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TODAY AND TOMORROW



By George Henderson

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phasized honesty in human interaction, distaste for an ethic of possession and accumulation, and the reserving of highest respect not for the abstract intellect, but for how it showed itself, was used and useful in one's life." Duberman quotes a Black Mountaineer: "A seed may sprout or may not sprout, but if it's a daisy seed it's going to grow a daisy. . . . The fact that you watered it, isn't what made it turn into a daisy rather than a radish. But you helped grow that daisy by watering it. . . . It's not important whether a particular daisy grows, but if there were none, it would be a catastrophe. . . . And in a sense, Black Mountain watered the post-historic plant that *was* growing . . . the last flourishing of the human spirit before the end or . . . the beginning of the flowering of what one of the founders of SNCC used to call 'the beloved society.' The beloved community. The decent society. Goddam it—sooner or later human beings *are* going to live in a decent society!"

I call it Eden rather than Utopia that those of us involved in such life-giving and life-destroying communities are trying to achieve—that is, the good life achieved through rediscovery of something lost rather than the invention (and control) of something new. This book is testimony to the incredible pain and foolishness and sacrifice that search entails, and also to its absolute necessity. In our present proliferation of experimental educational programs and communal forms, no book could be more relevant than this record of our intrepid predecessors, who bumbled about in the blackness of their mountain with all the magnificent error of Homeric gods. □

## Free and Nervous

THE NEW CHASTITY AND OTHER ARGUMENTS AGAINST WOMEN'S LIBERATION. By Midge Decter. 188 pages. Coward, McCann & Geoghegan. \$5.95.

BY LINDA WOLFE

This morning I have had two chores: one to sign over a donation to the Coalition for a Free Choice, the organization that will be defending New York State's threatened abortion law, and the other to evaluate Midge Decter's arguments against Women's Liberation. I like neither of these necessities—neither having to give money for what should be my inalienable right nor having to admit even a pinchpenny of admiration for a woman who sees birth

control as the first step on the Women's Liberation path toward total sexlessness.

Still, I must confess, I admire Midge Decter's classic counterrevolutionary stance, her fervor to see the worm in every sweet, ripe ideological argument, the antithesis in every juicy thesis. Her technique is to show that nothing about the women's movement is as it appears to be. Quoting frequently from liberation writers, with her ear to their pronouncements on housework, sex, marriage, and childbearing, Decter concludes that, although the women's movement may seem "to embody a new wave of demand for equal rights," it is actually "about something else altogether; it is about, in fact, the difficulties women are experiencing with the rights and freedoms they already enjoy."

The reason why women are having such difficulties is, in Decter's view, that they long to remain irresponsible little girls. Thus they eschew housework, not because it is dullard's work, but because it is perpetually decision demanding and women simply aren't up to it. If women seem to be moving away from sex (a highly debatable point) and becoming resistant to men—"the new chastity"—it is "not so much because of women's difficulties with the performance of its [sex's] specifics as because of the larger entanglements it represents: a life in hostage to the rhythms of time and mortality, to the needs and thus the ephemerality of flesh, and to the risks of opening oneself, making oneself available to the demands of others." Similarly, the movement's negative attitudes toward marriage stem, not from the fact that women feel overburdened, but instead from the fact that they cannot stand to give. And, finally, all this fuss about birth control is actually a cover-up. Women do not desire the right to say when and how many children they may have, but they actually want to put an end to the reproductive process altogether.

Behind these various *shandas*, Decter warns, lies the dirty secret that women are self-hating. It makes them life-denying. With almost Biblical prophetic grandeur she writes, "There is no more radical nor desperately nihilistic statement to issue forth from the lips of humans than that there are no necessary differences between the sexes. For such differences both issue in and do in themselves constitute the most fundamental principle of the continuation of

Linda Wolfe, a contributing editor of New York magazine, is working on a book about women's extramarital affairs.

life on earth. Denial of that principle—no matter how nobly, or on the other hand, how trivially uttered—becomes the denial of oneself, one's nature and one's true possibilities: becomes, in other words, the denial of life itself. . . . And as people learned in the past—and seem to need to learn over and over again—should the seeds of such denial take firm root, we shall all of us, men, women, and babes in arms, live to reap the whirlwind."

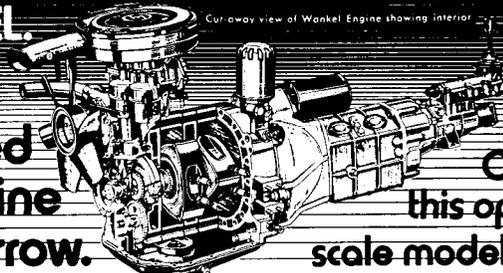
Well, yes, of course. It would be cause for despair if that were what the women's movement is about. But Decter, a magazine editor (formerly with *Harper's*, now with *World*), supports her argument on the flimsiest evidence, on bits and pieces of quotations gathered helter-skelter; she is happiest with fringe and freakish elements of the movement. Frequently we are told that something is "understood" or "said" in the women's movement without ever learning who understands it or who says it. "Sex understood as a coming together between two autonomous consenting adults," she writes, ". . . is said to be an entirely male conception, propagated for the sole purpose of keeping men sexually supplied." Or, "Women's Liberation has seen fit to characterize the professions in which the majority of professional women engage as housework in disguise." Who? Who? one keeps questioning. Who said it? Which women?

Decter's most publicized argument, the one that holds that Women's Liberation finds men sexually distasteful and, maidenly, is seeking an end to sexual freedom, cannot be documented at all. She is forced to admit, "Though its source is never directly alluded to in any document of the movement that I have seen (one would wager half a lifetime that it is a recurring theme in private and in the meetings of consciousness raising), the evidence is lying all about, unmistakable." But the only evidence we ever get is the slogan scrawled on some placards carried by a handful of young women at a liberation demonstration: "Don't fuck—masturbate."

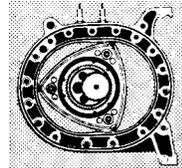
Curiously, it is Decter who seems the most maidenly of all women. In a voice all too clearly her own she insists that young women experience no lust, that orgasm is basically inessential since "pleasure in sex is not found in, or determined by, explosive release," and that coitus, while for a man an "attainment," is for a woman "a happenstance, roused and dispensed with on the same occasion . . . it speaks very little one way or the other to the rest of her life." Who are *these* women? one wonders. But these assertions are all of

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ferred as gospel, no sources quoted, and, to arrive at them, Decter overlooks sexual studies demonstrating that orgasm affects the entire well-being of women and she dismisses Masters and Johnson as "busy sexual engineers." Clearly, if women were as asexual as Decter sees them, a liberation movement might be wise to push chastity. But, since the premise of the sexually deadened female is here so absurd and undocumented, it hardly seems worth saying that of course this is not what the women's movement is about.

Nor is it about irresponsibility, being little girls again, or stopping the reproductive process. When Decter isn't damning the entire movement but using her unique abilities to dig at the underside of specific noble pronouncements, she unearths some chilling tendencies in some members of some liberation phalanxes. But in the end, like most of history's counterrevolutionaries, Decter finds the movement she attacks too broad, too grand; it eludes her. She has written a sonorous, investigative, but ultimately fallacious book because she has kept mistaking her own trees for the whole branching forest. □

## Horror and Struck

**THE CLOCKS OF COLUMBUS:** The Literary Career of James Thurber. By Charles S. Holmes. Illustrated. 331 pages. Atheneum Publishers. \$10.

BY WILLIAM HOGAN

James Thurber wrote fables, memoirs, reports, satires, fantasies, complaints. He ventured into the drama (*The Male Animal*, with Elliot Nugent). The movies smoked him out (*The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*). As his friend and colleague E. B. White once noted, Thurber "littered the world with thousands of drawings." Some were among the funniest in the annals of cartooning ("All right, have it your way—you heard a seal bark!").

He was not merely a clever writer for *The New Yorker*, which he joined in 1927 and helped to illuminate until his death in 1961 at age 67. He was a major American comic artist, whose puzzling Thurber country was as haunting as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, populated by resigned dogs, predatory women at war with bewildered men, creatures whose wheels were set in motion by the damp hand of melancholy. The melancholy was Thurber's.

William Hogan is book review editor of the San Francisco Chronicle.



James Thurber, before he became totally blind

Much autobiographical material appears in Thurber's books, notably in *The Years With Ross*, in which Thurber becomes as vivid a character as the book's ostensible subject, the late editor of *The New Yorker*, Harold Ross. Thurber's Columbus, Ohio, years—the McKinley era and later—were well documented in *My Life and Hard Times* (1933), a collection of stories that were fundamentally true, like the night the ghost got in and similar adventures in a family that was obviously addicted to absurdity.

In a 1957 collection, *Alarms and Diversions*, Thurber recalled his young manhood and his first trip abroad, as a code clerk in the American embassy in Paris. "The City of Light during most of 1919," he wrote, "was costumed like a wide-screen operetta, the uniforms of a score of nations forming a kind of restless out-of-step finale. . . ."

Charles S. Holmes does not deliver lines of this Matisse-like quality in his anecdotal biography, which concentrates chiefly on Thurber's role as a literary stylist. An Ohioan himself and a professor of English at Pomona College in Southern California, Holmes is a dedicated Thurber scholar who has done his homework exhaustively and with affection for his subject. The fact that, in a retelling of many familiar tales (from *The Years With Ross*, among other sources), his prose generates less magic than Thurber's did is not the biographer's fault. Thurber wrote like some unicorn in a garden, and Holmes is merely a mortal scholar, a solid writer rather than an exciting one, who is only able to suggest a world that constantly explodes into confusion and chaos, or

the Thurber quality of fantasy, which was so delicate and thoughtful.

*The Clocks of Columbus* might send a multitude of readers back to the originals—from *The Owl in the Attic and Other Complexities* to the children's fantasy of 1950, *The Thirteen Clocks*—and that in itself is a favor to us all. Yet the story is here, told chronologically—many Thurbers brought into perspective as a single phenomenon: the college days; newspaper days in Columbus, New York, and on the old Paris edition of the *Chicago Tribune*; his two marriages; and *The New Yorker*, on which Thurber became one of the most distinguished writers of his time.

And his blindness, which developed in the spring of 1940. For decades, as it turned out, he had seen without the normal apparatus of vision. We see the tormented artist becoming resigned to a distressing, but not defeating, affliction. His essays and children's stories continued to appear, as well as acid comments on the decline of America and the human race in general.

"People don't read any more," he observed in his late days; "they just develop a TV mouth and a TV stare." He added that ours is the age of mental illness, "of tranquilizers, sleeping pills, women-chasing and drink—everybody in the United States is trying to escape from reality."

Yet Thurber made a career of escaping reality, and Holmes shows this in many stories. In 1926 Thurber covered the Helen Wills-Suzanne Lenglen tennis match at Cannes in a style that resembled a Henry James novel (he had been through a James period). The impish Thurber was on hand, too.