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The meteoric rise and precipitous fall of Clara Brett Martin

Thoughts on the misuse of history

by Robert Martin

THE HEAD OFFICE OF ONTARIO'S MINISTRY OF THE ATTORNEY General is located, appropriately enough, on Bay Street in Toronto. The building itself is unsettling, a bit too arriviste in the shiny pink of its marble facing, although not nearly so crass as the police headquarters a few blocks to the north.

Even a casual passerby is struck by the building's name, or former name. It is evident the structure was once called the Clara Brett Martin Building, in both English and French. But the letters which proudly proclaimed its name to the world have been ripped from it, amputated. No effort has yet been made to cover the scars.

Who was Clara Brett Martin and why would anyone want to put her name on a building, let alone tear it off?

Martin was born in 1874, into a Toronto family which was both wealthy and, it seems, well connected. She received a BA degree from the University of Toronto at the age of

16 and then made a momentous decision. She wanted to become a lawyer. This was momentous because there was not then a single female lawyer in the entire country. It took her seven years and great determination, but in 1897 Clara Brett Martin became the first woman in Canada to be admitted to the practice of law. Her family's wealth and connections could not have been hindrances in her quest.

And that, frankly, is pretty much the story of Clara Brett Martin's life. Her career as a lawyer was virtually indistinguishable from that of other Toronto lawyers of the period. She accumulated clients, influence

and wealth. She dabbled in municipal politics. She did not, however, marry. At the age of 49 she suffered a heart attack and died.

There is only one reason to remember Clara Brett Martin, one memorable achievement in her life. Unfortunately, Martin has suffered much in recent years from the use of history to fight political battles in the present rather than as a means of understanding and illuminating the past. Propaganda, masquerading as history, turned Martin into something of a saint. And then her reputation was shattered as quickly as it had been created.

Miss Martin, for I have no doubt that is the way she would have wished to be addressed, began her rise to public prominence in 1985, 62 years after her death. In 1985 a new academic journal, the Canadian Journal of Women and the Law, much subsidized by public funds, made its first appearance. It opened an article entitled "'To Open the Way for Others of my Sex': Clara Brett Martin's Career as Canada's First Woman Lawyer" by Professor Constance Backhouse of the University of Western Ontario's



Clara Brett Martin

Faculty of Law. Though Backhouse was not the first contemporary writer to have discovered Martin, it was her article which was primarily responsible for propelling Martin, posthumously, into the limelight.

Backhouse's account of Martin's life was adulatory and uncritical. She chronicled Martin's struggle against male chauvinism to become a lawyer in loving detail. Much was made of the determined opposition she faced; but no explanation was offered for the fact that a number of male lawyers and legislators, most notably the Premier of Ontario, Sir Oliver Mowat, actively supported Martin in her desire to become a lawyer.

So one leaves her essay with a fundamental historical question unanswered. If the opposition to the entry of women into the legal profession was as intense as Backhouse suggests, how could a woman have been called to the Bar?

Whatever its limitations as history, the article, which ended with a plea for greater public recognition of Martin – going to the point of including a mailing address



1995 In 1995 Inroads published this (here abridged) tale of discovery by University of Western Ontario law professor Robert Martin (no relation to Clara Brett Martin): an instructive lesson about what happens when history meets political correctness.

for contributions to pay for a portrait to be hung at Osgoode Hall – succeeded as propaganda.

It was announced a centre for feminist legal studies at York University would be named after Clara Brett Martin. An awkward painting of her, taken from a contemporary photograph, was prominently displayed in the law building at the University of Western Ontario. The University of Toronto law school used her name for a series of feminist workshops.

But Miss Martin's greatest posthumous triumph came in 1989. Ian Scott, then the Ontario Attorney General, had been look-

In 1897 Clara Brett Martin became the first woman in Canada to be admitted to the practice of law. Her family's wealth and connections could not have been hindrances in her quest.

ing for a name for his new headquarters. Apparently dazzled by Backhouse's article, he decided to call it the Clara Brett Martin Building.

This decision surprised at least one person. Theresa Roth, head of reference services for the legal profession's Great Library at Osgoode Hall, had herself written an account of Martin's efforts to become a lawyer.¹ Roth was quoted as saying of Scott's decision to name his building after Martin, "After all we still didn't know much about her. No one ever said she was a brilliant lawyer or anything."²

The Clara Brett Martin Building was officially inaugurated with a glittering reception, "Rendezvous with Time," on September 22, 1989. Among the 600 people

in attendance were three female Supreme Court of Canada judges.

I had been vaguely aware of all this, but my interest in Clara Brett Martin was not piqued until the late spring of 1990. A friend who lives in Toronto told me there were stories circulating about Clara Brett Martin being anti-Semitic. Rumour had it there was some sort of document which demonstrated this. It was at that point I first read Professor Backhouse's article. My efforts to get a copy of the mystery document, however, proved futile.

And then one day a fax arrived. I still do not know from where. With the fax was a copy of a letter. The letter, typed on Clara Brett Martin's law office stationery, had been written to the Attorney General of Ontario on March 26, 1915. In it Martin complained about a practice which she believed to be widespread. Unscrupulous persons were registering bogus claims against titles to land. This made it far more difficult and expensive for the legitimate owners to sell or transfer their land. These "scandalous" doings, according to Martin, were the work of "foreigners," especially "Jews." No individual was identified by name in Martin's letter, but she gave examples of the behaviour she was criticizing, attributing each to a "Jew."

The letter, I found out subsequently, had been discovered, in 1985 or 1986, by Peter Sibenik, a graduate student at Osgoode Hall Law School, who was doing research in the Ontario Archives on quite a different subject. It is highly unlikely that Constance Backhouse's researches into the life of Clara Brett Martin would have led her to the letter.

I write a regular column for a newspaper called *The Lawyers Weekly* as well as being, like Constance Backhouse, in the University

of Western Ontario law faculty. I decided to write a column about Clara Brett Martin. My column was published on July 20, 1990. Its thesis was that Clara Brett Martin's canonization as a secular saint was premature, the product of bad history.

I wrote about the 1915 letter, but there was more. Backhouse had written of the size of Martin's estate on her death. There was a "large and handsome" house on Roxborough Street. There were also "seven row houses" on Napier Street in Toronto described as "investment properties."

I tried to discover where Napier Street might be. There is no Napier Street today. It was in the part of Cabbagetown, once described by Hugh Garner as the largest white slum in the world, which was demolished after the Second World War to make way for the Regent Park public housing development. It seemed likely that Clara Brett Martin was a slum landlord.

Backhouse had sought to portray Martin as having progressive social ideas. She was said to have been sensitive to "working class interests in education" and to have been a supporter of "daycare" for "working parents." These assertions seemed to me, given Martin's background and the social milieu in which she moved, wildly improbable.

About Clara Brett Martin I wrote: "Clara was not a bad person. Nor was she a particularly outstanding person. She was ... simply typical of her time, her place, and her class ... Clara Brett Martin did one remarkable thing in her life."

The *Lawyers Weekly* column was immediately picked up by the *Globe and Mail*, which made reference to the 1915 letter and my assertion that Clara Brett Martin was a slum landlord. It also contained a foretaste of how difficult it was going to

be to deal with the issue. Nancy Jackman, described as "a well-known Toronto feminist philanthropist," was quoted as saying that the women who have "heralded Clara Brett Martin should not be held fully responsible for this when it is the legal profession, the media, and the general censorship of Ontario society that has obliterated women's work." No specifics were provided as to how exactly "the general censorship of Ontario society" operated.³

The *Globe* is exceedingly influential. Martin's star began to set. The women-and-the-law caucus at the University of Toronto Law School changed the name of the Clara Brett Martin Workshop Series. The Clara Brett Martin Institute at Osgoode Hall Law School was renamed the Institute for Feminist Legal Research. The funds for the full-sized portrait at Osgoode Hall evaporated. And the Attorney General in Ontario's freshly elected New Democratic Party government, Howard Hampton, was having second thoughts about the name of his building. A spokesperson was quoted to have said: "It will probably be named after a woman again. But this time we're going to do better research."³ ...

The next important event in the saga was the publication in 1991 of Constance Backhouse's book, *Petticoats and Prejudice: Women and Law in Nineteenth Century Canada*. Chapter 10 of the book retold the story of Clara Brett Martin. The chapter is clearly based on the 1985 article, but much had changed. The references to Martin's support of working class education and daycare centres disappeared. The 1915 letter was openly acknowledged and, indeed, reproduced in a footnote. Backhouse acknowledged that Martin's row houses were in Cabbagetown, but offered this improbable justification in a footnote on page 438:



Assessment rolls indicate that the value of the buildings and property was somewhat better than that of neighbouring properties. Since Clara Brett Martin had consistently maintained rents that compared favourably with those of other landlords, these row houses had attracted a stable group of tenants, most of whom were from the skilled sector of the labouring class.

In the introduction the author set out her views about the writing of history. She took several pages to apologize for the fact that most of the women whose stories are recounted in her book were “white, middle-class, apparently heterosexual,” that there was only one “First Nations” woman

Why must Clara Brett Martin be mythologized? Why can she not simply be what she was – a real woman who lived in a real time and place?

presented and no blacks, no disabled women and, “the most glaring omission,” no lesbians. But she made no attempt to apologize for what she asserted on page 2 to be her central purpose in writing: the creation of “heroines.” ...

On May 18, 1993, prominent Toronto lawyer Clayton Ruby published an article about Martin in *The Globe and Mail*. Ruby ... was not prepared to accord heroine status to Miss Martin. He was, he said, as a Jew “affronted” and “humiliated” by the fact the Attorney General’s building was named after her: “The fact remains that this vicious anti-Semite is now honoured.” The name was removed in 1994.

Bad history was demolished by even worse history. Martin was probably an

anti-Semite, but she was not a vicious anti-Semite. Julius Streicher, Heinrich Himmler and Joseph Goebbels were vicious anti-Semites. The fundamental point is that Clara Brett Martin was not honoured because of her opinions on Jews or any other group, and not because she was or was not a heroine. She was honoured because she was the first woman in Canada to become a lawyer.

I cannot avoid asking what seems to me to be an essential question. Why must Clara Brett Martin be mythologized? Why can she not simply be what she was – a real woman who lived in a real time and place? The answer seems obvious – myths have more value to the propagandist than do real women. We should not have historians creating heroines (or heroes). We should recognize historical figures for what they are and not demand that persons who lived in other times conform to contemporary notions of what is acceptable.

The portrait of Clara Brett Martin which once hung in the University of Western Ontario law school has been taken down and hidden away. She is now utterly dishonoured. Her creator received a major American historical writing award in 1993 for *Petticoats and Prejudice*. ■

Notes

- ¹ “Clara Brett Martin – Canada’s pioneer woman lawyer,” (1984) 18 *Gazette* 325.
- ² Edward Hore, “What’s in a name,” *Saturday Night*, April 1992, p. 18.
- ³ Kirk Makin, “Image of first woman lawyer tainted by anti-Semitic letters,” *Globe and Mail*, July 19, 1990.
- ⁴ Hore, “What’s in a name,” p. 22.

Welcoming the nice barbarian invaders

The Barbarian Invasions. Canada/France, 2003. Written and directed by Denys Arcand. Starring Rémy Girard (Rémy), Stéphane Rousseau (Sébastien), Dorothée Berryman (Louise), Marie-Josée Croze (Nathalie).

by Henry Milner

As I WRITE, DENYS ARCAND’S FILM *THE BARBARIAN INVASIONS*, fresh from its triumphant opening at the Toronto Film Festival, has been chosen as Canada’s entry for the Oscars. In Quebec, it has been on screen since it captured honours at Cannes last spring (Marie-Josée Croze for best actress and Arcand for best script), but it has yet to open anywhere else in North America. So I offer Inroads readers a preview – as both invitation and caution.

First the invitation. Seeing *Invasions* was one of my most memorable film experiences in years. It is well directed, well photographed and well acted, bringing together a stellar cast of veterans (household names in Quebec) and relative newcomers. But it is more: one of the rare films that is at the same time immensely entertaining and consistently intelligent.

Arcand, historian turned filmmaker, here returns to the sure home ground of his famous *Decline of the American Empire*, taking up 15 years later with the same gabby coterie of friends and lovers. This is most welcome since, after repeating his success with the masterful *Jesus of Montreal* three years after *Decline*, Arcand faltered with *Love and Human Remains* and again with *Stardom*. Indeed, *Invasions* is both funnier and far more effective as social commentary than *Decline*, which owed its reputation in

The Barbarian Invasions is a welcome return to the gabby coterie of friends and lovers last seen in *The Decline of the American Empire*.

good part to the then still shocking sexual amorality of its articulate protagonists.

The plot of *Invasions* is simple enough. Rémy, whom Louise divorced after being forced to confront his pathological infidelity (dramatically recounted in *Decline*), is now a greying boomer dying of cancer in a Montreal hospital. His only visitors, apart from Louise (and Marie, the volunteer determined to save his immortal soul, on whom he showers graphic descriptions of atrocities committed in the name of Catholicism over the centuries), are his current mistresses. They are pale shadows of the smart, confident women he bedded in the days of *Decline*.

Seeing Rémy's distress, the ever-caring Louise begs their successful son Sébastien to come home from London. Sébastien, who has been estranged from his father for years, reluctantly agrees. Fiancée in tow, cell phone and laptop in hand, he flies to Montreal and soon takes over. No sooner is he back than he begins to apply his skills, contacts and money to make Rémy's last weeks as comfortable as possible. In no time he has rounded up his father's old comrades and lovers. Next he tracks down drug addict Nathalie, daughter of the sexiest of the ex-mistresses, hires her to obtain the cocaine



needed to ease his father's pain, and gets her into the hospital to regularly inject Rémy.

As in *Decline*, the characters talk passionately and intelligently about politics, philosophy and history. Arcand succeeds in skewering the left-wing certainties of an earlier era – admittedly not that difficult a target. He makes the skewering easier by placing the action in a setting revealing the worst of the Quebec welfare state in the guise of the union thugs and venal bureaucrats who run the hospital. This portrayal did not endear Arcand to most letter writers to Quebec newspapers. But caricature can work when done well, and here Arcand makes us appreciate the comic elements of the inevitable confrontation between the interests and realities of those for whom a hospital is a place to be cured or die and those for whom it is a place to get ahead.

The real problem with the underlying message of the film lies elsewhere, in the portrayal of Sébastien and his world. Sébastien not only spares no expense or effort to

make the last days of his father's life better but also, in passing, helps the beautiful Nathalie break free of her addiction. Yet he does not succumb to temptation when – in gratitude or love – she offers herself to him. He is determined to be faithful to his fiancée, never to abandon her or their future children as Rémy had abandoned his mother, his sister and him.

This is commendable, so commendable that we in the audience do not hesitate for a second to sympathize with Sébastien who does not hesitate for a second to use whatever means are needed to achieve his purpose. For every problem there is a simple solution, money: Sébastien has money to get Rémy into a private American diagnostic clinic, money to bribe corrupt hospital bureaucrats, money to pay off union thugs, money to buy drugs from the pushers. Since all of this is in a good cause, the well-being of family and friends, Sébastien never needs doubt the means to attain his ends. And despite initial misgivings, Rémy is soon swept along.

As an aging boomer and father of grown-up sons, I could not – despite myself – but be deeply touched, and be on the side of the clear and inevitable winner in this uneven contest between the decent and competent Sébastien and the highly flawed Rémy. In Arcand's world, the man of action wins hands down over the man of ideas. The dying history professor, who complains bitterly at the outset that his son never reads a book, is completely won over by his son at the end. And we too, won over to Sébastien as well, put out of our minds the fact that his principles amount to loyalty to one's loved ones and the hell with everything else.

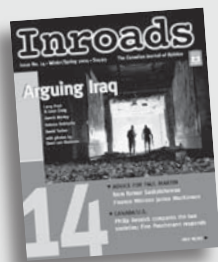
Let me repeat. This is a film that I immensely enjoyed. And it was precisely

because I enjoyed it so much that I left the theatre troubled by its implications.

Like Rémy I have learned that the “isms” of my youth were simplifications of a more complex reality. But I haven't abandoned the idea that there is a dimension in the good life that might be called social solidarity, or simply good citizenship. The central principle is that we make some effort to live in a way that most people would also be able to live if the society were structured as well as it could practically be. Moreover, living this way is possible only if we know something about what a well-structured society might look like. And that knowledge comes from books about the world in which human beings live and have lived.

Sébastien cannot be bothered with books. He uses his sharp intelligence to gather the information needed to acquire material wealth and power, wealth and power he can and does use for the benefit of his friends and family. Not being concerned with the wider world, he has no need of the knowledge central to the lives of his father and his circle of friends. Given the choice, who wouldn't agree with Sébastien? Through his eyes, we see the mess his parents' generation made of not only their own lives but also those of their children like Nathalie – a mess left for those like Sébastien, the strongest among them, to clean up.

It is all neat and tidy – maybe a bit too neat and tidy. The title comes from a lecture delivered in the film in which the destruction of the twin towers on 9/11 is linked to the invading barbarians' destruction of the Roman Empire. Yet at some level, perhaps unconsciously and despite himself, Arcand the intellectual may be warning us of another successful invasion – by a generation of the most competent and decent barbarians. ■



WINTER/SPRING 2004 Inroads has paid increasing attention to film in recent years. In the Winter/Spring 2004 issue co-publisher Henry Milner offered readers a thoughtful critique of Denys Arcand's new film *The Barbarian Invasions* just before its release in English Canada.

Rehabilitating naturalism

by Arthur Milner

ACCORDING TO PROFESSOR W.B. WORTHEN, EDITOR OF WHAT IS perhaps the anthology most often used in North American academic drama classes, Henrik Ibsen “established the contours of modern realistic drama,” and his 1879 play *A Doll’s House* “was a rallying point for international feminist demands for the vote and for other legal rights and protections for women.”¹

But in the same anthology, Worthen tells us, “Because realistic drama usually sees that world [“the dominant political and ideological order”] as an all embracing ‘environment’ ... its social themes don’t finally lead to a call for social change.”²

How can a play that “was a rallying point for international feminist demands” be an example of a type of theatre that cannot, by its very nature, “lead to a call for social change”?

Worthen’s “paradox” is not a simple error. Rather, it underscores a common misun-

derstanding of the history of realism (and naturalism), as well as serious problems of contemporary theatre criticism. And while the subject here is theatre, similar problems exist in cultural criticism as a whole.

To begin, we need to define *realism* and *naturalism*. According to British critic Bamber Gascoigne, “The meaning of ‘naturalism’ is beyond dispute – it represents a style of theatre in which the stage setting, the dialogue of the characters and the performance of the actors seem ‘life-like’ ... Naturalism reflects accurately the surface of

life, whereas realism is concerned with the truth of the experience conveyed.”³

Gascoigne’s efforts to distinguish between naturalism and realism are pretty much a lost cause; few current writers, even academics, use the terms with his precision. Moreover, what we accept as naturalism changes over time.

Strictly speaking, naturalism need not be narrative, i.e. need not entail the telling of a story. If I were to perform on stage two hours of my sitting at this computer, it might well be “life-like,” but it wouldn’t generally be considered naturalism.

It should be kept in mind, too, that, as Raymond Williams points out in *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*,⁴ naturalism (or realism) shouldn’t be mistaken for “natural” or “real.” An actor pretending to be a servant or a general, on a Russian estate at the turn of the century, in front of an audience going along for the ride (“suspending disbelief”) is no more “real” than any other theatrical convention.

In *The Triumph of Narrative*, Canadian journalist Robert Fulford writes,

Of all the ways we communicate with one another, the story has established itself as the most comfortable, the most versatile

*– and perhaps the most dangerous. Stories touch all of us, reaching across cultures and generations, accompanying humanity down the centuries. Assembling facts or incidents into tales is the only form of expression and entertainment that most of us enjoy equally at age three and age seventy-three.*⁵

One need only watch television, go to a popular play or movie or read popular novels to verify the truth of Fulford’s statement. And this is not new: *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* are, after all, stories; the most popular parts of *The Bible* have always been its stories. Of course, stories, like *Hamlet* and *Bambi*, don’t have to be naturalistic.

Revolt and counterrevolt

Émile Zola is generally credited with the “invention” of naturalism in theatre:

*The experimental and scientific spirit of the century will enter the domain of the drama, and in this lies the only possible salvation of the drama ... We must look to the future and the future will have to do with the human problem studied in the framework of reality. The drama will either die or become modern and realistic.*⁶



2001 In addition to being a founding editor of *Inroads*, Arthur Milner has worked in professional theatre since the 1970s. He has written several major essays on theatre for *Inroads*, and his radio play *It’s Not a Country, It’s Winter* was published in the 1997 issue. In his 2001 essay, of which this is an abridged version, he explored problems in contemporary theatre criticism and, by implication, cultural criticism in general. Using as examples the work of Canadian playwrights Tomson Highway and George F. Walker, he examined the contribution of poststructuralist academics. While many critics and theatre artists dismiss naturalism as passé or “dangerous,” he argued that naturalism has changed immensely in the last 100 years, and the best of contemporary playwriting remains essentially naturalistic. He subsequently returned to university to further explore the subject matter of this essay. Digital copies of his master’s thesis, “Political Theatre, Modernist Marxism, and the Avant-Garde” (Carleton University, Ottawa, 2002), are available on request from *Inroads* (inroads@canada.com).

The plays of Henrik Ibsen, pictured here in about 1879, became a commercial and, eventually, critical success. His plays featured ordinary characters (not Gods or kings) amidst ordinary bourgeois furniture (not painted backdrops), conversing in ordinary language (not poetry) about more-or-less everyday problems.

Zola's essay was to become a kind of naturalistic manifesto, but if Zola proclaimed the revolution, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* embodied it: a commercial and, eventually, critical success, in which ordinary characters (not Gods or kings), amidst ordinary bourgeois furniture (not painted backdrops), conversed in ordinary language (not poetry) about more-or-less everyday problems.

For the next 20 years, through Anton Chekhov, the early works of August Strindberg and the younger George Bernard Shaw (he died in 1950 at age 96), naturalism was the avant garde of its day – so avant garde that it shocked audiences (of course!) and required the invention of a whole new kind of acting. Before naturalism, star actors stood at centre stage (near the prompter's box and where the light was best) with lesser mortals spread out on either side. They faced the audience as they spoke, gesturing occasionally to indicate they were “really” speaking to a character beside them. Along comes naturalism and suddenly actors had to face each other and pretend the absence of the audience. They didn't like it.

After writing a couple of the classics of naturalism, Strindberg had a change of heart, deciding that “the higher fantasy has a greater reality than this actuality. The banal



accidents of existence are not essential life,”⁷ and wrote his dreamlike *Road to Damascus* (1898). By 1921 and Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (in which six “fictional” characters invade a “real” rehearsal to tell their story), naturalism was already passé.

Through the first half of the 20th century, “avant garde” and “experimental” playwrights and directors explored alternatives to naturalism: expressionism, impressionism, surrealism, symbolism, mechanism, futurism, dadaism, formalism, constructivism, functionalism, the Theatre of Cruelty, epic theatre (Brecht), poetic realism, absurdism and more.

All the antinaturalists proclaimed the death, deceit and/or limitations of naturalism. Irish poet and playwright W.B. Yeats,



Within a little more than a fortnight of its publication, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was presented at the Royal Theatre, Copenhagen. When Danish actress Fru Hennings, pictured here, closed the door on the Helmer household, its reverberations were heard around the world.

Antinaturalism was an attack on rationalism and the Enlightenment. Science, industrialization, the free market, “scientific” Marxism – each had been hailed as saviour, each had failed. It's not surprising that the Absurdist came last: in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1957), there's nothing to do but wait for a God who never comes. In the face of continuing poverty, two world wars, Germany's death camps, and Stalin, what more was there to say?

“Everything changes – except the avant garde”⁹

Of course, naturalism and narrative did not disappear. Jean-Paul Sartre, who wrote one of the classics of absurdism (*No Exit*, 1944), also wrote a naturalistic critique of Stalinism (*Dirty Hands*, 1948). Moreover, “popular” theatre remained naturalistic. For example, starting in the thirties, British playwright Terrence Rattigan wrote a dozen serious and very successful plays (e.g. *The Last Dance*, 1938; *The Winslow Boy*, 1946), but his work is barely mentioned by theatre historians. And that is the point. To get into the histories, you've got to be – or appear to be – “Original.”

nostalgic for the “beauty” of earlier forms, decried Ibsen's prosaic vulgarity. French dramatist Antonin Artaud, in pursuit of direct and unconscious communication between artist and spectator, proposed “a theatre in which violent physical images crush and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectator.”⁸ For Brecht, the goal was communism and the method *Verfremdungseffekt*; “alienated” from the performance, spectators would be forced to coldly analyze events on stage and, by implication, capitalism. André Breton, founder of the Surrealists, was also a Communist; his methods, however, resembled those of Artaud.

In retrospect, none of this should be surprising. The history of Western theatre reflects the history of Western society.

But by 1960 – to be generous – everything had been done. Audiences could no longer be shocked by the breaking of convention; none remained to be broken. As Gascoigne wrote, in 1962,

*Memory in the theatre is surprisingly short ... After eighty years in pursuit of Originality, the avant-garde cannot afford to look behind itself. Rather than risk not seeming new, it still boasts of having just knocked down that hoariest of Aunt Sallies, the well-made play ... It is the period from 1880 to 1930 [which includes naturalism] that theatre historians of the future will regard as the age of experiment, as the true hey-day of avantgardisme. In those years the bounds of theatre were stretched to their utmost limits, and sometimes beyond.*¹⁰

Nonetheless, contemporary antinaturalists see naturalism as old-fashioned and conventional and consider their own work avant garde and experimental. In maintaining this fiction, they've had a great deal of help from academics, for whom naturalism is not so much out-of-date as downright dangerous. French poststructuralist Roland Barthes is typical. Barthes sees as a “healthy sign”

*one which draws attention to its own arbitrariness – which does not try to palm itself off as “natural” ... Signs which pass themselves off as natural, which offer themselves as the only conceivable way of viewing the world, are by that token authoritarian and ideological ... In Barthes' view, there is a literary ideology which corresponds to this “natural attitude,” and its name is realism.*¹¹

One can see Barthes' influence in Worthen's statement that realistic drama can't “finally lead to a call for social change.” This

notion that “the structure is the message” is an interesting one. It does seem counterintuitive: isn't it the content that matters? A play about the oppression of women might move me, make me think, lead me to change my behaviour. Why should the structure of realism mean that, as Worthen says, it can't “finally lead to a call for social change”? Why should form or structure have any impact at all?

The various revolutionaries used periods, commas and upper-case letters where appropriate in their manifestos and analyses. Poststructuralists write badly, it's true, but they write in sentences with verbs and nouns and divide their books into chapters.

University of Guelph professor Ric Knowles calls for “dialogistic” (rather than “monologicistic”) theatre, but in his own writing a single “authorial voice” apparently satisfies him.¹² Knowles's goals are explicitly political. His project, he writes,

*is, in a sense, to politicize form, to examine form itself as a material agent of cultural affirmation (or reproduction), on the one hand, or cultural intervention, on the other. I want ... to ask what cultural work is done by different dramatic forms and different dramaturgical structures, whatever the subject matter or thematic content of the works*¹³ ...

Like ancient Scholastics arguing about angels on a pin and medieval doctors explaining bloodletting, poststructuralists build their arguments one tiny, logical step at a time. Medieval bloodletters didn't know about empirical research. Poststructuralists have no such excuse.

Knowles tells us that “the politicization of form” is not a new project, that before 1928, the Russian Formalists “strove to attribute deep ideological meaning to form.”¹⁴

Seventy-five years of theory should be enough. Surely it's time to actually test these claims: to what extent, if any, is “form” “a material agent of cultural affirmation?”

Modern criticism and its consequences

The first university literature departments, in the second half of the 19th century, taught the “appreciation” of literature: the great works of great minds. But soon professors of literature sought to justify their presence in universities by emulating their colleagues in the more rigorous physical and social sciences. By the time of the Russian Formalists, the study of literature looked a lot like linguistics, less concerned with “What does this mean?” or “What can we learn from this?” than with “How does this work?” Throw in a little Marx, a little Freud and a little Claude Lévi-Strauss and the result is poststructuralism.

For poststructuralists, language is both “fluid” and “socially constructed.” Because language is fluid, i.e. has more than one meaning, it is the reader who creates meaning, not the writer. And because language is socially constructed, it reflects not reality but existing power relations.

If the reader creates meaning, then there is no such thing as quality (it's just an ideological construct), and the films of John Wayne are as valid a focus of study as the plays of Shakespeare. If writing can't describe reality, there's no point in analyzing writing for its *insights* into, say, existing power relations; instead, one “deconstructs” the “text” in search of ideological “signs.” Thus certain forms, particularly naturalism, get to be manifestations of sexist, racist, capitalist and/or imperialist culture.

The result is that no one discusses what anything is about, and no one talks about quality. Writing is praised or denounced for its conformity with – or in the case of early writing, anticipation of – poststructuralist prescriptions.

Take the case of Knowles's discussion of Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* (1986). Highway “relies heavily on structural principles drawn from music,” says Knowles, and “perhaps it is the capacity of the form for the comfortable containment of potentially disruptive social concerns that accounts for [*The Rez Sisters*] success and popularity.” Not only that, but “this formal conservatism can potentially admit the ‘colonizing gaze’

For 20 years, naturalism was the avant garde of its day – so avant garde that it shocked audiences and required the invention of a whole new kind of acting.

of a non-Native audience.”¹⁵ Knowles never discusses what *The Rez Sisters* is about – seven Native women trying to get to Toronto for the biggest bingo game ever – and what it might *mean*. Knowles's only concern is the ideological implications of form.

Knowles barely mentions Highway's later, stunning and provocative *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (Fifth House, 1989). I've read many reviews of and commentaries on the play. Most mention Highway's theatrical use of images from Native mythology, as well as the harsh imagery in a scene in which a young Native man, a victim of fetal alcohol syndrome, rapes a Native woman with a crucifix. Some critics comment on the play's negative portrayal of Natives.¹⁶

No one talks about the story: A man, Zachary, wakes up in a friend's home. He has lost his underwear after, apparently, sleeping with a woman who is not his wife. As he searches for his underwear, we meet six more men living on the reserve and witness a number of harrowing events, including the rape referred to above. The women of the reserve, who don't appear on stage, have started to play in a women's hockey league, and some of the men are unhappy about this. The men are brutal, pathetic and/or silly. The one possible exception dies when, drunk and despairing, he accidentally shoots himself. Zachary, too, in constant search for his underwear and for apple pie recipes – he wants to open a bakery – seems silly. In the end, Zachary wakes up. It's all a dream. He's in a nice, clean apartment decorated with Native and non-Native artifacts. His wife hands him their infant daughter. Zachary tries to teach her a few Ojibway words. His wife, laughing, corrects him. According to the script, "The last thing we see is this beautiful Indian man lifting his naked baby Indian girl up in the air, his wife sitting beside them watching and laughing."

Oppression at the hands of whites forms a kind of background to the events, but is barely mentioned in the play itself. One man, a born-again Christian, argues with another about Native versus Christian spirituality and traditional versus modern medicine. There is the crucifix/rape symbolism. One man, we learn, had participated in the 1973 battle of Wounded Knee, but says, when forced to explain why he didn't stop the rape, "Because they – our own women – took the fuckin' power away from us faster than the FBI ever did."

In a long and anguished cry, Zachary laments conditions on the reserve:

"What's happening to this place? What's happening to these people? My people ... God of the Indian. God of the Whiteman ... Why are you doing this to us? Are you up there at all? Or are you some stupid, drunken shit, out-of-your-mind-passed-out under some great beer table up there in your stupid fucking clouds? ... I dare you to come down from your high-falutin' fuckin' shitthrone up there, come down and show us you got the guts to stop this stupid, stupid, stupid way of living. It's got to stop. It's got to stop. It's got to stop. It's got to stop."

What can it mean that colonial history and contemporary white society are largely absent from this play? What can it mean when its hero – what else can Zachary be? – runs a bakery and lives in a nice apartment with his wife and child? What can it mean that Zachary's wife corrects his Ojibway, but it's a source of amusement, not urgency? What can it mean that the final image of the play is a happy nuclear family?

Dry Lips won the Chalmers Award and the Governor General's Award. It's been performed across the country, including a run at Toronto's Royal Alex Theatre, one of the few Canadian plays they've ever presented. (Is this because *Dry Lips* "can potentially admit the 'colonizing gaze' of a non-Native audience"?) Critics and academics comment on its images, its structure, and perhaps its portrayal of the difficult lives of Natives. None ask the difficult or controversial questions. Of course it's far easier for politically sensitive poststructuralist academics to comment on "the production of meaning," and avoid the possibility that the major Native Canadian playwright might be suggesting that blaming history doesn't help, that entrepreneurship

isn't a bad idea and that restoring "family values" is crucial.

Naturalism returns

Is *Dry Lips* naturalistic? Most would say no. It's full of images, it's structured as a dream, it jumps around in time, it's got a trickster character who takes many forms and is invisible to the "real" characters. That's enough to escape the label of "naturalism" and the wrath of critics and theatre artists nostalgic for the avant garde ...

In *Dry Lips*, Highway uses a vast array of nonnaturalistic devices, but the play tells a story, and the characters and events are recognizable. The same can be said for the immensely successful *Angels in America, Part 1: Millennium Approaches* (1991) by U.S. playwright Tony Kushner. While the antinaturalistic disguises of these plays no doubt contribute to their success (by getting them past academic and journalistic gatekeepers), it is their essential naturalism that is a precondition for their popularity with audiences.

(Both plays, incidentally, were presented at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, an organization not known for adventurous programming. Of eight plays in the current NAC season, two are "prenaturalist" – Shakespeare and Molière; of the remaining six, *none* are naturalist in the narrow sense.)

Poststructuralism among academics and the lingering sense among almost all theatre artists (as well as theatre reviewers and those working for granting agencies) that naturalism is passé or worse inhibits serious and productive discussion of plays and playwrights. Poststructuralists quote one another and debate among themselves

(though it can't really be called a debate) and, apart from a few students brought into the fold, their analyses rarely reach a larger audience. Discussions of quality and meaning are almost entirely absent. No one is explaining the plays of Tomson Highway.

I want to end by considering George F. Walker. Walker is among the two or three most successful playwrights Canada has produced (as measured by Canadian and international productions and awards); to my mind he is also, by a wide margin, the best. His plays are very funny. The majority are set in the working-class district of Toronto

It's far easier for politically sensitive poststructuralist academics to comment on "the production of meaning," and avoid the possibility that the major Native Canadian playwright might be suggesting that blaming history doesn't help.

in which he grew up, and his passionate sympathy for the working class is evident, but his best plays are intensely ambiguous. One can hear the echoes of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter in Walker's "poetic" (i.e. rhythmic) dialogue, but he's doing something entirely new: his particular manner of playing with naturalism has allowed him to create the most articulate ordinary working-class characters in the history of theatre. And, except in his earliest plays, he's put recognizable characters and events into a story we can follow.

Knowles, in discussing Walker's earliest, "modernist" plays, finds that "Walker's characteristic irony creates a formal fissure indicative of the discomfort that Canada's

most modernist playwrights have frequently felt with the form ... Overall, however, the ideological work performed by these [early] plays is culturally affirmative, serving to deflect disaffection into an existential inertia.¹⁷ Knowles prefers Walker's later plays: "*Love and Anger* [1989] productively perverts the neo-Aristotelean structures of reversal and recognition, [and] *Nothing Sacred* [1988] does something similar with the oedipal narrative."¹⁸

Chris Johnson of the University of Manitoba does a better job of describing Walker's work, in his *Essays on George F. Walker*. He's hard on poststructuralism, which,

Poststructuralism among academics and the lingering sense among almost all theatre artists that naturalism is passé or worse inhibits serious and productive discussion of plays and playwrights.

he says, "has all too often ... frozen into a rigid, heavily-codified, pseudo-scientific and impersonal discourse,"¹⁹ but he can't stop himself from using poststructuralist writers and jargon to justify his admiration for Walker. Moreover, Johnson is concerned that something was lost, circa 1997, when Walker moved from modernism toward a more accessible theatre: "Walker's work underwent a change from the earlier eccentric, 'ex-centric' plays to work more accessible to a broader audience, more 'generous' to use Walker's word, and arguably, then, more 'mainstream.'"²⁰ "I think Walker was feeling the pull of commercial theatre, [but] at the same time ... was repelled by it, and felt that that kind of theatre would separate him from his self, his artistic self."²¹ Johnson

never says that Walker "sold out." Rather there's a sadness, as when Johnson writes of the "contradictions which occur when, on the one hand, Walker tries to stay true to what he sees, how he sees it, and what he is doing, and on the other hand tries to reach the broader audience."²²

There may be a conflict between an artist's integrity and his or her desire for popular success, but there's no contradiction. Artists *should* want to reach an audience. That Walker "rose to what passes as prominence in Canadian theatre"²³ may be sad because Johnson's ironic phrasing reflects the lack of recognition for artists in Canada, but Walker's success and willingness to be generous to an audience are cause for celebration, not sadness.

Judith Thompson is another very successful Canadian playwright, though more among academics (and perhaps theatre artists) than with audiences. According to Knowles, "There is even less sense here [in Thompson] than in Walker's plays of a unified or essentialist view of the individual."²⁴ This is, apparently, a point in Thompson's favour, but it underscores the arbitrary nature of poststructuralist – or at least Knowles's – criticism. Thompson's work – with its closed world and the apparent impossibility of communication – is reminiscent of Pinter's and could easily be described as absurdist.

Thompson's modernism – or perhaps her ability to resist "a unified or essentialist view of the individual" – makes her particularly attractive to academics. This may or may not be the reason Thompson gets into *The Canadian Encyclopedia*.²⁵ In any case, Walker doesn't. Now there's reason for sadness. ■

Notes

¹ W.B. Worthen, ed., *The Harcourt Brace Anthology of Drama*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Heinle, 2000), p. 589.

² *Ibid.*, p. 583.

³ Bamber Gascoigne, *Twentieth Century Drama* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1965), p. 7.

⁴ Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (Harmondsworth, UK: Pelican, 1976), p. 4.

⁵ Robert Fulford, *The Triumph of Narrative* (Toronto: Anansi, 1999), p. x.

⁶ Émile Zola, as quoted in Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker: A Study of Drama in Modern Times* (New York: Harvest, 1967), p. 6.

⁷ August Strindberg, as quoted in Bentley, *Playwright as Thinker*, p. 181.

⁸ Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, quoted in Worthen, ed., *Harcourt Brace Anthology of Drama*, p. 901.

⁹ A quotation, I am told, from Gore Vidal.

¹⁰ Gascoigne, *Twentieth Century Drama*, pp. 9–10. "Well-made play" actually describes an earlier form of theatre that arose in France in the mid-1800s, but is often used to describe Ibsen's type of naturalism. Ibsen, in fact, adapted the well-made play structure for his purposes.

¹¹ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 117.

¹² Ric Knowles, *The Theatre of Form and the Production of Meaning* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1999). A chapter entitled "Dialogic Monologue: A Dialogue" does present a "dialogue" (between Knowles and Jennifer Harvie), but it's like one of those debates where everyone agrees with each other.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62. The part about the "colonizing gaze" is Knowles quoting Alan Filewod.

¹⁶ See, for example, Marie Annharte Baker, "Angry Enough to Spit, but with Dry Lips it Hurts More than You Know," *Canadian Theatre Review* 68 (Fall 1991).

¹⁷ Knowles, *Theatre of Form*, pp. 57–58.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁹ Chris Johnson, *Essays on George F. Walker* (Winnipeg: Blizzard, 1999), p. 12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 228.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²⁵ James H. Marsh, ed. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1999).

How an Anglo-Irish aristocrat saved Quebec – and why no one knows about it

Philip Lawson, *The Imperial Challenge: Quebec and Britain in the Age of the American Revolution*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989. 192 pages, with index.

by Gary Caldwell

WHY REVIEW A BOOK PUBLISHED 12 YEARS AGO? I WILL EXPLAIN. But first, let me tell you what it's about.

When Britain took possession of Canada at the Treaty of Versailles in 1763, it faced an “imperial challenge”: how to integrate into the empire a society fundamentally different from England – in language, religion, and legal and political institutions. At the time, England was vigorously intolerant of Roman Catholicism or “popery,” the religion of its major enemies, France and Spain. British Protestantism was closely tied to the dominant Whig political ideology born of the Glorious Revolution of 1688–89. This doctrinal legacy prescribed that all British subjects were possessed of very definite and equal liberties, liberties endowed upon and

limited to those who conformed to the Whig Protestant definition of being British.

Hence the problem of 1763. English law and constitutional practice allowed only for Protestant public officials and elected representatives. This meant excluding the entire French-speaking population, some 70,000 to 80,000 (the “new subjects”) as compared to some 300 Protestants established in the colony (the “old subjects”).

There were two schools of thought as to what should be done. The Whig posi-

tion, favoured by much of the English political leadership and commercial class on both sides of the Atlantic, was not to accommodate the new subjects. It amounted to an attempted destruction of the local culture and to exclusion of the French-speaking population from all juridical, political and social positions, the hoped-for consequence being assimilation in one, perhaps two, generations. In short, what had been imposed in Ireland with the “Protestant ascendancy.”

The opposing school of thought, still marginal in 1763, believed such a policy both impracticable and undesirable. James Murray, Lord Shelburne, Lord Dorchester (Guy Carleton), H.T. Cramahé, Alexander Wedderburn, Lord Mansfield and William Knox not only held that a Protestant ascendancy in Quebec would ruin the colony; they also believed that Quebec society was deserving of being preserved. Murray and Dorchester, who knew Quebec and its people, were adamant: the Canadians were a good “race” – in Murray's words, “perhaps the best and bravest race on the globe” (p. 48) – and if protected they and their society would flourish and be loyal to the Crown. As it happened, all of these administrators and



Crown legal officers, with the exception of Cramahé, were Anglo-Irish or Scottish; not one of them was of English origin.

But how were the Canadians and their culture to be accommodated? There were, as Lawson demonstrates, three distinct dimensions to this accommodation. The first was to respect the prevailing

legal code and custom in civil and property matters; the second, to refrain from putting into place an English representative assembly because it would be the instrument of the 300 or so English and American voters in the colony. By far the most important was the third dimension, tolerance in Quebec of Roman Catholicism, which meant the nomination of a bishop, the tithe and the right of Catholics to hold public office. Dorchester and the others successfully won these concessions in London by 1770, and they were contained in the Quebec Act in 1774, to the horror of much of English public sentiment, and especially the Americans who were more resolutely against “popery” and more Whig than the English themselves.

When Benjamin Franklin arrived in Montreal in 1775 with the invading army of



2001 In an unusual book review in 2001, Quebec writer and regular Inroads contributor Gary Caldwell called attention to a book that had been published 12 years earlier but had not received the attention it deserved because it did not conform to prevailing academic orthodoxies.

the Continental Congress, he carried secret orders to ban the popish religion and the French language. Fortunately, the Americans were stopped in Quebec by no other than Dorchester, back from getting the Quebec Act through Parliament. At the head of an army of old and new subjects he broke the 1775–76 siege of Quebec.

Lawson's interpretation is insightful in putting the events into the context of the Irish question. The major players in promoting the accommodation that became the Quebec Act had in mind "the Irish Imbroglío," and were determined not to repeat the error of the "Protestant ascendancy" in Ireland. The Quebec Act emerges clearly as the culmination of thoughtful and courageous policy formulation, a model of generous statesmanship. Hence, as Lawson goes on to argue, the "toleration" of Roman Catholicism in the Quebec Act paved the way for the British Acts of Toleration of 1778.

Lawson also helps understand why Murray, Dorchester and the others came to the conclusions they did about the Canadian problem. These men were essentially empirical conservatives who found the answer "in the past" – Quebec society as they had known it in the 1760s – and the "elastic nature of the British Constitution." And here Lawson runs smack into the prevailing wisdom in Canadian historiography.

Lawson is insistent on the coincidental nature of any link between the Quebec Act and the American Revolution, affirming that there is no evidence that the inspiration for the Quebec Act was to placate the Canadians so as to keep them apart from the Americans. As this alleged link is one of the most tenacious myths in the Canadian historical consciousness, it is worth citing Lawson:

What can be done to dispose of this myth once and for all? Fifty years ago both Coupland and Burt said that they could find no evidence to justify such an assertion with Lanctôt repeating the message in the 1960s, and nothing has yet come to light to contradict them (pp. 123–24).

When I first read this book in the early 1990s and realized how revolutionary his thesis was, I contacted Lawson to talk about his work. In passing, I mentioned that I supposed that *The Imperial Challenge* must have created quite a controversy in Canadian academic circles. His reply was "No, it has attracted very little attention in Canada." (I never saw him again. I had arranged to see him a few years later, but just before I arrived in Edmonton he was admitted to hospital for terminal cancer and he died shortly afterwards.) In subsequent years, I have been to McGill-Queen's Press in Montreal to buy copies of his book to give to friends. Inquiring as to sales, I was told that only a few hundred copies had been sold. And, so far, I have encountered only one reference to Lawson's book (in Yves Lamonde's *Histoire sociale des politiques au Québec*).

I was curious enough to go back recently to the reviews written when the book came out. There were 16 in Canada in French and English, in the United States and in the United Kingdom; all reviewers were quite positive except one (who wrote two of the reviews). They all commented positively on the extent and depth of the documentation, as well as the fresh reading from parliamentary debates, the personal archives of the principal players and the press of the day. As for his interpretation of how the Quebec Act came to be, there is no suggestion that he was wrong in any respect. The negative reviewer suggests only that it is pretentious

of Lawson to think he has added much to existing work on the Quebec Act. Of the 15 reviewers, a full half explicitly accredit Lawson with drawing out the intention of avoiding the error of Ireland.

Why, then, did a book, critically acclaimed by the author's peers, which sheds considerable light on a pivotal period in the history of Quebec and Canada, drop out of sight in Quebec, and I suspect in the rest of Canada? Lawson calls into question the conventional wisdom on a very important subject in Canadian history, and no one takes notice. For instance, two prominent Canadians, Gérard Bouchard and John Ralston Saul, social thinkers who are currently reinterpreting Canadian history, make no mention, to my knowledge, of this book. A book that should have caused waves has generated scarcely a ripple.

Perhaps my assessment, as a nonprofessional historian, is faulty, and I would welcome a demonstration of where I have erred. What are the factors that explain the untimely eclipse of Lawson's work? Could it be simply that Canadian intellectual discourse is shallow, that a seminal work can be dropped into the water and hit bottom generating nothing more than a superficial ripple of perfunctory reviews and listings in compendiums? This is one possible explanation; a more certain explanation lies in ideology.

The ideological axe, starkly put, goes as follows. Quebec's nationalist, republican-leaning contemporary intellectuals are loath to entertain the idea that a coterie of British Conservatives (half of them aristocrats) literally saved Quebec society by helping to keep it strong enough to withstand the renewed neoliberal assault led by Lord Durham three quarters of a century later and, then, begin to

rehabilitate the Quebec polity (under British institutions) in 1867. Such an idea being beyond the pale (again, the ghost of Ireland), they maintain the myth that the Quebec Act was political opportunism inspired by the American threat. What will it take for Quebec nationalist thinkers to recognize and appropriate the historical reality that Dorchester twice – in the Quebec Act and the siege of Quebec – saved Quebec? It is no exaggeration to assert that, had it not been for this one Anglo-Irish aristocrat, Quebec would likely have become anglicized and, subsequently, integrated into the American empire.

As for English-speaking Canada, the current crop of orthodox historians has long consigned our British imperialist past to the Marxist dustheap of history: nothing good could possibly have come of it, all imperialisms being, by definition, bad. They are not about to disturb their orthodoxy that – in contrast to Imperial Britain, which was incapable of any genuine sympathy for Quebec – only Canadian nationalist intellectuals are enlightened and respectful of Quebec society. So, they too maintain the "political opportunism" interpretation of the Quebec Act, despite its having been refuted by Lawson and his predecessors. Essentially, what we are seeing is a refusal to acknowledge a debt owed to dead white male Protestants (from Ireland and Scotland). But gratitude is not, as the contemporary French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut has pointed out, a hallmark of modern progressive thinkers.

I write this review knowing full well that it is too late for Lawson's work to be rehabilitated. *The Imperial Challenge* is among the titles in this year's McGill-Queen's clear-the-warehouse sale. ■

Manufacturing dissent

Noam Chomsky, Vietnam and Cambodia: A debate

by Gareth Morley, with a reply by Rae Murphy

THE LEFT COMMUNIST WORLDVIEW WOULD HAVE REMAINED A small footnote in the history of the broader Left were it not for the Vietnam War and the related student radicalization of the late 60s. The war raised serious doubts about the possibility of a progressive anti-Communism centred on the Atlantic alliance. At the height of its involvement, the U.S. and its allies had more than 500,000 troops fighting against an insurgency that seemed to have the backing of most of the country's rural population. Even accepting that international legal norms permitted superpowers to intervene militarily on behalf of a sovereign government if invited, the various short-lived governments of South Vietnam did not have sufficient legitimacy to provide the U.S. with a defence to the charge of aggression.

And because the war was against the majority of the population, it could not be fought except by explicitly permitting

atrocities. The “rules of engagement” in Vietnam allowed U.S. forces to shell villages without warning if they were subject to gunfire from the village, and to destroy a village after providing warning if the village was considered to “harbour” members of the National Liberation Front – a description that applied to virtually every village in rural Vietnam.¹

By the late 60s, the war had split and discredited the Cold War liberals and social democrats who had tied antitotalitarianism to progressive politics and democratic reform at home and abroad. Simultaneously,

the hold of old-line Communist parties on the postwar generation weakened. After decades of obscurity and marginalization, the fortunes of left-wing ideological currents outside orthodox Leninism were suddenly revived. Many of Left Communism's themes, including the importance of will and of the direct democracy of workers' councils, reentered the zeitgeist.

These developments were not without their ironies. The Vietnamese “resistance” was, after all, a “popular front” centred on an orthodox Leninist party, as were the rulers of China and Cuba, both of which had considerable attraction to radicalized Western students. The student movement, therefore, found it difficult to resist repeating the mistakes of earlier generations of Western radicals by becoming apologists for Leninist tyranny. Chomsky, as inheritor of a tradition critical of Leninism, might have helped the student movement, but he fell into the same trap. He directed much of his critical energy into attacking “unprincipled” liberal opponents of the war, who, he said, opposed it on the grounds of a cost-benefit analysis of American interests, rather than because it was an aggressive war against the people of South Vietnam.

Do Cold War liberals like John Kenneth Galbraith or Hans Morgenthau who turned against the war deserve such criticism? They based their opposition to Communism on a commitment to democratic values and felt no need to deny that it was also in America's interests. However, there is nothing inconsistent in the claim that anti-Communism is a noble cause but that a particular war fought in its name is not. Nor is it inconsistent to argue that a particular war is immoral *and* contrary to national interest.

Neither Chomsky nor the student Left (at least initially) were supporters of Leninism. But the Left Communist assumption that the apparent ideological battle between democratic capitalism and the Soviet bloc was a sham, along with the Marxist assumption that all real conflict is economic in nature, made it impossible for them to see the anti-Communist progressives as anything but corrupt and cowardly. This bred the self-righteousness common to the young radicals and their middle-aged cheerleaders.

Chomsky did not simply attack the liberal antiwar intellectuals and media but argued that the “doves” served a *function* – of narrowing the debate about Vietnam to purely instrumental issues. In this way, he argued,



WINTER/SPRING 2003 From the movement against the Vietnam War in the 1960s to the antiglobalization movement of the 21st century, large elements of the Left have looked to Noam Chomsky for moral and intellectual guidance. In the view of Vancouver lawyer and frequent Inroads contributor Gareth Morley, that guidance has been faulty on several counts. In a wide-ranging essay in the Winter/Spring 2003 issue of Inroads, Morley criticized Chomsky's “propaganda model” of the media, his literary style (“One of the century's greatest students of language, he is nonetheless incomprehensible”) and, above all, his tolerance of the Khmer Rouge's genocidal policies in Cambodia. Morley placed Chomsky in the tradition of Left Communism, whose heirs, “including

Chomsky, [are] deaf to those aspects of conflict that are not reducible to economic interests.” This excerpt focuses on Vietnam and Cambodia; journalist and writer Rae Murphy, who visited Vietnam twice in the 1960s, replies.

the Western system of intellectual freedom was far more clever and effective than the Soviet system of censorship. Chomsky, of course, never argued this was the doves' conscious intention, that they were pretending to oppose the war in order to befuddle the masses; but he seemed not to worry about the obvious explanatory gap: how were the liberal intellectuals instructed in the optimal amount of dissidence that would best preserve the system without threatening it, if not through their conscious minds?

Despite his argument that the American form of social control did not operate through coercion, Chomsky repeatedly claimed for himself the title of "dissident,"

Chomsky repeatedly claimed for himself the title of "dissident," thus comparing himself to Eastern Europeans who put their freedom and lives at risk, and implicitly painting his less radical American colleagues as cowards. – Gareth Morley

thus comparing himself to Eastern Europeans who put their freedom and lives at risk, and implicitly painting his less radical American colleagues as cowards. Like many of that era, Chomsky exaggerated the danger to internal civil liberties posed by the Vietnam War. On a number of occasions, he said that he was seriously worried that he, a full professor at MIT, would be sent to jail for "years" for antiwar activity.² While this may have been understandable at the time, it is remarkable that Chomsky has maintained this since. It is also remarkable that he has repeatedly attacked genuine dissidents, including those associated with the moderate Left, like Václav Havel. When Havel became president

of Czechoslovakia and was invited to a joint session of the U.S. Congress, Chomsky could not suppress his venom. In a published letter to *Nation* columnist Alexander Cockburn, he described Havel as "vastly below the level" of Stalinist hacks, and asserted that Havel was insincere in his praise of American democracy in order to get money for his "relatively rich" country.³

After the Vietnam War ended, and the passions it had excited began to calm, much of the former student Left began to see the dark side of the regimes that had displaced U.S. colonialism in Southeast Asia. Chomsky used his authority to pronounce anathema on any American leftist who criticized the Hanoi regime, even if the criticisms were true:

Let us assume that credible information is produced indicating that there are severe human rights violations in Vietnam of the sort alleged [by the International League for Human Rights]: thousands of political prisoners, and so on. Then protest is warranted. But some serious questions arise about the proper mode, given the historical record and existing circumstances. Included here are some elementary questions of simple good taste. Speaking personally, I would agree to sign an appropriately worded protest against human rights violations in Vietnam if it were released, say, in Sweden, or were presented to the public through some medium that emerged with a shred of honour from the catastrophe of the past years. But for a protest presented to the public through the American mass media, that is quite another matter.⁴

Following this reasoning, Chomsky went so far as to denounce efforts to help postwar Vietnamese refugees publicize their



NOAM CHOMSKY at the University of British Columbia. PHOTOGRAPH BY LINCOLN CLARKES

fate or settle in Western countries.⁵ But the true moral disaster came when he and his collaborator Edward Herman attacked those responsible for an alleged "vast and unprecedented" propaganda campaign of "fabrication" against Democratic Kampuchea [Cambodia]. Among those whose integrity Chomsky attacked were Jean Lacouture, on whose testimony Chomsky had previously relied to downplay reports of human rights abuses in postwar Vietnam, and William Shawcross, a bitter critic of Kissinger and Nixon's Cambodian policies.

Chomsky and Herman were well aware that the Khmer Rouge forced every resident of Phnom Penh (many of them recent refugees from Khmer Rouge rule in the countryside) out of the city at gunpoint. By 1979, it should have been clear that at least one million people had died from starvation or summary execution during the Democratic Kampuchean regime. Yet Chomsky and Herman portrayed the Khmer Rouge blandly as a "peasant army" and even attempted to blame the residents of Phnom Penh for their fate:

It becomes a question of some interest whether in Cambodia, for example, a gang of Marxist murderers are systematically engaged in what Lacouture calls “autogenocide” – “the suicide of a people in the name of revolution; worse, in the name of socialism” – or whether the worst atrocities have taken place at the hands of a peasant army, recruited and driven out of their devastated villages by U.S. bombs and then taking revenge against the urban civilization that they regarded, not without reason, as a collaborator in their destruction and their long history of oppression. [Emphasis added]

The true moral disaster came when he and his collaborator Edward Herman attacked those responsible for an alleged “vast and unprecedented” propaganda campaign of “fabrication” against Democratic Kampuchea. – Gareth Morley

Forced collectivization of the countryside by leftist forces predated the fall of Phnom Penh in April 1975, and, along with American bombing, contributed to a mass exodus to the cities, as well as mass starvation. When Phnom Penh fell, the Khmer Rouge conducted well-documented mass executions, and immediately forced the 3 million residents of the city into rural collective farms. Pol Pot himself boasted that he had turned the entire country into a “work camp.” Democratic Kampuchea was a land of forced marriages, forced labour and summary execution by indoctrinated teenagers. In January 1977, Khmer Rouge forces entered into a disputed border zone and attacked three Thai villages. Pictures of

mutilated corpses of women and children were widely published in the Western media, confirming the refugee reports that Chomsky urged be treated with “caution” two years later.⁶

In their 1988 book *Manufacturing Consent* (reissued with a new introduction in 2002), Chomsky and Herman refer to their earlier discussion of Cambodia in the *Political Economy of Human Rights*: “The conclusions drawn there remain valid. To our knowledge, no error or even misleading statement or omission has ever been found.”⁷ Neither their comparison of Pol Pot’s troops to the French Resistance nor the alleged culpability of the residents of Phnom Penh in their own enslavement and murder are mentioned. At the same time, Chomsky and Herman (rightly) take the United States to task for imposing sanctions on Vietnam for its invasion of Khmer Rouge Kampuchea, and, in fact, appear to approve of the Vietnamese invasion – an invasion that can surely only be justified by the genocidal nature of the Pol Pot regime.

The most shameful coda to Chomsky and Herman’s writings on Cambodia is the film *Manufacturing Consent*. At one point, the directors show Cambodian demonstrators protesting a visit by Chomsky to the University of Toronto. One of the protesters explains that Chomsky denied the genocide in Cambodia. The directors cut to Chomsky saying in a calm, professorial voice, “I don’t mind the attacks. I just mind the lies.” The film gives its viewers the impression that Chomsky never minimized the Cambodian genocide itself, but only compared coverage of Cambodia to that of East Timor. Of course, Chomsky cannot personally be held responsible for the film’s distortions, since he claims he has never seen it.

Chomsky in context

A response to Gareth Morley

by Rae Murphy

IN THE COURSE OF BUILDING HIS CASE, Morley gallops through the history of the Left, situating Chomsky in the middle of everything, somewhat like the Woody Allen character Zelig. It begins in earnest with Vietnam when, as Christopher Hitchens suggests in parting company with Chomsky over 9-11, he was at his best:

I have begun to think that Noam Chomsky has lost or is losing the qualities that made him a great moral and political tutor in the years of the Indochina war, and that enabled him to write such monumental essays as his critique of the Kahan Commission on Sabra and Shatila or his analysis of the situation in East Timor. I don’t say this out of any “more in sorrow than anger” affectation: I have written several defenses of him and he knows it. But the last time we corresponded, some months ago, I was appalled by the robotic element both of his prose and of his opinions.

In a sense, Hitchens is too kind to Chomsky. There has always been a robotic

– I would say dogmatic – element in his writings, and never more so than when he is answering critics. Like many members of the professoriat Chomsky does not take criticism well, and he takes being contradicted not at all. His polemical style sometimes gets him into trouble, and never more so than in the debate on Pol Pot and “genocide” more than 20 years ago. Calling him an apologist for genocide, however, is an oversimplification. His extended exchange with Jean Lacouture focused on numbers and sources and who said what when. The articles are all on the public record – as Casey Stengel would say, “You could look it up” – and I believe Chomsky wins on points. But the context also needs to be understood.

While Chomsky never did condone genocide, he minimized and rationalized Pol Pot’s murderous excesses. I think he did this for a number of reasons. He misjudged Pol Pot’s peasant army and saw it as a genuine revolutionary force long after it had degenerated into a well-armed gang of murderers. The CIA knew their Pol Pot better than Chomsky



and they armed and fed him. Part of the political and ideological background for Chomsky's continued equivocation on the crimes of the Khmer Rouge is a longstanding and often prevalent view, not only among the Left, that there is something pure about the countryside – “the real America beyond the beltway.” Among the Left, particularly the more radical anarchists, the mythology always has the peasants marching on the cities. This romantic nonsense is part of Chomsky's baggage.

The larger point, however, is that in the whole colonial epoch in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the term *genocide* is applied only on this one occasion in Cambodia, and not to the lengthy and highly destructive U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia. Morley's incorrect assertion that the war in Vietnam was the result of an insurgency helps obscure this point. In 1945, after the surrender of the Japanese, Ho Chi Minh declared a republic. He did so with the same legitimacy that underlay de Gaulle's declaration in Paris the summer before. The Americans had previously armed the Viet Minh and promised support for Vietnamese independence if Ho would fight the Japanese. Ho kept his word; the Americans didn't keep theirs. And so, considering the immense cost in life and treasure of the American betrayal of the Vietnamese, the mad inferno that was created in Southeast Asia by the wars waged by the Japanese, by the French and, most brutally, by the Americans is relevant here. What of the carpet bombings, defoliants, napalm, the

total destruction of the social and political infrastructure of Laos and Cambodia as well as Vietnam? The Americans dropped more bombs on Vietnam than all the tonnage dropped by all the combatants in World War II. And boasted loudly about it – bomb them into the Stone Age. Nothing wishy-washy then about mere collateral damage. The essential cause of the mass destruction – human, social, environmental – in all of southeast Asia was the rampaging American military machine.

Having destroyed every aspect of Vietnam's economy and killed, maimed and poisoned several million of its citizens, the Americans left the pieces behind – a forerunner of George W. Bush's mantra, “We don't nation-build, we fight wars.” Before they would lift their economic sanctions, they even forced the new government to repay the money the puppet government had borrowed to finance the American invasion. “After the Vietnam war ended, and the passions it had excited began to calm,” Morley writes, “much of the former student Left began to see the dark side of the regimes that had displaced U.S colonialism ... Chomsky used his authority to pronounce anathema on any American leftist who criticized the Hanoi regime.” What is it about Americans

of every political persuasion, including members “of the former student Left,” which gives them this moral superiority to pass judgement on the world? Passions did indeed cool rapidly among the student Left, especially after they realized they would not be drafted. They did not cool as rapidly in Vietnam.

I was in Vietnam twice, in 1965 and 1967–68. I spent most of my time there in the North, but I did go down to the DMZ and I saw part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail (a very busy place at the time – I was to learn later that this was about a month before the Tet Offensive). I was naive and carried some illusions (some of which I carry to this day, as I realized preparing this article). One incident stands out.

While hardly recommended, an air raid shelter is a good place to talk about a war – I was with an elderly French journalist who seemed to have spent a great deal of his life in Vietnam, although he was more interested in Quebec and de Gaulle's aborted visit. He gave me a long description of the rivalries and struggles within the various factions of the Communist parties, the merging and dissolution of alliances between socialist and quasi-socialist groups, even the manoeuvring of the Buddhists and Catholics. The upshot of it all was that, as the war was intensifying, the Communists in North Vietnam were gaining absolute control throughout Vietnam, and this was scaring the Laotians and the Cambodians, who were secretly supporting the Americans. I knew then about the split within the Vietnam Communist Party, which reflected the split between the USSR and China as well as the ambivalence of Ho Chi Minh, who by 1967 was on the margins. I also knew there were tensions within the broad alliance which

Ho had constructed as far back as the mid-1940s. But now, my French friend told me, the military was in control and General Giap had his own agenda: “Once these little Prussians deal with the Yanks they have a few matters to settle with those princelings in Laos and Cambodia. If the Russians and Chinese think they are going to get the oil in the gulf they will also learn otherwise.”

I didn't really pay much attention to what I was told. Wars tend to simplify and obscure a complex reality. Rereading Chomsky's writing of those times, I think he captured this complex reality better than anybody else writing on either side. Chomsky's straightforward style, his insistence and persistence and “numbing detail,” often prove the issue he is debating. It is not surprising that Morley, who appears to be more partial to sweeping indictments, should find him “incomprehensible.” ■

Notes

- ¹ M. Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 3rd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p. 189.
- ² Interview, cited in M. Rai, *Chomsky's Politics* (London: Verso, 1995).
- ³ Reprinted in A. Cockburn, *The Golden Age Is in Us* (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 149–151.
- ⁴ N. Chomsky, *Radical Priorities*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1981), p. 66.
- ⁵ See, for instance, N. Chomsky, *Perspectives on Power* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1997), p. 64.
- ⁶ W. Shawcross, *The Quality of Mercy: Cambodia, Holocaust and Modern Conscience* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).
- ⁷ N. Chomsky & E. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2001), pp. 281–282.

Looking across the Mediterranean

Radical Islamic politics and the West's response

Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West*. Translated by Pascale Ghazaleh. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004. 336 pages. (translation of: *Fitna: Guerre au cœur de l'islam*. Paris: Gallimard, 2004. 380 pages.)

Walter Russell Mead, *Power, Terror, Peace, and War: America's Grand Strategy in a World at Risk*. New York: Knopf, 2004. 226 pages.

by John Richards

LIKE IT OR NOT, SINCE THE END OF WORLD WAR II AMERICAN FOREIGN policy has been far more important than that of any other nation in determining the evolution of the international order. And in the immediate future, radical Islamic politics is the force most likely to upset that order. A torrent of books on both subjects is inundating the world's libraries. Among those published in 2004, these two are among the most important syntheses. Both these writers – one French, the other American – write within a tradition of political realism, interpreting the term broadly. Reading them is a useful antidote to a certain parochial naiveté that surrounds Canadian thinking about international relations – whether the thinking be in academe, journalism or the offices of Foreign Affairs and CIDA.

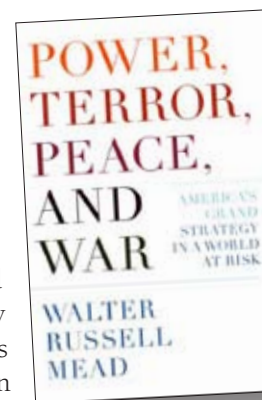
I was in Dhaka in August 2004, on a day that Sheikh Hasina, former Prime Minister of Bangladesh and now Leader of the Opposition, addressed a large rally of her supporters. As she ended her speech, men on the rooftop of a nearby building threw a dozen grenades. They missed Hasina but killed two dozen people including several of her senior aides, injured another 200 and created panic among the crowd, estimated at

up to 20,000. Panic led to riots, confrontations with police and the burning of many shops, cars and buses as well as a train in the station of a nearby

city. Earlier in the year, as he left a mosque in his home district in the northeast of the country, the recently appointed British High Commissioner became the target of some other grenade thrower. For the first time, Britain had appointed a Bangladeshi-born naturalized U.K. citizen to this senior posting. The High Commissioner was lucky. He was injured; several others were killed.

Bangladesh may seem an out-of-the-way place from which to launch this review, but bear with me.

In the case of the attack on Hasina, a hitherto unknown group of self-defined jihadists subsequently claimed responsibility via an email sent to a newspaper. Having missed their mark this time, they promised to kill her next time. Sheikh Hasina called on the government to resign, claiming that elements of the governing coalition had organized or indirectly sanctioned the attack. Hasina's explanation is an example of

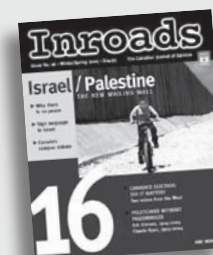


the extraordinary animosity between leaders of the country's two major parties. Admittedly, the governing party engages shadowy figures who

intimidate via force – as does Hasina's party. And no arrests have been made, either for the attack against her or for the one against the British diplomat. So perhaps Hasina is right, but she produced no evidence.

Almost certainly, the explanation for both attacks is the obvious one. Many devout Muslims are intensely frustrated by the corruption endemic in Bangladeshi public life. For four years running, Transparency International has designated Bangladesh as the country with the world's most corrupt public sector. A small minority among the devout believe the appropriate response to be the waging of jihad against those they consider apostates.

In the case of the diplomat, he is presumably being punished for collaborating with the government of a country that supported the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. In the case of the former Prime Minister, she has probably been targeted because of her political record.



WINTER/SPRING 2005 In the context of an issue dealing mainly with the Israel/Palestine conflict, co-publisher John Richards stepped back and took a broader look at the growth of radical Islam and the West's response to it. He did this through the lens of two books, Gilles Kepel's *The War for Muslim Minds*, which took Western readers inside the major Islamic political currents, and Walter Russell Mead's *Power, Terror, Peace, and War*, which offered a qualified defence of U.S. power in the world. This excerpt focuses on Kepel's book.

As Prime Minister from 1996 to 2001, Hasina led a deeply corrupt government that did not apply shari'a law. To jihadists, corruption is an inevitable byproduct of the secular.

Gilles Kepel's pessimism

Gilles Kepel is a senior member of the faculty at the Institut d'Études Politiques in Paris. *The War for Muslim Minds* is the most recent of several important books he has written or edited over the last 15 years on Islamic politics and religious thought. Nowhere, to my knowledge, has he written about Bangladesh – but his thesis fits the country well enough.

The first generation of postcolonial Arab elites – leaders like Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, Ahmed Ben Bella in Algeria and Saddam Hussein in Iraq – were secular and enamoured of central planning. In general, they failed to realize reasonable social progress. They produced a small and fragile middle class dependent on the patronage of an unwieldy and overly centralized state. Instead of reasonably prosperous workers in expanding industrial sectors, they perpetuated rural poverty and presided over the growth of vast slums within their capital cities. The most coherent opposition to these elites has proved to be imams. In Arab countries, politicized Islam has become the dominant political ideology among those dissatisfied with the status quo. Cleansing politics by a return to the fundamentals of the Holy Qur'an appeals to the pious among the middle class and to many among the poor. However, intense conflicts have emerged among various prophets of politicized Islam, and this is creating “une

guerre au cœur de l'islam” (a war in the heart of Islam), something Kepel labels as *fitna*, an Arabic word meaning anarchy.

The strength of Kepel's book is that it provides those in the lands of unbelievers with insight into major Islamic ideologies and their relation to politics. In his discussion of Al Qaeda, for example, he stresses the role of Osama Bin Laden's second-in-command, Ayman al Zawahiri, an Egyptian born into the country's intellectual aristocracy. The fortunes of the family collapsed in the wake of Nasser's 1952 coup. Zawahiri's intellectual development was much influenced by Sayyid Qotb, chief theoretician of the Muslim Brotherhood, who was tortured and assassinated by Nasser in the 1960s. Zawahiri came to accept Qotb's belief in the essential unity of the Muslim world, and the necessity of jihad to realize just Islamic states. Zawahiri concluded that the waging of jihad was required not only against nonbelievers but against Muslim leaders who rejected the teachings of the Qur'an. On the fringe of the Islamist group that assassinated President Sadat, Zawahiri was arrested and imprisoned. On his release in the mid-1980s, he left Egypt for Saudi Arabia where he befriended Bin Laden.

Saudi Arabia is, to use Kepel's image, in the eye of the Islamic theological hurricane. The Bedouin elites that rule the country have made two contracts that are proving impossible to reconcile. First with the British and since World War II with the Americans, they have contracted to use their vast oil reserves as “swing provider” and thereby ensure that the industrial world obtains sufficient oil at reasonable prices. (Determining a reasonable price is an ill-defined dimension of the contract.) To retain legitimacy among the world's Muslims for their dynastic

government, they have entered into a second contract: to rule Saudi Arabia as a uniquely devout state worthy of hosting the two most sacred sites of Islam. Both domestically and abroad – via subsidies to madrassa schools, for example – the Saudi government promotes a particularly rigid version of Islam (Wahhabism). Provided they do not preach jihad against the Saud family, many religious refugees – such as Zawahiri – have been granted asylum.

To Bin Laden and other radical Islamic leaders, the success of the mujahideen in driving the Soviets from Afghanistan in the 1980s proved the power of jihad. If the faithful could humble the mighty Soviet army, then they could do the same to the Zionist beachhead in Palestine and to the Americans whose presence in Muslim lands has corrupted governing elites and prevented realization of just Islamic states. Bin Laden's final break with his extended family occurred at the time of the first Gulf War, when Saudi Arabia allowed infidel soldiers to be stationed in the country to wage war against Iraq. Whatever Saddam's errors, Iraq was a Muslim country. It was unpardonable to abet armies of “Christian crusaders” come to wage war against a Muslim state. First from bases in Sudan, then from Afghanistan and now from an unknown address, Bin Laden and his wealth have enabled Zawahiri's ideas to pass from rhetoric to reality.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is for Kepel but a small battleground in a conflict of civilizations. What makes it unique is its provision to jihadists of their most persuasive rallying cry. Defeating Zionism has served as the most successful pretext for waging jihad against the West. In Kepel's words, “The bloody duel ... between [Sharon

and Arafat], ... both in their seventies, has offered Islamic jihadists the rationalization for launching their ‘great blow’ ... Thanks to the transformation of the Palestinian struggle into jihad, the political language of suicide attacks for the love of Allah has now acquired a certain legitimacy in the eyes of the Islamic faithful.”

In his assessment of Iraq and America, Kepel surveys the major forces in play. It is a crowded field: Saddam's tactical evolution from secular pan-Arab socialist to nominally devout Sunni Muslim; the more or less secular ideas of the Kurds (who, with

To Bin Laden, the success of the mujahideen in driving the Soviets from Afghanistan proved the power of jihad. If the faithful could humble the mighty Soviet army, then they could do the same to the Zionist beachhead in Palestine and to the Americans.

the protection of the no-fly zone imposed by the United States and Britain, have prospered since the first Gulf War); American neoconservatism; the “quietist” Shiite tradition represented by Ali Sistani that advocates a separation of church and state; the militant Shiite tradition of Moqtada al Sadr that does not; the ideas of the shadowy Abu al Zarqawi, a Jordanian who allegedly is the senior Al Qaeda operative in Iraq.

It is unclear what Kepel would have the Western world do about Iraq. On the one hand, he describes the dangers to the region of Saddam Hussein, an ambitious and tactically astute dictator. Given the brutality of his internal rule and the ethnic and religious cleavages among Iraqis themselves, a suc-

successful internal revolt was always unlikely. To that extent, he is sympathetic to the neoconservative position: the Western world should use armed force to topple Saddam.

On the other hand, Kepel is scathing in his critique of the naiveté within the U.S. Defense Department. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had inordinate faith in the efficacy of the U.S. arsenal of technologically sophisticated weapons, and the rapid victory over Saddam's army provided short-term confirmation. But when the battle shifted to the complex problem of managing the occupation, high-tech gadgets were no substitute for large numbers of troops able to impose order. The Bush entourage expected Iraqis to treat the advancing GIs as liberators

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– which by and large they did – but they also expected Iraqis to forget the inglorious history of Western accommodation of Saddam's atrocities over the previous three decades, and to forget the Islamic interpretation of what that history meant. Whatever else divided them, the mullahs concurred in their critique of the West – Europe and Japan as much as the United States – for having displayed a much greater interest in access to oil than in the collective suffering of the Iraqis.

In his final chapter, Kepel turns to the Muslim populations of Europe. The Muslim diaspora extends from the midlands

of England through neighbourhoods of Rotterdam and Hamburg and the Maghreb “zones” of Paris and Marseille to the majority of citizens of Bosnia, Kosovo and Albania. In total, the population of this diaspora is about 15 million. Kepel accords a privileged role to European Muslims. Relative to their coreligionists on the south bank of the Mediterranean, European Muslims have far more intimate contact with Western values such as equality between men and women, the importance of free political debate and the privileged place for independent scientific enquiry.

With mounting anxiety, the political leaders of Europe have set aside romantic elements of their multicultural policies and are now actively pursuing assimilation of Muslim immigrants to a core set of “Western” values. France has symbolically asserted the secular nature of its public school system by banning the wearing of religious symbols – girls wearing the hijab being the intended target. Britain, the country that historically has been the most tolerant of imams preaching as they wish, is embarrassed by the epithet “Londonistan” and has gagged the most radical. All European countries are keen to restrict legal and illegal Muslim immigration and to encourage existing Muslim immigrants to move from their ethnically homogenous enclaves into the mainstream. On the other hand, many imams oppose this agenda. Their goal remains as before: to build citadels of believers separate and apart from the impious majority.

Will these new assimilationist policies succeed where the old failed? The answer is far from certain. A useful analogy for North Americans contemplating Europe is to think of the Mediterranean as the equivalent of the Rio Grande. The huge economic disparity

between incomes north and south of the Rio Grande and the massive immigration it induces has obliged U.S. politicians to concern themselves with the economic fate of their southern neighbour. The United States has rebuffed its protectionist lobbies in order to negotiate NAFTA. The immediate European analogue is the debate over inclusion of Turkey in the European Union. U.S. per capita GDP (in terms of purchasing power, not exchange rates) is roughly four times that of Mexico; that of France or Britain is five times that of Algeria and seven times that of Egypt.

A dramatic means to illustrate the economic failure of most Muslim states over the last half century is to compare per capita GDP in a sample of them with that of China. Set aside the feudal oil sheikdoms whose prosperity depends largely on Allah's placement of oil deposits and the voracious appetite for oil among the world's industrialized countries, and look at China in relation to 18 majority-Muslim states with a cumulative 2002 population of more than 800 million. In the middle of the 20th century, China was exhausted from decades of war and desperately poor. The economic prospects of Arab states were a good deal brighter. However, per capita GDP in China is now higher than in 11 of the 18 states.

At US\$4,400, per capita Chinese GDP in 2002 was roughly 15 per cent of Canada's. By far the most successful of the 18 majority-Muslim states is Malaysia, with a 2002 per capita GDP nearly twice that of China. Other relatively prosperous Muslim countries are Turkey, Tunisia, Kazakhstan and Algeria. Per capita GDP in Turkey and Tunisia was about 40 per cent above China's; in Kazakhstan and Algeria, about 25 per cent higher. The per capita GDP of

four countries – Turkmenistan, Lebanon, Jordan and Albania – was within 10 per cent of China's. In Morocco and Egypt, per capita GDP was about 15 per cent less than in China. The per capita GDP of Syria, Indonesia and Azerbaijan was between two thirds and three quarters of China's. In the four remaining countries in this sample – Pakistan, Bangladesh, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan – per capita GDP was less than half of China's.

The War for Muslim Minds is ultimately a pessimistic book. Kepel hopes that European Muslims will form the vanguard of a modern, liberal Islam. But he is expecting a great deal from a small number. Both the pan-Arab nominally socialist regimes and the feudal petromonarchies have failed to bring reasonable social progress to their citizens. Why? There is a hurricane of conflicting Islamic interpretations. This hurricane is not about to abate quickly ...

An inadequate response

The weakness of both Kepel and Mead is in their prescriptions. Kepel affords a privileged role to European Muslims. Mead offers a few suggestions pertaining to Israel and Palestine, and a few others on reform of the UN and the conduct of foreign aid. Neither agenda is an adequate response to the dominant options at hand – radical politicized Islam and “failed Fordism.”

If Muslims are to transcend the dominant options, it behooves us “Christian crusaders” to think much harder than we have to date about means to improve economic fortunes among Muslims, whether they live in the “Arab street” on the wrong side of the Mediterranean or farther afield. ■

In the shadow of Ingmar Bergman

A new generation of Swedish filmmakers tries to find its voice

by Bengt Forslund

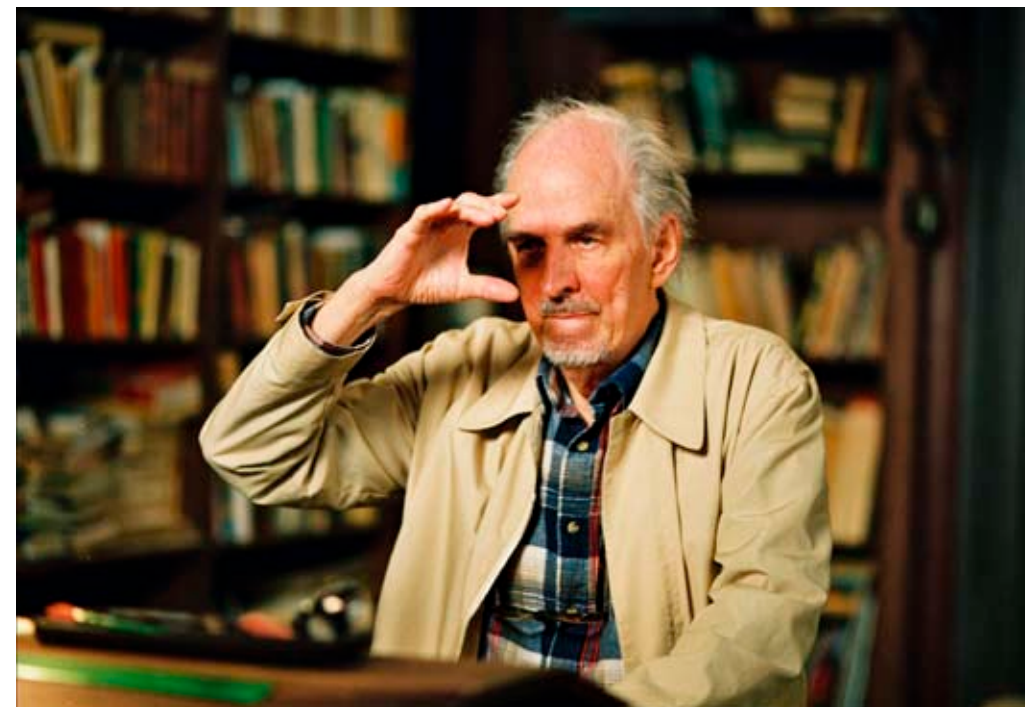
In THE FALL OF 2004, INGMAR BERGMAN'S FILM *SARABAND* OPENED to a generally favourable response. This was quite a remarkable event, not only because the legendary Swedish filmmaker was 86 years old, but also because *Saraband* had been made not for the cinema but for television. Since it had been shot in HDTV, however, it could be shown on the big screen, with a technical quality no one could dream of 20 years ago.

As critics noted, the power and beauty of Bergman's art and his skill at drawing out powerful moments of humanity between actors were undiminished. Bergman had shown in masterpieces going back half a century that he used film as no one else, to dig deeply and relentlessly into the body and soul of human relationships.

He had announced that *Saraband* would be his last artistic endeavour – no more theatre directing, no more films, no more

television, no more radio. In this article I will take him at his word, though he's made that promise before. As someone who has lived inside the world of Swedish film for 40 years, I wonder how his enormous shoes might be filled.

I will not try to capture his legacy. Bergman's brilliance has given rise to more than 130 books, covering cinematography and also the many dimensions of human relations – psychology, psychiatry, sociology, religion – that he grappled with in some 40 films. The literature has flourished especially



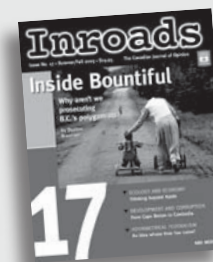
Ingmar Bergman

since Bergman declared that the highly acclaimed *Fanny and Alexander* (1982) would be his last film.

It didn't turn out that way. Bergman had always regarded film as his mistress, and now he wanted to be faithful to his old wife, the theatre. Except that in the background was a new passion. Television, the illegitimate child of theatre and film, and beloved of people cut off from both, had fascinated Bergman from its beginnings.

Indeed, among his greatest successes was his 1973 TV series, *Scenes from a Marriage*, which was adapted into a successful film.

His plan was to use television as a setting for chamber pieces, concentrated in time and place and with few characters, often talking directly to the camera in the long closeups for which he was famous. In 1984, with Erland Josephson (star of *Scenes from a Marriage*) and Lena Olin, he made *After the Rehearsal* for television. But his long-time



SUMMER/FALL 2005 Think of Swedish film and inevitably the first name that comes to mind is Ingmar Bergman, one of the masters of world cinema. But as the master's career winds down, who is coming up to fill his shoes? This was the question addressed by Bengt Forslund, himself a noted Swedish film producer and film historian and author of several books on Swedish cinema.

collaborator, cameraman Sven Nykvist, shot it on 35mm film, making it possible for the distributor to sell it abroad for cinematic release. Bergman was furious; from then on he made all his television productions using ordinary TV technology – three cameras and videotape.

A new Bergman show on Swedish television became an annual event. At the same time, Bergman wrote scripts for Nordic directors, and several found their way into successful films: Dane Bille August's *Best Intentions* (1992), which won the Palme d'Or in Cannes; and *Private Confessions* (1996) and *Faithless* (2000) by the Norwegian Liv

hopeful. There have been some good films, certainly, but no new Bergmans. Perhaps this is inevitable. In the 1950s, his presence in Sweden was so powerful that there was little room for other filmmakers.

In the sixties, however, under the influence of *La nouvelle vague* in France and *Papas Kino is tot* in Germany, and with the support of the Swedish Film Institute founded in 1963, a few talented directors had the opportunity to establish themselves internationally. Films by Vilgot Sjöman, Jan Troell and Bo Widerberg were seen at festivals all over the world, and a few, like Widerberg's *Elvira Madigan* (1967), Sjöman's *I Am Curious, Yellow* (1969) and Troell's *The Emigrants* (1971), had commercial success in Europe and America.

But Sjöman, Troell and Widerberg were only five or ten years younger than Bergman, and they soon faded from the scene. What of the following generation? The truth is, they haven't left many milestones in Swedish film history. There have been good films, of course, including successful local comedies and children's films (which have long been a Swedish specialty, largely because of Astrid Lindgren's famous tales). But apart from Lasse Hallstrom, few have gained international recognition, and Hallstrom was lost to Sweden when his breakthrough *My Life as a Dog* (1985) took him to Hollywood.

Sweden has also benefited from mobility. A successful British import was Colin Nutley, who settled in Sweden and made movies looking at Swedish society as an outsider. His breakthrough came with *House of Angels* (1992), a comedy about two charming foreigners who settle in a small Swedish community and turn values upside down. *House of Angels* was seen by 10 per cent of Sweden's population in theatres, and by 30



Bergman directing Liv Ullmann and Julia Dufvenius.

Bergman had shown in masterpieces going back half a century that he used film as no one else, to dig deeply and relentlessly into the body and soul of human relationships.

Ullmann, when she turned from acting to directing.

Saraband reunited Ullmann and Josephson to revisit Marianne and Johan, the divorcing couple of *Scenes from a Marriage*. But here the focus is not on their relationship but on Marianne as the clear-eyed observer of Johan's relationship with his son, and the son's relationship with his own daughter. The vision here is dark – reminiscent of early Bergman, and far bleaker than that of *The Barbarian Invasions* by Canadian filmmaker Denys Arcand, who also returned to characters of an earlier film to explore generational relationships.

Can the current generation of Swedish filmmakers fill Bergman's shoes? The record over the last 20 years, when Bergman "wasn't making films," is not especially

per cent on television a year later. Nutley's subsequent films all reached a large Swedish (if not international) audience, and *Under the Sun* (1999), another loving portrait of the Swedish countryside, earned him an Oscar nomination as well as an invitation to Hollywood, which Nutley fortunately – for Swedes – refused.

There are not many immigrants from the West in Sweden. Most come from the countries to the East, often as refugees from war and poverty. Among this new group of filmmakers are Reza Parsa and Reza Bagher, both from Iran; Josef Fares and Fares Fares from Lebanon; and Baker Karim from Somalia. Unlike earlier immigrant directors, whose films usually suffered from being too close to the material and overstressed the problems of being a foreigner in Sweden, this

new generation grew up in Sweden and their movies reflect contemporary Swedish life. Josef Fares's *Jalla! Jalla!* (2001) and Bagher's *Wings of Glass* (2001) deal with marriages between Swedes and immigrants, and both are very funny, putting greater emphasis on the universal aspects of the situation – sex, youth and conservative parents – than on the immigrant predicament itself. The result is energetic filmmaking with broad appeal and something to say.

But none of these directors could or would lay claim to Bergman's mantle. If there is a new Bergman on the horizon, it would have to be Lukas Moodysson, a leading figure in the new wave of directors. Leadership is nothing new for Moodysson, who has never suffered from lack of ego. By 1986, 17 years old and already known

as a rebellious poet, he left school to lead a literary protest movement. Two volumes of poetry and a novel followed. Then suddenly, after seeing David Lynch's TV serial *Twin Peaks*, Moodysson decided to become a filmmaker. He returned to school and graduated in 1995.

After a couple of shorts, he made his feature film debut in 1998 with *Fucking Åmål* (for international distribution a different title, *Show Me Love*, was selected), which became a surprise hit in Sweden and at festivals around the world. The tale of two terminally bored high school students – who come out as lesbians – realistically evoked

“To poke about relations and emotional life is important, but you also have to grasp the big connections, understand why things are like they are. If you have talent you cannot use it only for your own sake, you have a responsibility.”

life in a small-town high school and raised the subject of homosexuality at a moment when both children and parents were ready to discuss the issue openly.

Moodysson's ability to get fine performances from young actors was again evident in his next film, which deals with life in a seventies “commune.” *Together* (2000) was sold to more than 40 countries and was an even bigger hit than *Fucking Åmål*. Its strength lies in its being reflected through the eyes of the commune's children, who as a matter of course expose the consequences of, and political rationalizations for, their elders' behaviour.

The New Country (2000), another tale of togetherness, was coauthored by Moodysson

and talented screenwriter Peter Birro, and directed by Geir Hansteen Jorgensen. We follow Ali, a 15-year-old Somali, and Masoud, a 40-year-old Iranian, as they wander through Sweden in their rusty Mazda, avoiding expulsion as illegal immigrants. *The New Country*, an entertaining road movie and a satirical critique of present-day Sweden, expressed Moodysson's increased sense of social responsibility.

Moodysson avoids interviews, and it is typical that one of the most revealing appeared in *Situation*, a magazine produced and sold by the homeless. In an oblique critique of Bergman, Moodysson told *Situation*, “To poke about relations and emotional life is important, but you also have to grasp the big connections, understand why things are like they are. If you have talent you cannot use it only for your own sake, you have a responsibility.”

Moodysson took his own advice in his next film, *Lilja 4-ever* (2003), which is based on the actual case of a teenage Russian girl who was promised a better life and a good job in Sweden, but was used as a prostitute and ended up killing herself by jumping from a motorway bridge. *Lilja 4-ever* is not an uplifting story, but it served to put the problem of human trafficking on the front pages in several Eastern European states as well as in Sweden, where it was screened for members of Parliament and in schools, and was the subject of numerous TV discussions.

After four big hits, there was much anticipation among critics and the public for Moodysson's next film. If *Lilja 4-ever* wasn't black enough, he chose an even darker subject for his *A Hole in My Heart* (2004): the porno movie fan. The film's realism was so extreme that audiences were disgusted,

and cinemas put up warning signs. Released at about the same time as *Saraband*, *A Hole in My Heart* shows how far Moodysson has yet to go to fill Bergman's shoes.

Clearly, there's no Swedish successor to Bergman. Perhaps we have to look in Scandinavia beyond Sweden, at Denmark's Lars Von Trier, for example, but that's the subject of another article. In the meantime, as a consolation prize, I bring to your attention another Swedish filmmaker, Kay Pollak, whose *As It Is in Heaven* (2004) is in all aspects an antidote to *A Hole in My Heart*.

In 1980 Pollak made *Children's Island*, one of the few good early Swedish films that did not involve Bergman. But when Pollak's next film flopped, his career was put on hold. Twenty-four years later, he is suddenly back with a feel-good film, generous in all aspects – even from an artistic point of view – and full of heart. The story is

simple: a world-famous violinist has a heart attack and returns to the community of his childhood in northern Sweden, where he is reluctantly persuaded to rehearse with the church choir. It is both funny and tragic, with an excellent cast and a musical score full of joy. Its message is simple: *carpe diem* – it is never too late.

A million Swedes saw *As It Is in Heaven* in just ten weeks, and it was Sweden's choice to compete (unsuccessfully, as it turned out) for this year's Academy Award. *As It Is in Heaven* is reminiscent of Bergman's *Saraband* in that music is central to both. The cello in *Saraband* is an expression of the father's emotional dependency and the daughter's dreams of fulfilment. Pollak is more hopeful than Bergman. He will never be Bergman, but perhaps, as Bergman's shadow recedes, Pollak will be part of a more modest but nonetheless exciting renewal of Swedish film. ■



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Making Sense of a Changing Planet. Forty experts tell you how

The world according to Stuart

Alexander Masters, *Stuart: A Life Backwards*. London: Fourth Estate, 2005. 292 pages.

Theodore Dalrymple, *Life at the Bottom: The Worldview that Makes the Underclass*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001. 263 pages.

by Paul Delany

As WE WALK THROUGH CITY STREETS, IT NORMALLY DOES NOT TROUBLE us that we know almost nothing about the lives of those whose paths we cross. City life is supposed to provide freedom from responsibility for others, apart from our family or friends. Everyone else just gets a casual glance – except for when a “street person” appears, someone obviously destitute or desperate. Our first instinct is to look away, before they can make us aware of something we would rather avoid: the needs of strangers.

Alexander Masters, a freelance writer in Cambridge, England, chose to keep looking at a homeless man he noticed on the street, Stuart Shorter. He has written Stuart’s biography, and made the claim that his is “an important life.” Most people who read this book will agree. It is the funny, fantastic and agonizing story of someone who made a complete mess of his life, and did much

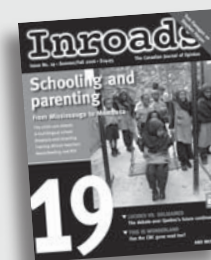
harm to others along the way. Failure, of course, is often more interesting than success; and absolute failure becomes more than that, a trip into the infernal regions beneath the affluent surface of Western cities. Stuart underwent pain, and inflicted pain, far beyond anything most of us have experienced. Then he chose to end his life – like Jesus, at the age of 33. Masters hints that Stuart, too, may have died for our sins, though one of the virtues of this book is that it suggests many other ways of telling the life of Stuart.

Stuart was one of the “chaotic homeless”: people who have no settled homes or relationships, who are rarely employed, who are unhealthy, violent and addicted to drugs. In the government agencies that deal with the homeless, the chaotic are often considered beyond repair. Their life expectancy in England is 42 years. They are 35 times as likely to commit suicide as an average person. Ten of them are male for each female. Why? Masters suggests that women may cope better with failure and disappointment. This is not a very satisfactory explanation, but one of the themes of *Stuart* is that it isn’t easy to explain anything about homelessness. The problems in a life like Stuart’s are so comprehensive, so majestic in their destructive power, that the standard sociological explanations of them look like the most feeble of clichés.

Masters does offer reasons why Stuart ended up living on the bottom level of the Lion’s Yard parking garage in Cambridge. Many reasons. His father was a gypsy who

walked out when Stuart was small; Stuart was dyslexic and had muscular dystrophy; he was sexually abused by his brother, who later killed himself; he damaged his brain through glue-sniffing, head-butting, car-crashing and using heroic amounts of alcohol and heroin; his marriage failed (when he held his infant son hostage at knife-point); he had borderline personality disorder; he did time in 16 prisons. As Masters sums it up, “It isn’t a bedsit and employment that [the chaotic] need; it is a new brain. At best we can keep them steady with drugs. At worst, we must throw them in jail, and hope that we are not in the room when they decide to hang themselves.”

In fact, “The System” (as Stuart calls the social services) provides much more for the homeless in England than drugs and restraint. Over the three years of their acquaintance, the government paid Stuart more than Masters, a Cambridge graduate in physics, managed to earn for himself. Once classified as unemployed and disabled,



SUMMER/FALL 2006 In this perceptive review, Vancouver writer Paul Delany, formerly a professor of English at Simon Fraser University, addressed the intractable problem of homelessness by engaging two books that dealt with the problem in very different ways.

Stuart received about \$400 a week and free rent. He regularly found ways to spend \$150 a day on heroin. Apart from direct support, Stuart had guidance from the small army of social workers and administrators who deal with homelessness (Masters served in this army for a while). Theodore Dalrymple, in the other book under review here, described a hostel he visited that had 91 residents and 41 staff, most of them working behind locked doors so that they wouldn't be bothered by their clients.

The government helps, and gets no gratitude in return:

All homeless people hate the System, even though many of its organisations – housing benefit, social security, the rough sleepers unit, dozens of charities – have been set up especially to make their lives easier.

The System is hated because it holds a carrot in one hand and a stick in the other. Hostels have many rules and penalties for bad behaviour; drug dealers make no demands on their customers, other than the price of their wares. Whatever the System gives to the homeless, it is never enough to repair the chaos of their lives. A homeless person has nothing and needs everything; how does one provide that?

Today, the state is close to throwing up its hands in trying to solve the problem of homelessness. Part of its despair comes from an intellectual failure. Psychiatry, medicine, sociology, criminology no longer claim that they even understand homelessness, still less that they know how to fix it. The most effective, and notorious, policy has been that of Rudolph Giuliani in New York: just drive the underclass out of central public places through ruthless law enforcement. Yet it is

precisely in great and wealthy cities that homelessness seems to be growing fastest.

Alexander Masters began trying to understand Stuart by reading the social science literature, but Stuart himself would have none of it. "You grew up with order," he told Masters, "so you're going to want order to explain things." Stuart can't explain himself, so how can an outsider do better? Masters falls back on just telling Stuart's story – and telling it backwards, from adult to child. First we see Stuart the psychopath and criminal; at the end of the book we see the chubby, smiling baby with his big brother. They are both going to kill themselves, but Masters never really tries to tell you why, or who is to blame.

What Masters gives us is the world according to Stuart; and he convinces us that Stuart is more interesting than most of the people on the other side of the college walls of Cambridge. But how much of Stuart's fascination is put there by Masters's talent as a writer? Masters rejects the compassionate social-worker approach, which would see Stuart as only a victim – one of the "socially excluded," in current jargon. Stuart had his own social world; it just wasn't a comfortable or law-abiding one. By joining that world on its own terms, Masters was "feasting with panthers," in Oscar Wilde's phrase. He was not looking for sexual excitement in consorting with Stuart and his friends, but prided himself on finding acceptance in an underworld that the solid citizens of Cambridge just wanted to avoid. Masters was lucky not to end up like Timothy Treadwell (portrayed in Werner Herzog's film *Grizzly Man*), who lived with the grizzly bears for 13 years, until one of the grizzlies decided to eat him.

Theodore Dalrymple is the pseudonym of Anthony Daniels, who also writes under his own name on travel and other subjects. Until recently, Dalrymple worked as a psychiatrist in British inner-city hospitals and prisons. He belonged to the sharp end of government response to "the underclass" (as he calls it), where doctors, nurses, police and prison guards have clearly defined tasks of treatment and social control. Such people tend to be critical of the soft end, where social workers, hostel managers and poverty advocates do their work. Yet neither the hard people nor the soft ones seem to have great confidence in what they are doing, as the underclass has become a permanent feature of the urban landscape. Both Dalrymple and Masters are resigned to this, but their moral judgements are radically different.

One could say of Masters what Martin Amis said of himself, that he is "not terribly interested in disapproval." People on either the left or the right might have their reasons to be indignant about Stuart's life, but Masters mainly just wants to know what it's like to *be* Stuart. Dalrymple, on the other hand, goes in for all disapproval, all the time. He is furious with how the System intervenes in the lives of his patients, and more furious with how it fails to intervene when it should. The reason for this dangerous passivity, Dalrymple says, is that "moral relativism ... has been successfully communicated to those least able to resist its devastating practical effects."

The thesis constantly repeated in the essays in *Life at the Bottom* is that "the fish rots from the head." Misguided intellectuals, Dalrymple says, have undermined traditional beliefs in moral standards, free will and personal responsibility. There are two reasons to disagree with this. One is the fra-

gility of the proposed causal chain: between Rousseau and Woodstock, or Nietzsche and the Nazis, there are too many links. What is the point of making such thinkers responsible for the distant and distorted "consequences" of their ideas? Today, people on the right like to blame disorder on "elites" and assume that ordinary folk, if they were not led astray, would come up with strong and simple values. In fact, populist ideas can also be traced back to intellectuals, just different intellectuals – Calvin rather than Montaigne, for example.

The other problem with the "intellectual decay" argument is that the underclass is not

The problems in a life like Stuart's are so comprehensive, so majestic in their destructive power, that the standard sociological explanations of them look like the most feeble of clichés.

drifting in a value-free, postmodern cloud. They still have plenty of rules, and believe in reward and punishment; if anything their rules tend to be too savage, not too lax. In the Kingston Penitentiary uprising of 1971, the inmates held a mock trial of sexual offenders and tortured several of them to death.

Dalrymple's book is full of horror stories about young women killed for breaking the rules of their immigrant communities, or old people persecuted by thugs. When he speaks of the "collapse of the British character," he means that there is more violence, selfishness and addiction; this may be true, but woolly ideas are not the core of the problem. Nor is it plausible that "the tastes, conduct, and the mores of the

underclass are seeping up the social scale with astonishing rapidity.” The British elite have no desire to join the underclass; they just think it can be a good joke to behave like them in superficial ways like wearing grubby clothes or dropping their aitches. That sort of play-acting has been going on since Marie Antoinette dressed up as a shepherdess. No middle-class person actually wants to live on a sink estate or send their child to a failing inner-city school.

Dalrymple’s book is a good read, nonetheless. He tells his stories well, and has a clear-eyed view of what makes life hard for immigrants and other “marginalized” people

Between Rousseau and Woodstock, or Nietzsche and the Nazis, there are too many links in the causal chain. What is the point of making such thinkers responsible for the distant and distorted “consequences” of their ideas?

in cities. As a right-wing thinker, he also has some refreshing differences from the sort of American neoconservatives who praise him on his back cover. Dalrymple believes England is circling the drain; the neocons are so sure that America is the greatest country in the world that they turn a blind eye to much evidence to the contrary. Dalrymple, like Christopher Hitchens, has no love for faith-based solutions to social decay. He is hostile to vulgar consumerism; neocons believe that big houses and cars help to make America great. Dalrymple says the welfare state is not to blame for the underclass, because it’s only in the last 20 years or so that things have gone to pot; neocons say that welfare saps initiative. Dalrymple still

resembles his Communist father in being appalled by many of the fruits of capitalism; neocons bang the drum for Anglo-Saxon economic freedoms.

Although he believes that order and responsibility are better than permissiveness and self-expression, Dalrymple sees the underclass as people who choose for themselves, not just products of the social machine. They are a much larger group than just the homeless, and they live on the margin because society gives them what they need to survive there:

They have no fear of failure and are utterly without the constraint of routine: their only daily task is to appear on time for a meal, and their only weekly task is to collect their social security. Moreover, they are automatically part of a fraternity – quarrelsome and occasionally violent, perhaps, but also tolerant and often amusing ... It is difficult for most of us to accept that this way of life, so unattractive on the surface, is freely chosen.

The descriptions of a tramp’s life in George Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London* show that Western societies used to deal with the homeless far more harshly than they do today. Orwell did not sentimentalize his tramps – he says of one that he has “a jackal’s character” – but he spent time at the bottom to get a perspective on the vices of those at the top. He viewed hardship below as a product of selfishness above.

Dalrymple, on the other hand, blames postmodern intellectuals for the chaotic lives of the underclass. Neither he nor Masters accepts Orwell’s old-fashioned leftist view of social inequality. In their different ways, they are both postmodernists. They look at the underclass as a distinct culture, with its particular rules. When members of one

culture seek to judge members of another, they cannot appeal to any universal or national culture that overrules local patterns of behaviour. Dalrymple deplores this situation, to be sure, but he accepts that moral and social fragmentation are irreversible in contemporary Britain.

The multicultural model of society now includes groups – predominantly white, as Dalrymple notes – that used to be defined by their economic deprivation. Society is now a horizontal tapestry of cultures, not a vertical pyramid of classes. Economics has yielded to anthropology. Orwell still believed that the injustices of that pyramid could be dissolved, and that solidarity could bring about a happier and fairer future state. Now, as David Goodhart has argued, “The left’s recent love affair with diversity may come at the expense of the values and even the people that it once championed.”¹ Goodhart

sees Scandinavia as the exception: in a homogeneous population with an old-fashioned national identity, it is much easier to create a feeling of solidarity between rich and poor. There is an underclass in Scandinavia too, but it is proportionally much smaller than in the Anglo-Saxon countries.

In North America the right deals with the underclass by retreating into gated communities, or by trying to displace the poor from the public sphere of the city. The left tries to engage with them, but does not challenge values that are in fact destructive to those who hold them. Solidarity used to be the answer; but the lesson of recent decades is that solidarity is surely not forever. ■

Note

¹ “Too Diverse?”, *Prospect*, February 2004.

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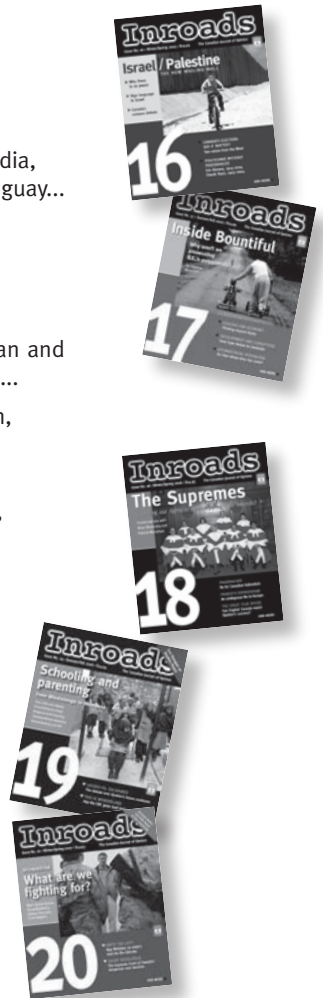
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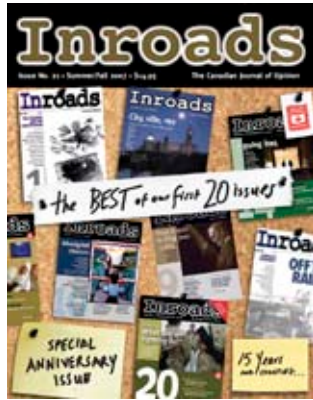
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