatz commodity that grows out of these circumstances is powerless to satisfy the hunger of the human spirit for a real, organic, traditionally based culture. In fact, our rejection of, but instinctive desire for, this kind of culture is a major topic of modern music, art, and literature. Even such art forms as the rock song and the soap opera record this inchoate desire.

Not surprisingly, much of modern literature testifies to the desperate need to maintain Western culture against the onslaught of modern mores. The recently published letters of James Thurber and of J.R.R. Tolkien, two impressive but very different men, make this same point in diverse but unequivocal ways.

Throughout Thurber's letters to friends, novelists, editors, doctors, and strangers, he never mentions culture explicitly. Nevertheless, all that he draws

and writes is conditioned by his reliance upon it. He intuitively understands that without culture and the moral strictures upon which it is based there can be no humor and, therefore, none of the hilarious cartoons or witty stories at which he excelled. This is not to say that he was a Bible-beating enthusiast or an adamant sectarian. Far from it. He seems to have recognized religious enthusiasm in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek manner, as when he wrote to E.B. White: "Over here [England] everybody turns Catholic when anything is the matter and perhaps you should try that. T.S. Eliot turned Catholic and so did Evelyn Waugh and they look fine." Thurber recognized that a world devoid of a code of fundamental decency, order, and ethics is anything but a funny place to live. Moreover, in such a world where nothing is normative, there can be no humorous plays on the unanticipated, the unlikely, the ironic, the incongruous, the bizarre, the grotesque, and the outrageous because none of them is a departure from the regular. As Thurber cogently observes, "The old cliché 'the dignity of man' is proved in the breach. It is only when he falls down that we appreciate how straight he can stand." We might add that if he never stands, we cannot appreciate the humor or the tragedy of his fall.

Thurber makes this same point in various ways throughout the letters—most notably in his comments on Henry James and modern mores and on living in New York. In the first instance, the humorist notes that the kind of drama that James could achieve is no longer available to the modern writer because society has lost much of its horror of unprincipled behavior:

What a nicely glowing point of honor he put upon two people for giving up Love for a principle! It seems so far-away in this day when we give up principles for Love—and somehow the Love they gave up seems, God help us all, rather more worth the