

History for the Excluded

by Michael Merrill

Whigs and Hunters

by E. P. Thompson. 313 pp. Pantheon Books, \$15; paper, \$5.95

Albion's Fatal Tree

by Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, John G. Rule, E. P. Thompson, and Cal Winslow. 352 pp. Pantheon, \$15; paper, \$5.95

The principal mark of a great historian is that he changes the way history is written. By this rule E. P. Thompson is indisputably a great historian, perhaps the greatest of his generation. It has been his conspicuous achievement to give a voice to the aspirations of the "outsiders" and "losers" in the history of the past 250 years. The poor, when dealt with at all by traditional historians, have been portrayed as the unfortunate victims of Progress, sacrificed by an invisible hand to the greater good. But in Thompson's writings—which to date include one masterwork, *The Making of the English Working Class*—the poor become the actors as well as the acted-upon in history. In his new book, *Whigs and Hunters*, Thompson characteristically begins with "the experience of humble foresters," and follows up the lines that connected them to power until he has mounted

to the ministerial heights that are the more common concerns of eighteenth-century historians. Unlike his predecessors, however, he succeeds in viewing these heights as they were seen at the time by the likes of William Shorter, farmer, or John Huntridge, innkeeper.

Thompson is able to lift people like these out of their respectable obscurity because they came into direct conflict with the Great Men of England. The entire resources of the Crown were thrown into the prosecution of Huntridge, for example, for aiding and abetting poachers of the King's deer. Because he was able to afford competent counsel, Huntridge won an acquittal. But he was almost the only one to do so among the many accused under the provisions of the notorious "Black Act" (which had been passed by Parliament in 1723 in order to prevent the landed gentry's sporting deer and forest from being put to mundane uses by the common people). *Whigs and Hunters* is an extended essay on the circumstances surrounding the passage of this act, which as much as any other event accustomed England's rulers to attaching the penalty of death to every description of offense during the eighteenth century. The protection of the

genteel property interests of England from the depredations of the poor required, England's lawyers said, this desperate stratagem. Thompson, by placing himself next to Huntridge and Shorter, is able to show us that horse-thieves, venison traders, and the like, whom the penal code was designed to deter, were petty criminals compared to Cabinet ministers, money men, and the gentry themselves, whose depredations were immeasurably larger and more injurious to the people of the English countryside.

Albion's Fatal Tree, essays by former students and colleagues of Thompson's, demonstrates clearly the difference Thompson has made, and will continue to make, to the writing of history. Besides an important analysis of the functions of the criminal law in English society, the volume contains a series of articles on the riotous disorders at Tyburn on hanging day, smuggling, coastal wrecking, poaching, and the writing of anonymous "threat" letters. Peter Linebaugh, as evidenced in his moving study of the execution riots at Tyburn, has learned Thompson's lessons most completely. The spectacle of public hangings at Tyburn has been presented by historians "as a symbol of all that is bestial, violent, and brutal in eighteenth-century society." But Linebaugh makes a convincing case that the "rioters" at Tyburn may have been the truest, as they certainly were the most courageous, humanists of the day.

For the London poor rioted at Tyburn in order to prevent the bodies of the condemned from being taken for dissection to one of London's private hospitals or physicians' colleges. To doctors and anatomists, a felon's corpse was merely a commodity, something to be bought at the best price, if not from the executioner then from the gravedigger. But not even the threat of being themselves imprisoned, and possibly executed, could dissuade the London poor from their strongly held belief that a felon deserved a decent burial. "Hundreds of men and women rallied at Tyburn to provide the condemned with this last mark of humanity," Linebaugh writes.

The formalized customs of be-reavement, depending as they often did upon the integrity of the corpse and the respect shown to it, were brutally violated by the practice of dissection. . . . Against that policy with its shame and disgust, the men and women beneath the gallows tree had to fight to provide decency for the dead, and, like Antigone, to restore peace to the living in the bitterness of their loss.

By enabling us thus to see that a strong sense of justice motivates most people, even in the worst of places, Linebaugh, like Thompson, not only writes of the great majority of people once excluded from our history, he writes for them. □

Poetry

Riding the Earthboy 40

by James Welch. 71 pp. Harper & Row, \$5.95; paper \$2.50

Our poets, like our politicians, tend to feel at their best when they are at their loudest and most garrulous. Walt Whitman's barbaric yawp and Allen Ginsberg's prolonged howl come to mind as models of our noisy national muse. Possibly such singers and their songs reinforce our cornucopian view of an America brimming with a plenitude of everything, even of words. Our verse runneth over.

Still, within the American context there is a countertradition of at least equal power and eloquence. The poetry of American Indians, both their older chants and their newer cadences, is one in which the silences weigh as heavy as the words, and in which the words themselves are carefully treasured up and parceled out, like sacred stones. The result is a poetry of intense and dramatic spareness, a terse impressionism that declares little but suggests a great deal.

As a Papago woman once remarked to the anthropologist Ruth Underhill, "Our songs are so short because we know so much."

With James Welch's brief, knowing poems we are carried instantly into contemporary Indian country, a place of both incredible beauty and awesome dinginess. Here one can admire the Montana landscape ("sky falls blue against the butte") through a bottle of cheap Muscatel. The bars in these taverns, off-reservation communities—villages, says Welch, from which even the rivers have turned—are often the red man's last refuge, the one remaining spot on earth that has been neither federalized nor whitewashed.

Welch—who is part Blackfeet and part Gros Ventre—sits there and spins his glass, seeing through it dark-

ly. He is the Indians' rotgut-laureate. "The tune is cowboy; the words, sentimental crap," he informs us. But: "We all know our name here. . . ."

The names are bloodshot Indian rather than blue-eyed white:

Town drinkers, Buckles Pipe, Star Boy, Billy Fox, were blood to bison. Albert Heavy Runner was never civic. . . .

There is much sky in these poems, and much prairie; yet it is finally the inner landscape that attracts and holds us—not the buttes but the doubts. And the lines do bristle with doubt, some of it tinged in self-scorn: "The wages of sin is to live where/the mountains give down to the Indian town."

Welch announced his quest for self last year with publication of his novel *Winter in the Blood*. In that fine tale the narrator, who appears to be the author's stand-in, speaks of a distance he feels within his soul: "I was as distant from myself as a hawk from the moon"—plainly an advanced case of winter in the blood.

An existential thaw, one senses in both the novel and the poems, will occur when Welch succeeds in tapping his root Indianness, in making some vital soul-connection with his ancestry. "Children need a myth that tells them be alive," he writes. So he rides the Earthboy 40—an abandoned farm once worked by an Indian named Earthboy, a red Everyman—and sifts the hard dirt for signs of a myth that will keep him alive as man and poet:

Beneath the clowny hat, his eyes so shot the children called him dirt, Earthboy farmed the land and farmed the sky with words.

We await more words from James Welch, and more silences.

—Richard J. Margolis

The Fabulous Beasts

by Joyce Carol Oates, illustrated by A. G. Smith, Jr. 86 pp. Louisiana State University Press, \$6.95

Probably ninety-nine percent of those who read and relish Joyce Carol Oates's fiction are unaware of her poetry. Or her criticism either, for that matter. A pity. She is one of the most acute literary intelligences we have, and whatever she turns her pen to is informing and agreeable. *The Fabulous Beasts* is her fourth book of poems.

Her prose stories, short or long, are well known for their psychological acumen and moral cogency, as well as their originality, freshness, and fidelity to the contemporary social landscape; and these same qualities are in her poems. "After terror," she writes,

we move like the slow
reverent fingers of the blind.
Our maneuvering of what remains
of us is a prayer
worked out in flesh.
We pray to what has not yet
happened.

It is worth reading twice. For my part, I don't remember anything quite like it before. It gives the distinct impression that Oates has been there; she knows what she's talking about. We can delight in a genuinely new perception of something we all know, in being told something about our own existence: that exact condition of our bodies. Oates refreshes our memory of ourselves—a primary function of art.

Many such moments occur in her poems, gathered around many topics. Driving is a favorite. She has a dozen poems in her book about riding in cars all over the country. Other poems deal with life in an industrial city, the difficulties of sex, and the weather—especially storms. Her language is plain, almost prosaic, in fact it is prosaic, yet saved from flatness by the extra tension she gets from her immense, exactly used vocabulary and skill with syntax. There's a sense of bearing down in these poems, a concentrated mentality, welcome after the slackness of so much current verse.

The advantage of poetry over prose is that in a poem one can condense a story into a few lines, leaving the whole focus on meaning. No need to establish characters or define complex situations. Poems can use abstract statements as objects, as tokens of feelings—something very difficult in prose. Hence the elation in these poems, even the most solemn of them; I detect a sigh, and a smile, of relief. Here is one of the most quotable short poems, called "The Forgiveness of Sins":

The dying embrace us
and it is not necessary to confess
how, squirming in one embrace,
someone yearns crazily for another
how, that day downtown,
someone ducked into a drugstore
to avoid someone else

the blue-rinsed hair, the day-old
Easter orchid
in its plastic vial!

The dying embrace us
their shiny-skinned fingers are
forgiving
always an odor of soapy warmth
above the hospital sheets
Someone will always be dying
someone will always be forgiven

Is it necessary to confess
how, weeping in one embrace,
someone is already wiping tears
away
already walking toward the car?

Dying, they know these ordinary
facts.
They love, they forgive.
They instruct.

Notice the lines beginning with "how," their refrainlike quality. (Yeats's *fol-de-rol*.) Notice how complex the action, yet how clear, and how tellingly that final "instruct" turns the whole poem back upon us, the readers.

The Fabulous Beasts is a fine book by a woman who has placed herself, without political rhetoric, at the forefront of American letters, along with two or three others, and this is a source—for me at least—of considerable quiet gratification. —Hayden Carruth