

for KGB culpability in sponsoring terrorism, there are disturbing gaps in the presentation of her evidence: She barely gives rightist terrorism a nod, nor does she examine the clandestine activities of Western intelligence agencies. But her book does ring true in its scrutiny of the peregrinations and activities of stateless malcontents hell-bent on translating muddled ideology into violence.

—DAVID BELL

Mountbatten

by Richard Hough

Random House, 256 pp., \$15

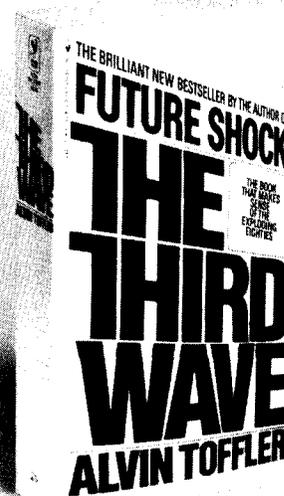
THE LIFE OF Lord Mountbatten, born Prince Louis of Battenberg in 1900, in many ways mirrored the sunset of the British Empire. At his christening he was held by his great-grandmother, Queen Victoria, and his childhood holidays were spent at royal castles in England and Germany and on the Russian Tsar's yacht. He married the richest heiress in England and learned to live with her infidelities.

Following his German-born father into the British navy, Mountbatten spent World War II helping defend the Empire as Supreme Allied Commander South East Asia. But after the war he helped liquidate Britain's colonial holdings as Viceroy of India. Cousin to Queen Elizabeth II and uncle to her husband, Prince Philip, he succeeded in having the name Mountbatten-Windsor adopted for the Queen's heirs. In August 1979, while vacationing at his Irish estate, Mountbatten was killed when members of the Irish Republican Army blew up his fishing boat. He had already planned his own funeral, down to the guest list.

This is not an official biography but an informal portrait—admiring but candid, balanced but often critical—of a man who claimed that he never made a mistake in his life. Mountbatten was always controversial. Brilliant, hard-working, ambitious, vain, and arrogant, he seemed to his contemporaries somehow un-English, yet ended as a national hero. That he also emerges as likable and vulnerable is in part a tribute to Richard Hough's highly readable appraisal.

—RONALD NEVANS

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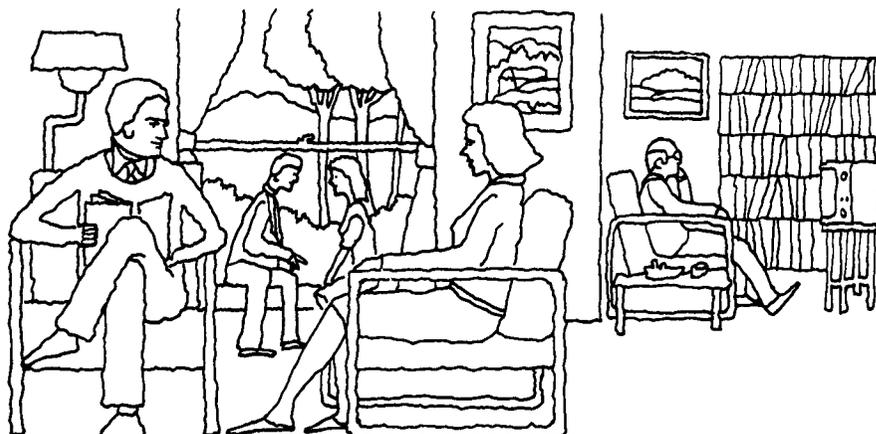
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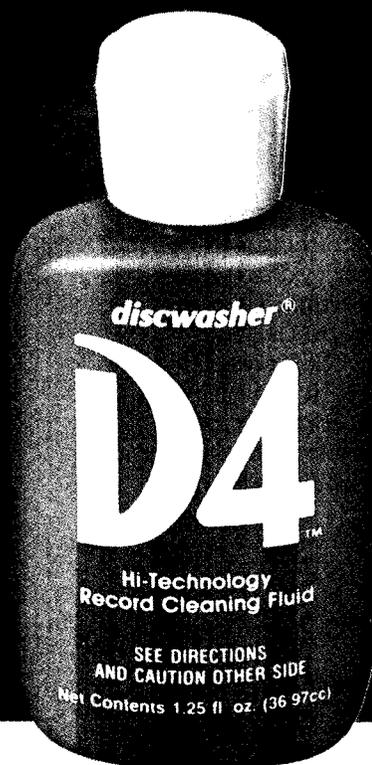
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Why Jeannot Can't Read

The first French book I read from cover to cover—I mean the first *real* French book, read only for pleasure, no *Vocabulary* in the back, no *Review Questions* at the end of each chapter—was *Les Carnets du Major Thompson*, by Pierre Daninos. I was living in Paris at the time, in 1955. Major Thompson is Daninos's fictional Englishman, whose comments on France and the French are an absolute delight and provide as good an introduction to reading for pleasure in French as do sexy French stories. Better, in fact, unless you're hooked on *slips*, *soutiens-gorge*, *portes jarretelles*, and other lacy delicacies.

Last year, I met Pierre Daninos himself at a party in Los Angeles. He and his beautiful wife, Marie-Pierre, were on vacation, touring the United States. The Daninoses expressed concern about what is happening to their language. They're not worried about foreign imports—what used to be called *Cocaculture*—but about the current laxity in speech and writing, the quantity of junk that passes for acceptable French. On learning that I write a column on language, Daninos told me that he writes similar columns in France.

Long ago, my French wasn't half bad, but over the years it has atrophied and is now a shadow of its former self. M. Daninos's English is, I should think, a cut or two below my French, but Mme. Daninos's English is excellent, so she and I have had some correspondence.

I was surprised to learn from her that the French are having a problem of illiteracy among their youth comparable to ours. Mme. Daninos wrote me a letter deploring the use of the *methode globale* in teaching children to read, what we call the "look-say," or "sight-word" method.

That the French would have adopted the look-say method came as a shock to me. I've mentioned before that I find it puzzling that anyone would consider look-say a particularly good method for any language that uses an alphabet rather than ideograms. To refresh the memory of anyone who might wonder what is meant by "look-say," "sight-word," and the French *globale*, it is the method Rudolf Flesch blasted back in 1955 in his book *Why Johnny Can't Read*. The child is not taught the alphabet and the sounds of the letters in their various combinations (the *phonic* method that M. and Mme. Daninos and I learned—and you, too, if you are

A child taught the "look-say" method could never read "frob-alaggr-y."

of our generation); in look-say, the teacher subjects the students to whole words until they learn those words as totalities. The students are expected to have mastered a certain number of words over a given period of time. Here's one of Flesch's examples of an excerpt from a typical modern look-say reading textbook:

"Quack, quack," said the duck.
He wanted something.
He did not want to get out.
He did not want to go to the farm.
He did not want to eat.
He sat and sat and sat.

I think a bright, energetic youngster, faced with that sort of material, would probably find something better to do, like climbing the wall, removing the legs from his chair, or starting a scrap

with his neighbor. But if a nice, docile child reads that often enough, he'll be able, it is hoped, to recognize those words when he sees them. That will give him a reading vocabulary of 18 words. However, he will probably not be able to make out *horse*, *goat*, *chicken*, *she*, *her*, or *him*, because he hasn't encountered the words yet.

English is notorious for some of its phonetic absurdities, but by and large it functions well enough phonetically so that a reasonably bright eight-year-old, taught to sound letters and groups by the old-fashioned phonics method, will probably be able to work out the pronunciation not only of *horse* and *chicken*, but of *frob-alaggr-y*, even though I'm the only person in the world who knows what *frob-alaggr-y* means, having just coined it. (It is the grubby, rubbery residue that must be brushed off a page after one has made an erasure.)

French is so much more phonetically consistent than English that it is quite astonishing that the French should have fallen for look-say. If it makes little sense in English, it makes even less in French.

Rudolf Flesch maintained that it is largely the big money involved that keeps look-say in business, and I suppose French textbook publishers, like their American counterparts, know a good thing when they see one. What better way to make fat francs than to create a demand for millions of copies of books saying the equivalent of "Quack, quack."

So the problem spreads, and more and more Johnnies and Jeannies and Jeannots and Jeannettes can't read. If they can't read, they can't write; if they can't write, they can't reason far beyond mere scheming; if they can't reason beyond scheming, God help us all. ■