

# The Best of Our Time

by Geoffrey Wagner

Our Age: English Intellectuals Between the World Wars—A

Group Portrait

by Noel Annan

New York: Random House;

479 pp., \$30.00

Electing Provost of King's College, Cambridge, in his 30's and subsequently Vice-Chancellor of the University of London, Lord Annan is a delightful person who has given us a delightful book of scintillating erudition that ranges far beyond the confines of its subtitle. Indeed, there can hardly be a single English intellectual of significance in this century who is not mentioned in it.

As an etiology of upper-class England, it is inevitably grounded in that "unique British institution," the public school, which is to say the private school. Having been through one, I can attest to Cyril Connolly's opinion that the experience dominates your life. I have seen two elderly Englishmen introduced to each other and soon bringing up the ritual question, *Where were you at school?* (It is a fairly meaningless one in Italy or France and stands apart in intensity of definition from any university allegiance.) In my one brief meeting with T.S. Eliot, it was the only question he put to me.

Annan rightly sees this code of the public school man percolating through British life and letters, as well as politics (every member of Macmillan's postwar cabinet, including himself, had been to Eton). The *New York Times* reviewer objected to the elitist background of *Our Age*—only four percent of the British population experienced any form of higher education before the last war—but failed to see that the book is about Our Age rather than "our age." Annan capitalizes throughout.

The code taught civilized behavior—or manners if you will (Winches-

ter's motto being "Manners Makyth Man"); loyalty to institutions such as school, family, regiment; avoidance of conceit ("side") as of any emotional show; religion as a form of social control; and stoicism on playing or battlefield (one master sidelined tennis as a sport since it didn't hurt enough). I won't mention the food.

Philistinism was one of the results. When Roger Fry showed some early Matisse to art students they jeered back, "Drink or drugs?" An Oxford professor discredited Zola and Ibsen by comparing their photographs with those of "any decent midshipman." My own Oxford tutor, producing Shakespeare on the London stage, told me to avoid Ibsen as "barbaric," while his friend and colleague C.S. Lewis detested T.S. Eliot.

The code—which Kipling called *The Law*—has been covered in other books, but never so entertainingly. It bequeathed a remarkable self-confidence, epitomized by the story of the Duke of Wellington strolling down Bond Street in plain clothes (mufti) later in life and being accosted by a man saying, "Aren't you Mr. Jones?" To which the Iron Duke replied, "My dear chap, if you can believe that, you can believe anything." Women's schools aped the men's, as in the select Cheltenham Ladies College, where Indira Gandhi and Iris Murdoch were chums, and the code was exported to the colonies.

The rebellion against the code was intellectually rich. Churchill's nephew ran away from Wellington and Toynbee's son from Rugby. It was also perforce entirely upperclass; Annan's subjects for portraiture include Bertrand Russell ("a Whig holding advanced Victorian views"), Virginia Woolf ("the patron saint for the feminists of Our Age"), the insufferable Strachey, and Bloomsbury collectively. As for the university communists and Cambridge spies, *Our Age* parallels Verne W. Newton's recent book on the vermin, Annan well quoting Sir Harold Acton that "Every villain is followed by a sophist with a sponge"—truly a motto for our times.

A major dissent against the Establishment took the form of the cult of homosexuality. But what Sir Maurice Bowra called the Homintern is hard to interpret to modern America where the subject has become so politicized and vulgarized and in a word disgusting. In England between the wars it was of course criminal conduct (Gielgud so fined) rather than the rallying point for some new demonstration. England had, in any case, a long and innocent bachelor tradition. One American professor put a sexual interpretation on the fact that as a boy A.E. Housman had his arm slung around another in a school photo. But in those days the cameraman carefully composed such groups and my father's study was tapestried with old rugger hearties so enlaced. Nor would the few lesbians of the British 20's have been anything but stunned by the feminist terror squads of modern America. Generally, the "queer" was not politically ambitious then. Keynes did not

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strut his sexual bias. Oscar Wilde, asked what he thought about socialism, flapped a wrist and replied, "All those evenings."

With the advent of a permissiveness largely imported from America, liberalism parodied itself in English intellectual life as in America; "The wall of silence and ignorance crumbled in the fifties and sixties." And "No Government had ever contained so many former dons and intellectuals as the Labour administrations of the sixties." Annan regales us with chapters on "deviants"—Waugh, Leavis ("A don who despised scholarship as pedantry"), Michael Oakeshott—alongside pen-portraits of C.P. Snow, A.J.P. Taylor, Wittgenstein, my own Oxford colleague Hugh Trevor-Roper (now Lord Dacre), and a host of others, all brilliantly "placed" within their time. At the end he has to ask himself whether Britain's decline into a client state of America is due to its educated classes or to the trade unions that split the Labour Party in the 70's ("They also destroyed social democracy for a decade and the political assumptions of Our Age"). Mrs. Thatcher courageously opposed the latter, but by that time the country had become fairly ungovernable. "Britain now became the victim of her own rhetoric. She fondly imagined she had won the war. She had not. America and Russia had won the war."

A similar book to Annan's has just come out by a friend of his, Desmond Flower. Throughout this century three generations of the Flower family owned and directed the celebrated firm of Cassell & Co., Churchill's publisher (and my own), until brutally bought out by the usual American conglomerate; one editor, Toby Buchan, John Buchan's son, told me he had been

"spat onto the street" by the American impresarios. Desmond Flower's memoirs, *Fellows in Foolscap*, read alongside Annan's, show a similarly sunny period when a man of taste could publish what he wanted to, without the circus. Gloucester's lament in *Lear* stands in my mind as an epitaph over both books: "We have seen the best of our time."

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## Ishmael Among the Scriveners

by Thomas Fleming

Theorie e Altre Liriche  
by Peter Russell  
Rome: Carlo Mancosu

The heroic age of modern poetry has been over for some time. The learned reactionaries who shaped it for two generations have all been dead for many years: Eliot (1965) and Pound (1972), Valéry (1945) and Claudel (1955), Ungaretti (1970) and Montale (1981). Diverse in style and technique, the great modernists were all ambitious in straining at the limits of expression, in finding the principles that underlie formal conventions, in bringing to bear the weight of humane learning upon the inhuman conditions of the 20th century. The poets who have followed, even when they are good, have had neither the erudition nor the ambition to take up their challenge.

There is, however, one outstanding exception to this generalization, Peter Russell. Born in Bristol in 1920, Russell

served in the British army in Europe and in the Indian army in the East. He has lived virtually everywhere—Malaya, Berlin, Venice, Tehran, and British Columbia, and at one time or another has studied much of what is worth studying. He can translate from Latin and write in Serbo-Croatian, and the range of his allusions is almost as broad (although by no means as bewildering) as that of Ezra Pound. Russell's connection with Pound goes deeper than style, since it was Peter Russell who worked for years to secure Pound's release from St. Elizabeth's. (Why is it that exile and madness are the two destinies most frequently enjoyed by American poets?)

Quite apart from a long list of volumes of verse and criticism, Peter Russell has, over the years, involved himself in a number of literary projects, as editor of the arts review *Nine* in the 1950's, and more recently of his own newsletter *Marginalia*, which is like a personal letter from a brilliant and learned friend. His work is also to be found in *Temenos*, an unusual journal of "imagination."

These days Mr. Russell is living in rural Tuscany, from which he continues to make lecturing forays, and is regarded with considerable respect in Italian literary circles. His newest volume, a selection of his recent verse accompanied by translations into Italian, might serve as an introduction to readers unfamiliar with Russell's work.

Here we find examples of his hard-edged lyricism put into forms whose rules he manages to twist and bend to his own convenience:

Would I could find the magic  
arrow  
To shoot up in the seamless  
blue  
My house of earth is narrow,  
narrow  
How should I welcome you?

It's ruined too O make it wide  
Strike down these ruins and  
rebuild  
What if the bolt transfix my side  
If my empty cup be filled.

The following lines begin his poem "By the Lake," which also illustrates Russell's metaphysical bent:

Primordial silence on the lake

### LIBERAL ARTS

#### AND PEE-WEE HERMAN'S VOICE MADE HER . . .

A neurologist reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine* last summer that a woman's epileptic seizures were caused by the voice of *Entertainment Tonight* co-host Mary Hart. Symptoms included an upset stomach and mental confusion. The Associated Press reported Dr. Venkat Ramani as saying, "It was very dramatic. . . . The expression in her eyes—she looked like she was far away and out of it."