

Books received

D.N.G. Carter. Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement.
Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble, 1989.

Modris Eksteins. Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of
the Modern Age. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989.

Charles Doyle. Richard Aldington: A biography. Carbondale: Southern
Illinois Press, 1989.

The publication of these three books in the last half of 1989 has addressed some of the neglected areas of scholarship on their respective subjects. Carter's study of Graves' poetry is the first to examine his works since Michael Kirkham's The Poetry of Robert Graves (1969) and Daniel Hoffman's Barbarous Knowledge (1970).

Between the appearance of these books and the poet's death, Graves produced a number of new poems; but except for Seymour-Smith's call for "relentless pruning" of most of the post-1970 production, very little work has been done to demonstrate the weakness of this "muse poetry."

One of the services that Carter's book performs, then, is to examine the later poetry and show not only Graves' narrowing poetic vision, but also his failure to write love poetry that touches the real woman instead of the remote goddess. Carter's point is made in his dissection of "The Falcon Woman," where "Goddess and girl conflate, and the result is moral ambiguity." He feels that by the end of the poems the reader is "left with a feeling that Graves has come to a private arrangement with the experience of enchantment and betrayal, namely that it is somehow acceptable if it is divinely inspired" (256-57).

But Carter is also able to sift through the muse propaganda of the last fifteen years of Graves' production and praise love poems like "Fact of the Act," which he sees as a return to the earlier love poetry where Graves warned of being too carried away by the passionate promises of the early stages of love. Carter also finds a return to the "Songs," the pure lyrics that Graves experimented with so successfully in the early years of his marriage with Nancy Nicholson. Again, Carter's deft choice of "Song: Olive Tree" is an enlightened one. His final analysis is left to a study of those poems where "one encounters Graves in all his own power and complexity, no longer sheltering behind his myth but admitting...to age, frailty and loss." The only complaint one can make is that Carter might have looked at "The Unpenned Poem" and "A Shift of Scene" in more detail.

Perhaps one should not complain of lack of detail in Carter's conclusion because the rest of the book is so rich in particulars. Carter goes over the familiar ground with new perceptions and insights that make the book a joy to read. In the "Poems about Love" section, for example, he examines the unfortunately suppressed "The Nape of the Neck," where Graves boldly announces, by means of a bizarre sexual metaphor, the furthering of intimacy between himself and Laura Riding (based perhaps on Riding's opinion that thought flows along an inner path different to that of the senses--its secret entrance being at the base of the neck). Having examined this product of 1926, Carter ingeniously links this rare description of a

woman's anatomy with "To Sleep," "where the roles are reversed and it is the woman who is poised protectively over the man;" here the woman contemplates her man. Both of these poems, separated by nearly fifteen years, "record the healing of a division not only within the relationship, but within Graves himself. Sexuality and love cease to be strange bed-fellows" (69).

Eksteins' Rites of Spring is claimed by its publishers to be a "brilliant work of cultural history that redefines the origins and impact of World War I:" rather a large claim for any book. And yet, when the book is finished, one is inclined to agree. In fact, I can't remember being so enthusiastic about any book on cultural or literary history since Paul Fussell's The Great War and Modern Memory.

The book is structured around the one event which is said to have ushered in the Modernist movement: the first performance of Diaghilev's ballet "The Rite of Spring" in Paris on 29 May 1913. From this premise, Eksteins links the sacrificial dance of the young virgin to the psychological state of the young soldiers on the Western Front. By examining the predominant cultural values of both Paris and Berlin before the outbreak of hostilities, Eksteins reveals an already existant deathwish mentality in both capitals.

The chapters on the war itself are engaging for their discussion of and insights into the combatants themselves. We are drawn into the background of the famous Christmas truce of 1914 which embarrassed the war offices of the belligerent nations, the fantastic power of the artillery barrage over men on both sides of the guns, and the German decision to use unconventional weapons, all of which help explain the "mentality" of the participants in the four years of butchery. Eksteins' explanation of how all three major European powers viewed the conflict, however, is most revealing. The observation that the Germans saw themselves as the innovators and technocrats trying to overthrow the old structure of society represented by France and England is both novel and well argued. For Eksteins, this German spirit of revolution trying to move the entrenched conservatism of the other countries was the whole point of the war.

Where literature is concerned, the failure of the "spiritual revolution" and the return to the traditional life style after the war caused a universal "psychic depression" which led to "the language and literature of disillusionment" (207) that would characterize the post-War world and sow the seeds for a new conflict twenty years later.

The book concludes rather awkwardly, from a thematic point of view, with a discussion of three particular events which are somehow representative of the intra war period: Lindbergh's solo flight across the Atlantic, the appearance of Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front, and Hitler's meteoric rise and subsequent fall. While these events are crammed with interesting reflections, they seem to drift away from the premise on which the book was founded. Nevertheless, the book is such an innovative and perceptive work that one can forget the unevenness of the author's move from "The Rite of Spring" to "Es ist ein Frühling ohne Ende" ("Never-ending Spring"), the popular song in Germany in 1945.

Charles Doyle's Richard Aldington has been long awaited by scholars

and critics alike, and Doyle's book goes a long way to satisfy those of us who have waited for a full length study of his life and works. However, the biography is far from definitive and may leave the reader with more questions about the subject than answers.

The tone of this book is rather odd, and while I have no doubt that the author is extremely objective in his conclusions, the book never really captures the essence of energy and passion that mark Aldington's life. Doyle's workmanlike manner infects the text, and we pass through events in Aldington's provocative life rather like tourists in a group "doing" the Louvre in two hours. Questions occur from the outset of Aldington's life that are passed over with the unnecessary hastiness of Doyle's excursion. Why, for example, did Aldington resent his mother so much? And how closely is his damning portrait of Mrs. Winterbourne in Death of a Hero based on his own mother?

Perhaps the most disappointing factor in the book is that Doyle omits to examine the breakdown of Aldington's marriage to H.D. and subsequent liaisons with Dorothy Yorke, Brigit Patmore, and Netta Patmore. Doyle fails not only to allow the reader an insight into Aldington's lack of success in his relationships with these three women, but also to discuss how they affected the author's writing and personality. One looks in vain for connections between biography, event, and literary production.

Nor does the biography produce much more than what has already been written about Aldington. While one is grateful that Doyle has brought together all the diverse pieces of work on Aldington (such as Selwyn Kittredge's unpublished dissertation and Blackmur's article from the 1934 *Nation*), one gains little new insight from the book. Surely, with Aldington's daughter and a number of his acquaintances still alive, Doyle could have found more means to bring this writer to life.

Finally, on a purely pedantic note, I found the book extremely difficult to read in places because of lack of clear punctuation on the part of the writer or editor. Throughout the book, the comma is frequently omitted after a long introductory clause or phrase. As a result of this oversight, the reader is forced to return again and again to the initial part of the sentence and guess where the imaginary comma should be placed. Maybe in the next printing...

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