

Manners

In a Classless Society

AUGUST HECKSCHER

GOOD BEHAVIOUR, by Harold Nicolson. Doubleday. \$4.

Sir Harold Nicolson writes about manners not as a historian might—he is too random and haphazard for that—or (as he is the first to claim) as a sociologist. He is the essayist, inspired by a mood he describes as “inquisitive and benevolent optimism”; and he is ready at any point to interject his highly individualized opinions.

Thus Sir Harold quite obviously does not have a traditional regard for the English daisy. “An age which could indulge ecstatically in the belief that the common daisy of the fields was the loveliest of nature’s flowers,” he says of the age of chivalry, “could induce itself to believe anything.” Of the elaborate ceremony of the Orient he can declare that he writes with “an ignorance of the subject unredeemed by any glow of sympathy, any impulse of attraction, any stirring even of curiosity.” (Yet he writes entertainingly of this, as in all the other parts of his book.) The early Christian Fathers also lack his sympathy so far as civility is concerned: “It was not by any charm of manner that the Christians succeeded, within three centuries, in altering the conscience of this world.”

The nineteenth-century cult of “respectability” comes off as badly. Sir Harold quotes grimly the Victorian injunction to young ladies that their primary duty in life is “to smooth the bed of sickness and cheer the decline of age.” The famous English public schools, he admits, may have performed their function, but that function is one which scarcely elicits his enthusiasm. Through these institutions, he says, “The governing classes were provided with a constant supply of young men, uniform in manners, indistinguishable in intellect or character, and prepared to defend their caste privileges against internal and external proletariats.”

Sir Harold also has his strong

likes: the Greek ideal, with its variety and grace (and notwithstanding its residual cruelties and its subjection of women); the Roman *gravitas*, fit quality for a people whose contribution was in the fields of war, administration, jurisprudence, and engineering; above all, the manners of a Chaucer and a Shakespeare. He likes the American manners, too—



though he professes not to understand them, and considers us a people too sensitive to endure comment.

ALL THIS is delightfully personal, and Sir Harold seems content to leave it so. He searches for no broad conclusions and makes only a guess about the future. Yet underneath the random observations there is a strain of well-formed judgment. What does he really mean by “good behaviour”? He means the standard of behavior traditionally derived from a minority, which expresses feelings of the heart and has for its end the making of life easier and more agreeable for others. When behavior remains at the level of self-gratification or when it degenerates into formal etiquette, it fails in the essentials of civility. When it serves the purpose of maintaining a group in power, it lacks, however elegant or superficially pleasing it may appear, the quality which justifies its being called “good.”

In British society a tendency to

ward decentralization, with a balance between the various classes, helped diffuse the pattern of civility. From the beginning, a certain tolerance and forbearance mitigated the pretensions of the ruling elite. In France the opposite development took place. Sir Harold points out how the code of the drawing room, the court, and the boudoir reached out from the center to form the same bourgeois values of *l'honnête homme*. Artificiality was transcended in the conviction, alive to this day, that the wise man is set apart by a special competence in the art of living. “To get the very most out of one’s own individuality” was how Montaigne defined the goal, and individuality implied consideration for others.

The ‘Gay Science’

It did not, however, imply a lack of passion. Men and women were to live life as it came, attentive to the subtleties of their moods and humors yet never wholly slaves to them. As Walter F. Kerr wrote the other day in his review of a Turgenev comedy, “Balance already exists in each of the characters: if they are capable of any excess, they are also capable of measuring that excess intelligently. Against a fine supply of animal spirits runs a steady, very high degree of consciousness.” That consciousness, with its sense of limits and apprehensions of delicacy, is the individual’s key to conduct.

“Good behaviour” is thus inherently liberal and active, free from the constraints of social compulsions or taboos. It is as changeful as the relations of men, and the best of its practitioners have almost always been innovators. The knights of the age of chivalry spoke in this regard of the “gay science.” For Shakespeare ceremony was an “idol” worshiped by dull men. “Dear Kate,” says his Henry V, “You and I cannot be confined within the weak list of a country’s fashion. We are the makers of manners, Kate.” Sir Harold sees manners always waiting to be made; he has no doubt that they will continue to be made even through an iron century.

Florent Americana

But how? And of what sort will they be? It is the theme of this book that civility has invariably been the crea-

tion of a class, and Sir Harold looks resignedly toward a classless society. He looks resignedly, too, toward having the United States write the next chapter in the evolving tradition. Much that he has seen of the United States obviously troubles him. He is disturbed by the idolization of women, especially mothers; by the "social American" who lives in New York or Paris, the "lonely American" whom one encounters in travels abroad; by the American of



big business and big politics. Yet he has felt in this country what he calls "the warm and steady pulsation of a gigantic human heart." He is confident that there is something better to come than one can readily account for.

In Erasmus Sir Harold finds a hopeful clue: the vision of an elite composed of humane intellectuals devoid of class snobbishness or hampering social connections. He thinks he has discerned something of such an elite in the smaller liberal-arts colleges of the United States, where "the members of the several faculties labor within the fields of learning without strain or noise." They are men and women of exceeding modesty, he adds, and therefore very few. Yet they transmit what is best in the American culture. They are an aristocracy of intellect, disinterested, recruited from every layer of society, quietly at odds with much that is happening in the mass culture of the United States. In short, they are eggheads. And the best heads America possesses, Sir Harold assures us, "have always been her eggheads."

WITH all due deference to the eggheads, one suspects that if kindness, decency, disinterestedness, and courtesy are to save a technological age, they must spring from a broader base. Equality shapes its own code of

manners. There may be coarseness in it—as indeed there has been coarseness among the blooms in each of civilization's finest seasons. But lack of subservience, lack of superiority—these by themselves are much. They provide a beginning of civility; and common experiences, perhaps common sufferings, may yet provide a fulfillment.

The problem, as in all the problems of democracy, is one of scale. What in former ages was attained by the very few must become the attainment of huge numbers. The education once accorded the gentleman is now open to nearly all. The freedom from superstition and taboos, formerly reserved for the elite, is now granted to the great masses who must work out for themselves, without these props, the basis of a mature existence. So, too, with manners. Either they will be a universal possession or they will probably be possessed by none.

What is discouraging today is not the way men and women behave toward one another individually. In the United States, as through the western world, there is in almost every respect a standard of conduct as considerate as any Sir Harold can show in the twelve cultures of his history. The trouble is the way men behave in political parties, in groups, in nationalities. Sir Harold has been one of the most eloquent defenders of the old diplomacy, with its involved courtesies and its seemingly artificial rules. He has argued that in the maintenance of the tradition of civility lies what hope there is for the settlement of international disputes. In domestic politics there is no less need for a certain grace and urbanity. Too often the man who is polite by nature becomes ruthless as the driver of an automobile, and a comparable change comes over him when he enters partisan or group activity.

There is no denying that primitive emotions have been loose among us. Violent feelings and unprincipled attacks have become, more than ever, the stock in trade of the politician. The cult of public relations has provided its own forms of corruption. Against these things the eggheads in 1952 made their stand. They lost. And with Adlai Stevenson's defeat the intellectuals of the liberal col-

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leges where Sir Harold sees his hope, the classless and cosmopolitan elite of Erasmus, was shown to be but one element in the wide American culture. It is not merely to a saving remnant that we must look now, but to a purification and elevation in the political sensibilities of a whole people.

SIR HAROLD, concluding his work, keeps a sense of mystery about the future and about America. He believes that decency will not pass. But how it will be preserved he does

not pretend to know. Democracy itself is at bottom a mystery, time and again rationally discredited and as often vindicated by the heart. It breeds excesses, but at its best it can also breed a kind of unforced gentility, an offhand courtesy nowhere expressed in rules. May it not in its own way produce those conditions which Sir Harold deems essential to civilization—not security and justice only, but also “enhancement of pleasure, the love of loveliness, the refinement of relationships, and the embellishment of life”?

Some Selected Footprints Of Richard M. Nixon

WILLIAM LEE MILLER

THIS IS NIXON, by James Keogh. Putnam. \$2.75.

NIXON, by Ralph de Toledano. Holt. \$3.

Mr. Keogh, who works for *Time*, has written a routine election-year glorification of his subject. There are the usual campaigner's childhood, full of standard family piety, standard small-town Americanism, standard devotional quotations (“and departing, leave behind us”), and standard hard work (“It wasn't easy”). There are the usual school days, showing the proper mixture of popularity, earnestness, football, success, and quiet reading of deep thinkers on the side (“mostly in the original French”). There is proper evidence of knowledge of his country (“His stay in Ottumwa gave him an opportunity to know the Middle West first hand, just as his years at Duke had taught him what life was like in the South”), and the proper evidence of virtue (“showed an increasing independence” . . . “widespread talk about Nixon's fairness”). There is the usual touching up, the usual selective forgetting, the usual adjectival summaries of the man (“intense, serious, earnest, industrious, ambitious, able”).

BUT THIS standard treatment does not tell much about Nixon, not even in that inverted and between-

the-lines way by which most campaign biographies unintentionally do reveal something about their subjects. It takes Mr. de Toledano's book to perform that inadvertent service. It is a different kind of book: worse, partly because, in some amoral technical sense, it's better. It is a bit more carefully written, a bit cleverer in its conception, a lot more strategic in trying to achieve its end. Mr. de Toledano laughs at the usual campaign biography and then writes one that glorifies its subject in a much more dubious and insidious way: one which makes Mr. Nixon the symbol and instrument of Mr. de Toledano's own fierce and cocky anti-liberalism, and which requires the systematic derogation of all who oppose his hero.

That 1946 Campaign

A reader can make his own test of the character of Mr. de Toledano's book. Take the chapter called “The Mythology of '46.” Compare it with the story of the same campaign in *Confessions of a Congressman*, the book by the man Nixon defeated for a House seat in that campaign, Jerry Voorhis. Mr. de Toledano tries to make the whole disapproval of Nixon's tactics in that campaign a retroactive invention of the left-wing intellectuals against whom he is writ-

ing. (“The myth of the 1946 campaign began to develop only after Nixon had given impetus to the Hiss investigation . . .”) He says the whispering campaign that Voorhis was a Communist was a “fairly recent invention of the typewriter pundits,” that the Nixon campaign was run by volunteers and was pinched for funds (even Mr. Keogh doesn't try to hold to that one), and, quoting Nixon, that “communism was not the issue at any time in the '46 campaign.”

These claims are all denied by many who were close to that campaign and most of them by the chapter in Voorhis's book, written ten weeks after the campaign and in print a full year before the Hiss case was even heard of. But most interesting of all, notice Mr. de Toledano's misrepresentation of Voorhis's own attitude toward the campaign. One would think that this at least was something on which the man's own word is not subject to dispute.

Observe what Mr. de Toledano does: He takes the undisputable tone of Voorhis's approach and tries to make it seem that there was nothing in the campaign to dispute about; he takes Voorhis's willingness to forgive and forget and tries to use it to indicate that there was nothing to be forgiven or forgotten. He quotes most of the long and very gracious letter Voorhis wrote Nixon after the campaign, but he omits and then deals separately, in his own deft way, with this crucial paragraph: “I have refrained, for reasons which I am sure you will understand, from making any references in this letter to the circumstances of the campaign recently conducted in our District. It would only have spoiled the letter.”

Mr. de Toledano says the first sentence has been quoted out of context to prove what he calls the “myth” of the 1946 campaign. But it is he who quotes it out of context, for he conveniently forgets to tell his readers at all about the second sentence (“It would only have spoiled the letter”), which made Voorhis's meaning abundantly clear.

A PARENTLY some of Nixon's footprints on the sands of time need to be rubbed out, and for that purpose one of his biographers is willing even to distort the graciousness of a defeated opponent.