

diffident" about claiming Orwell as a nonsocialist, and didn't press the point, aside from citing the famous remark from *The Road to Wigan Pier* that "the mere words 'Socialism' and 'Communism' draw towards them with magnetic force every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, 'Nature Cure' quack, pacifist, and feminist in England." His claiming of Orwell doesn't sound "audacious" to me. Neither Podhoretz nor Rodden mentions the remarks of Frederic Warburg, who became Orwell's publisher after Victor Gollancz rejected *Homage to Catalonia* for fear that it would offend the British Communist party:

I don't think he was ever a socialist, although he would have described himself as a socialist. . . . He didn't like progress; he preferred the old ways, the traditional ways, which is surely not the road of socialism. . . . How could [Gollancz] publish a book which, brilliant as it was, was all the same violently anti-socialist? . . . The paperback edition . . . contained a preface by Gollancz himself saying that Orwell was in fact acting as devil's advocate against socialism, though omitting to mention that Orwell was not only a devil's advocate but believed the views of the devil's advocate.

As for where he would have stood today, Orwell was anti-abortion, anti-contraception, anti-Scots, anti-Irish, anti-Indian, anti-homosexual (he referred to Oxbridge Marxists as "the pansy Left"), rabidly anti-Catholic, and probably anti-Semitic, views which would certainly have excluded him from the special-interest politics of the Dukakis-era Democrats or the Kinnock-era Labour party.

Rodden, who describes himself as a "left-of-center white male of working-class origins, a post-Vatican II Catholic liberal, an academic in English and Communication Studies, and an American who came to Orwell's work in the 1970s," claims not to carry a brief for any political camp, and for the most part he is scrupulously fair-minded. Still, some of Rodden's "faces" of Orwell are more equal than others, and he has no qualms about calling Orwell "a democratic socialist."

Rodden's unwillingness to define the term "socialism" is itself a grave failing. It can be expected that those who helped create Orwell's reputation will differ on what socialism means, but, in a book that begs the question of Orwell's political allegiances on every page, one expects to see the issue of his socialist sympathies better defined. Rodden never makes clear whether he's referring to Mrs. Thatcher's share-owning welfare state, Castro's low-tech Stalinism, or even the redistributive capitalism of contemporary America. Orwell was uncomfortable with the

English class system, which has no equivalent in this country, and Rodden could have done a better job in distilling Orwell's class obsessions from his economic ones and acknowledging the difference. Under such a vague rubric it's no more difficult to claim Orwell as a socialist than it is to claim him as an Englishman with a moustache.

Orwell used political terms with a similar vagueness. Even in his socialist manifesto *The Lion and the Unicorn*, he made only tentative recommendations for any political program, and in his novels political ideals are always running up against human frailties. To

read him alongside the explicitly political literature of his era, like those "socialist realism" novels in which the guy who gets the girl is the one who requisitions the most grain, is to realize how rare it is for political writers to think about human beings. Orwell's characters fish, drink, swindle, pray, write poetry, go to whores, play polo, gamble, pick hops, have bad teeth, dodge creditors, beat their wives, and worry about birthmarks. Except where political change is no longer the prerogative of human beings, readers of every political stripe are going to want to claim Orwell as one of their own. □

whom "said he had always wanted to see what it felt like to kill somebody. He said that it felt like nothing."

The same pokerfaced prose seems appropriate to Frazier's frequent historical interludes, the humor Plains-dry without falling Plains-flat. The despondent dude Teddy Roosevelt "knocked down a man who was mean to him in a bar, and caught three other men who stole a boat from him, and cheered up." Connecting a future historian's 1846 reaction to Oregon Trail travelers with a name marked on Register Cliffs in 1859, Frazier muses: "Francis Parkman was Harvard '44, of an old Boston family; one gets the feeling that people named Thyrza Hoe Pelling were not exactly his speed." A rare bit of metaphysical speculation ends up whackier than the jokes; brooding on the remains of hard-drinking Fort Union, North Dakota, Frazier wonders if the scenery has "somehow been permanently altered by the thousands of drunken eyes which have looked at it before."

As his extensive notes reveal, this history buff has an understandable fondness for first-hand accounts, such as General James S. Brisbin's 1881 *The Beef Bonanza; or, How to Get Rich on the Plains*: "Someone had highlighted the general's more far-fetched projections of riches with a wavering, hopeful, faded line." But his reading lacks system. Carelessly using Charlie Siringo's *A Texas Cowboy* as a source on Billy the Kid, he repeats the tale that "the Kid" played the piano inside a besieged house as flames licked at the parlor. His mysterious reference to "the 4th Cavalry" as "an all-black brigade" confuses the black 9th and 10th Cavalry Regiments with Colonel Ranald Mackenzie's white 4th. Rashly accepting the claim that General George Crook and thirteen Sioux chiefs "plotted to kill Crazy Horse" after his surrender, he discusses his death without, apparently, having consulted Captain John Bourke's classic *On The Border With Crook*, wherein we find Little Big Man's claim to have slain the chief—accidentally! But one must admire his instincts, as he omits an account of Crazy Horse kneeling to shake hands with Crook "because (1) I don't completely believe it and (2) I don't like it."

Though now greatly outnumbered on the Plains by whites, Indians figure largely in Frazier's odyssey—which is as it should be. His roadside vignettes of modern Indian life, unsurprisingly, tend toward the depressing, as when he encounters a couple bound for the funeral of one of nine young Arapaho men who had committed suicide on the reservation that year: "Lydell White Plume said he thought the problem was lack of communication." When White

GREAT PLAINS

Ian Frazier/Farrar, Straus & Giroux/290 pp. \$17.95

Wayne Michael Sarf

I suppose one shouldn't make this complaint about any book originating with *New Yorker* "fact" pieces, but *Great Plains* is too short. It's not because readers will decide that Ian Frazier has shortchanged his subject, or abruptly polished off a book to satisfy a contract. It's simply because he's such splendid company out West.

"Away to the Great Plains of America," he cries, "to that immense Western short-grass prairie now mostly plowed under! Away to the still-empty land beyond newsstands and malls and velvet restaurant ropes! . . . Away to the land where TV used to set its most popular dramas, but not anymore! . . . Away to the fields of wheat and milo and sudan grass and flax and alfalfa and nothing!"

And the sky. For those who haven't seen the Plains, Frazier conjures up that sky. "I'm on the Great Plains!" a West Indian woman cries into the telephone. "It's amazing here! The sky is like a person yawned and never stopped!" Seeing it yourself is best, of course. But in an age when "most travelers who see the plains do it from thirty thousand feet," the heartland has become fly-over country. This vast area—about 2,500 miles long by 600 miles across at its widest, extending to ten states (and into Canada) without fully embracing any, where each county has recorded a loss in population since the 1920s—may offer little incentive for even a journalist's extended exploration, unless he pursues a dream, or has already lost one.

Wayne Michael Sarf is the author of *God Bless You, Buffalo Bill: A Layman's Guide to History and the Western Film*.

Ian Frazier fits both categories. In 1982, having dreamed for years of Montana, he rented a house in Kalispell: "I did not know one person in Montana. I sat in the house and tried to write a novel. . . . I went for walks, drank quarts of Coors beer, listened to the radio . . ." Alas, "suddenly I no longer had any place to dream about." So he began dreaming about the Great Plains. For fantasies, they "are in many respects the perfect place," so big that "you could never know all there is to know about them—your fantasies could never wear them out." Three years later he moved back to New York, but with 6,000 miles' worth of rambling to write about, evoking both the Plains' vastness and their strangely intimate world.

Frazier has that apparent necessity for writers of *New Yorker* fact pieces, a knack for the deadpan, alienated-observer description:

All at once a low-slung '67 Pontiac full of long-haired Indians passed me, going about ninety. Then a Montana state highway cop, with no sirens going. Then several more cars of Indians, then another highway cop, then more Indians. Just across the Flathead Reservation and inside the boundary of Glacier National Park, I came upon the cars again. They were now pulled every which way off the road; policemen and Indians, both, were just standing there, hands in pockets. Some were looking off into the brush. Nobody's mouth was moving.

Only later does he learn that they had stopped at the spot where two murdered Indians had been found. The killers were two Canadians, one of

Plume opens his car's hatchback to carefully lift out and display portions of his fragile, feathered dance costume, there seems a poignant symbolism in the moment. Jim Yellow Earring of the Sioux helpfully tells Frazier how the Crow Indians "drink Lysol, also known as 'Montana gin,' which will sure get you drunk, but which can collapse your lungs if you don't mix it right . . ."

Unfortunately, Frazier himself victimizes his pre-modern Indians, by homogenizing them. "All kinds of Indians lived on the plains," he notes correctly. But as he tells us about "Indian" customs (some new to this reviewer but regrettably un-footnoted), we should recall that there are no such people as "Indians"—at least not generic ones, as in "Indians ate young, fat dogs" (some did, others didn't), "ants," "grasshoppers," and so on. Judging from his citation of specific *tribal* customs, Frazier knows this, but perhaps breaking up his custom-cadence with tribal names would be a drag.

Frazier suffers from no mysticism concerning primitive ecologists: "Among the Indians, no part of the buffalo was ever wasted—except sometimes, when a tribe might kill a herd of fourteen hundred and cut out the tongues to take to the traders for whiskey, or when a war party on enemy hunting ground would shoot animals and leave them on the ground to rot." The whites were of course even more wanton (and more systematic) killers, buffalo disappearing up the railway tracks "like water up a straw"; but Frazier's treatment of a hitchhiking German archeologist manages to seem a put-down of a meddling Teuton even if he didn't intend it that way.

. . . "Za vite people in America haff done zuch terrible sings to za Indians," he said. "Za vite people haff destroyed zo many uff za Indians' zacred blaces."

I looked at him. "What is your name?" I asked.

"Gerhard Stadler," he said.

I asked him to spell it. He did, and then shut up.

Yet it is an Indian who occupies the book's spiritual center—a veritable dream of an Indian. Frazier loves Crazy Horse for all the right reasons—and places the historian George Hyde, who had sneered at Crazy Horse's admirers for glamorizing a man so narrow-minded, selfish, and impractical, among those who "do not get the point at all."

Personally, I love Crazy Horse because even the most basic outline of his life shows how great he was; because he remained himself from the moment of his birth to the moment he died . . . because, unlike many people all over the world, when he met white men he was not diminished by the en-

counter . . . because the idea of becoming a farmer apparently never crossed his mind; because he didn't end up in the Dry Tortugas; because he never met the President . . . because, deprived of freedom, power, occupation, culture, trapped in a situation where bravery was invisible, he was still brave . . . because, like the rings of Saturn, the carbon atom, and the underwater reef, he belonged to a category of phenomena which our technology had not then advanced far enough to photograph; because no photograph or painting or even sketch of him exists; because he is not the Indian on the nickel, the tobacco pouch, or the apple crate. Crazy Horse was a slim man of medium height with brown hair hanging below his waist and a scar above his lip. Now, in the mind of each person who imagines him, he looks different.

Once, he tells us, "America's size in the imagination was limitless. . . . Like the center of a dying fire, the Great Plains held that original vision longest." Thus, just as Europeans finally came to the Plains and changed them, so did they slay a man with the misfortune "to live in a place which existed both in reality and in the dreams of people far away . . ." But is this not the paradox of the mythic West? The civilization for which the conqueror yearned turns to dust in the mouths of his children, even as the conquest, the struggle of white and red, becomes part of our Heroic Age. Without the tragedy, there can be no elegy—perhaps not even a Crazy Horse, who without the coming of the Europeans and their horses might have been left to flourish or perish unknown in gory, pointless scalping raids against enemy tribesmen. For moderns, the tragedy is part of the dream, with a fallen Crazy Horse at the end of the trail. But for Frazier he can be no mere, easy symbol, to be snatched up by his conqueror; his trueness to himself transcends this. Dying and in pain, "still as far from white men as the limitless continent they once dreamed of," he had refused to lie on an officer's cot. "What a distance there is between that cot and the floor! On the cot, he would have been, in some sense, 'ours': an object of pity, an accident victim, 'the noble red man, the last of his race, etc., etc.' But on the floor Crazy Horse was Crazy Horse . . ."

Frazier is not interested in theorizing, Walter Prescott Webb-style, on the way in which the Plains shaped American culture or society. His quest is for a dream never quite realized, and also never quite defined. Driving to tiny Nicodemus, Kansas, founded in the 1870s by black homesteaders, he expects ruins—and, miraculously, not only finds a living town, but arrives in the midst of its Founders' Day Weekend. He has a swell time:

. . . Suddenly I felt a joy so strong it almost

knocked me down. It came up my spine and settled on my head like a warm cap and filled my eyes with tears, while I stood there packed in with everybody, watching Mrs. Robinson's lovely daughters dance.

And I thought, *It could have worked!* This democracy, this land of freedom and equality and the pursuit of happiness—it could have worked! There was something to it, after all! It didn't have to turn into a greedy free-for-all! We didn't have to make a mess of it and the

continent and ourselves! It could have worked! It wasn't just a joke, just a blind for the machinations of money! . . . For a moment I could imagine the past rewritten, wars unfought, the buffalo and the Indians undestroyed, the prairie unplundered. Maybe history did not absolutely have to turn out the way it did. Maybe the history of the West, for example, could have involved more admiration of hats, more unarmed get-togethers, more dancing, more tasting of spareribs.

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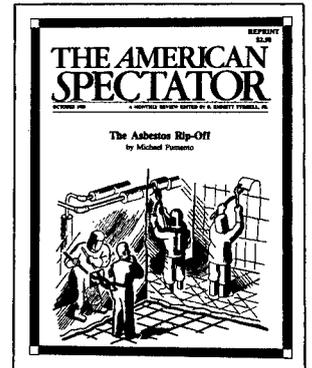
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One might quibble that an unconquered West would have been not a motorist's multiracial paradise (a dreamland too dull for dreamers, especially admirers of Crazy Horse) but a no-man's land of warring tribes, where no van would be complete without its rifle rack; even Frazier's dream West seems to be the Wild West, an "obligingly blank backdrop" where men struggle and wrest a living (or sport) from nature. But such is the delirious atmosphere of the Plains. "Joy like this is so rare in me as to be endangered. Did people used to feel like this all the time? Was this what those old-timers were looking for, and finding, on the Great Plains?" Without describing his stop at Custer Battlefield, Frazier even produces a novel reason for liking General Custer—a life which "demonstrates the power of a person having fun." He *wants* to believe that the mortally wounded Boy General, as allegedly recounted by Sitting Bull, laughed as he fell: "I like to believe Custer even had fun dying."

Frazier's regional theme is the decline of the land and its population. He fears that the Plains do not ingratiate, are not pretty enough even to attract the sympathies of ecologists: "They seldom photograph well or rather, they are seldom photographed." They are landscapes so barren that once, for want of anything else to look at, Frazier finds himself walking over to examine an object dropped by a bird. But in such a place ruins last, and whatever history there was casts a long shadow. A sign near an abandoned Texas home describes a getaway by Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, adding: "In this quiet region, the escape is now legend." But of course.

Nowadays, the past seems almost nonexistent, even contemptible: on TV, the cop says to the criminal, "Reach for that gun and you're history." But, for many places on the Great Plains, the past is much more colorful and exciting and populous than the present. Historical markers are everywhere. In many towns I stopped in, the public buildings were a store, a gas station, and a museum.

Frazier visits the Bob Wills Museum in the singer's hometown of Turkey, Texas, and finds Lincoln, New Mexico, preserved by its outlaw heritage: "Because Billy the Kid danced on it, the courthouse balcony endures." There *must* be a past; hence Frazier's contempt for strip mining, which leaves none—and no year to think about but that of the mining: "It is impossible to imagine a Cheyenne war party coming out of the canyon, because the canyon is gone."

But Frazier spends little time in lamentation, none in despair. "A person can be amazingly happy on the

Great Plains. Friends have told me the joy they felt, say, driving from Sheridan, Wyoming, to Hardin, Montana. . . . Once happiness gets rolling in this open place, not much stops it."

Readers who have not yet traveled the Plains will get to know the feeling—which is perhaps the highest compliment one can pay this modest, appetizing book. □

IRWIN SHAW: A BIOGRAPHY
Michael Shnayerson/G. P. Putnam's Sons/447 pp. \$24.95

Lionel Abel

On the cover of Michael Shnayerson's biography of Irwin Shaw there is a photo of the youthful Shaw at his typewriter. He must have been in his early twenties when this picture was taken, and he looks innocent enough to have qualified for advice from the "wise man" of Housman's poem: "Give crowns and pounds and guineas/ But not your heart away." Handsome, unlined, sharp-featured, yet ardent and idealistic, the face of the young Shaw we see in that photo is oh so different from the face of the same writer some five decades later looking back at us from the cover of his collected *Short Stories*. Here we see a face flesh-packed and jowly, and the look of a man who has learned not to care at all after hav-

Lionel Abel, professor emeritus at the State University of New York at Buffalo, is author of *Metatheatre*, *The Intellectual Follies*, and, most recently, *Important Nonsense* (Prometheus Books).

ing cared somewhat, a man who may have (in fact, had) given away crowns and pounds and guineas but not his heart to any particular woman or for that matter to the art of writing.

But if Irwin Shaw did not give his heart to any other person, to any cause, or to his art, then why is his life worth recounting? In fact, what was his life? Who can care now, be saddened or excited, by his many successes with women? What if at the very start of his career he made it to bed with Helen Lawrenson of *Vanity Fair*? He may figure as one of Lawrenson's triumphs rather than she as one of his. And in any case, the accidental ups and downs of dealing with editors, publishers, producers, and women one has disappointed do not, I think, make a life interesting.

The question is: What does? Here I am reminded of Goethe's response when asked: What were the interesting periods of history? Those, he remarked,

when men believed in something. Is this not also true of persons? For persons tend to become interesting to us if we learn that they held something dear. Now what did Irwin Shaw hold dear? Nothing apparently; not peace, not revolution, and not his art, and he was involved with too many women to have loved any one of them. He seems to have lived by the cynical French adage: "One nail drives out another." But if Shaw lacked all conviction, is not this the very description Yeats gave of those he called "the best"? These "best" Yeats set off against the "worst," whom he thought filled with "passionate intensity." Perhaps it is because we have just seen the "worst"—I'm speaking of the Communists, of course—renege on intensity, that we can now think of questioning Yeats's description of the "best," which is beginning to look like an oxymoron: Can those lacking all conviction be reasonably called the "best"? I do not think so, and thus I cannot include Irwin Shaw among the best in any department, in life or in literature.

And this may also be the opinion of his biographer, for Shnayerson ends his book with this overall judgment of Shaw: ". . . a life well lived. A man could do worse." Is it possible to miss the implication that many have done better?

The serious critical judgments of Shaw as a writer and as a person, and most particularly as a person involved in politics, all make the same point: whatever Shaw's views were, he managed not to suffer because of them. *Time* put the matter thus: "Before the war, Irwin Shaw won easy fame and money by turning out smooth and clever plays and stories—for many tastes . . ." Diana Trilling described his swings of political opinion as in line with the equivocations of liberal ideology: "When liberalism took its boldest stand on a hatred of war, Mr. Shaw raised the bones of the war dead. When liberalism had its surfeit of quietism, Mr. Shaw issued the call to action." Making an analogous point, the young Leslie Fiedler wrote: "The way Shaw has chosen seems to me finally intolerable: to be just right always—not a Communist a month past the time when being a Communist seems (to the most enlightened) a creditable excess; not against a war a month past the point when true liberalism demands it." Now this judgment is not invalidated, as Shnayerson thinks, by the fact that Shaw was never a card-carrying Communist; neither was the very wary Harold Clurman, who was, however, pro-Communist during the thirties in the precise sense Fiedler charged Irwin Shaw with hav-

