

# Checkmate to Chaos

*The Decline of the West*, by David Cate (Macmillan, 616 pp. \$7.95), concerns the vicissitudes of an infant African nation that resembles in its struggles Algeria and the Congo. Charles R. Larson teaches English and African Studies at the American University in Washington, D.C.

By CHARLES R. LARSON

THE TIME is the end of the seventh week of the first year of independence. The place is Coppernica, a former French colony in Central Africa, rich in mineral wealth. The people are twelve million Africans, half a million whites, and a handful of international financiers about to manipulate a coup to overthrow the young, inexperienced government. These are the ingredients of David Cate's third novel, *The Decline of the West*.

Cate's title is from Oswald Spengler's historical treatise, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes (The Decline of the West)*. Imperialism, Spengler wrote, "is to be taken as a typical symbol of the end . . . something demonic and huge which

grips, forces into service and consumes the late mankind of the world-city stage, whether it wills it or not, whether it knows it or not." Coppernica's government knows it but is able to do little about it. The mines account for 72 per cent of the nation's yearly revenue, and the profits are controlled only marginally by the Africans. French and Anglo-American business interests are so strongly dominated by a few ruthless businessmen that the coup which results resembles an international chess contest with Africans as the set pieces and Western pressure groups as the players. At the end of the competition all the gambits have been played, most of the competitors have lost, and the country is in its worst political chaos.

Cate's characters are vividly drawn, fully delineated personalities. They fall into several distinct groups. First, the industrialists: There is the Englishman Soames Tufton, who hasn't been able to adjust to Coppernica's independent status. "The bridge between black and white has got to be green, the color of dollar bills," he tells Chester Silk, his brother-in-law. Silk is the American ambassador to Coppernica, and he and Tufton own most of the stock in Amcol,

the country's second largest copper company. Tufton and Silk are pitted against Frenchman Aristide Plon, who runs the Union de Coppernica, the country's biggest mining concern. Plon has the armed forces behind him, "the French officers who had stayed on after independence—at his beck and call." And Plon and Tufton have André Laval, the sadistic commandant of the special mercenary forces, to carry out the coup which will replace Coppernica's young government with pro-European sympathizers.

As human beings the Africans come off considerably better; the reader sympathizes with them from the beginning. There is Raymond Tukhomada, the charismatic prime minister who as a youth was educated by a French priest until the clergyman thought he was asking too many questions. Then there is Tukhomada's minister of the interior, Amah Odouma, educated in France, the intellectual whose younger sister André Laval tortured to death in the days of fighting which preceded independence. And there is Fernand Ybele, the rapacious leader of the opposition party and puppet of the industrialists.

Alongside these characters are several others upon whom much of Cate's story depends: Powell Bailey, the Negro diplomat and assistant to Ambassador Silk; Jason, Bailey's son, hopelessly in love with Zoe, the ambassador's daughter; and James Caffrey, Tufton's disciple, the thwarted intellectual, pulled into international politics and a career of action. These and others fit into Cate's political parable of bribery and corruption, revolution and death—man's fate.

*The Decline of the West* comes at a time when many emergent African countries have been forced to re-evaluate their political systems. Coppernica might be any of a dozen of these nations. In its pre-independent stage it resembles Algeria; after independence it bears an uncanny similarity to the Congo: "In large areas of the country the Government's writ had already ceased to run. Ybele's attitude encouraged one tribal chief after another to proclaim break-away, separatist governments in the provinces." After the coup, "Coppernican politics resembled more than ever a Chicago gang war, and the identity of the Al Capone was less than ever in doubt."

In a larger sense, *The Decline of the West* is a big, ambitious novel stretched over three continents, embracing an international cultural confrontation that rises above the petty neuroses of inner life we have seen chronicled so meticulously in much of contemporary fiction. And in this context the author resembles André Malraux, of whom Cate wrote in his book *Communism and the French Intellectuals*: "When, in 1935, sixty-four French intellectuals defended Musso-



"Here's the pitch, Jenkins. You start out with nothing but one of our credit cards."

lini's Abyssinian adventure in the name of Western values and Latin civilization, Malraux . . . replied that the West had not been a valid power- or value-concept for many years past." The quotation is applicable to Caute's ugly picture of international force in *The Decline of the West*. Like Malraux's, Caute's expatriates find themselves in a world of extreme political upheaval, in a foreign climate diametrically opposed to Western political life, in a world they strip of human dignity and fraternity. Such are Caute's cosmopolites—citizens of the world, but citizens of nowhere. Coup and counter coup, revolution, guerrilla warfare, violence and torture—all have ramifications beyond the individual and his country. The disasters of world events belong to an endless chain of which no single culture has a monopoly.

Passages in Caute's novel are as fluid and alive as anything that has yet been written about politics in African fiction. Fleeing the mercenaries, Amah Odouma looks out the automobile window and recalls the magnitude of African-Western relations:

The vast continent was heaving with the effort of childbirth, of self-creation. And always there was the long, flat, empty sky, blanketing the blue hills, the jungles and the neat, plasticine villages, with their fires, their placid, ribbed cattle and their thin, watchful boys shrouded in the fine dust of hunger. Amah felt himself burned to dust by that flat sky which refused to bend with the earth it blistered black. Here the soil was barren. Nothing flowered—not even the mines, the hard shafts, the pistons of European steel which penetrated the mineral depths, thrusting down with vertical greed, guided by steel-helmeted technicians—white men, calm and arrogant, whose senses had been sharpened by gain.

This is where Caute's writing is at its best—when he writes of the rhythm and heartbeat of contemporary African life, the dreariness of its villages, the throb of its cities. The pace diminishes only occasionally in the extensive flashbacks set in France, England, and the United States. It is difficult to keep them as electrifying as the sections describing the initial coup and the aftermath of guerrilla warfare between the white mercenaries and the African political factions; these are the chapters which will undoubtedly make *The Decline of the West* an international best-seller.

At the end of the novel an African country has realized that the problems of nation-building cannot be learned overnight: the burden of the white man continues long after independence. But David Caute's *The Decline of the West* is also a powerful commentary on the moral commitments the West has long ignored in Africa.



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## Inferno Revisited

*Attendance List for a Funeral*, by Alexander Kluge, translated from the German by Leila Vennewitz (McGraw-Hill, 203 pp. \$4.95), contains eleven short stories about people under Nazism, in which the official language of the Hitler era chillingly conveys its horror. Joseph Bauke is associate professor of Germanic languages at Columbia University.

By JOSEPH BAUKE

**I**N THE last five or six years German literature has made the comeback for which readers in and outside Germany had been waiting since the fall of the Third Reich. Günter Grass and Jakob Lind, above all, have revived a language that seemed all but dead and unfit for any artistic purposes, after the uses to which it was put under Hitler. In their work these authors descend into the hell of the past and reflect their

vision of it in a profusion of surrealist images that has compelled the attention of audiences in many countries. In his collection of short stories, *Attendance List for a Funeral*, Alexander Kluge demonstrates that there are other ways of exorcising the evil spirits of an era.

Kluge, born in 1932, was too young to experience the Nazi years consciously; but, like many of his generation, he is profoundly concerned with the sins committed by the fathers. A lawyer by profession, he writes with a precision and a detachment rather rare in the German tradition. In these stories about the paths of people under Nazism there are no verbal cascades, no intellectual fireworks, no expressionist flights into the absolute. Instead, we have a prose as reasoned and as dispassionate as a lawyer's brief. In one of the stories, a superb piece about the career of an academic, Kluge resorts to lengthy footnotes to underscore his quest for the factual.

Sometimes the tendency to documen-

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## Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich and David M. Glixon

### A NOVEL SWITCH

Taking fifteen works by major novelists, Lorraine Reitano of Hammonton, N. J., has perversely substituted related words for their titles; synonyms, antonyms, and puns are among her camouflages. Can you disentangle the titles and assign the correct author to each? Solutions and correct titles are given on page 118.

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|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Negligible Prospects</i> ( )     | 1. Pearl S. Buck         |
| <i>A Fixed Banquet</i> ( )          | 2. Erskine Caldwell      |
| <i>The Walking-Stick Revolt</i> ( ) | 3. Willa Cather          |
| <i>Yearning for Decease</i> ( )     | 4. Charles Dickens       |
| <i>The First Cheer</i> ( )          | 5. Lloyd C. Douglas      |
| <i>Curve of Defeat</i> ( )          | 6. George Eliot          |
| <i>A Tender Trip</i> ( )            | 7. William Faulkner      |
| <i>In Positive Struggle</i> ( )     | 8. Ernest Hemingway      |
| <i>Majestic Male</i> ( )            | 9. James Hilton          |
| <i>Snuff Boulevard</i> ( )          | 10. Edwin O'Connor       |
| <i>Paltry Mania</i> ( )             | 11. Erich Maria Remarque |
| <i>The Quiet and the Rage</i> ( )   | 12. John Steinbeck       |
| <i>Centrewalk</i> ( )               | 13. Laurence Sterne      |
| <i>Two of Yours</i> ( )             | 14. Irving Stone         |
| <i>Casual Crop</i> ( )              | 15. Herman Wouk          |