

ence if future disaster is to be avoided.

The "Green Revolution" created the belief that technology had made agricultural production independent of weather. But as Roberts and Lansford demonstrate, the striking accomplishments of that technology came near the end of a period of unusually warm weather that had begun in the nineteenth century. The illusion was dispelled when, in 1972, bad weather struck throughout the world: A dry, hot summer followed a harsh winter in the Soviet Union; the monsoon failed to bring sufficient moisture to India's croplands; floods occurred in midwestern U.S.; drought hit parts of South America and Australia and intensified in the Sahel. Total world food production dropped by more than 2 per cent, the first decrease since World War II. Global reserves dropped much more sharply.

Although millions of acres were restored to use and a record world harvest was achieved in 1973, more bad weather struck the following year. The U.S. grain belts, now supplying a major fraction of the world's food exports, were hit hardest. Grain reserves in the U.S. fell to their lowest level in twenty years and world reserves plummeted again. The assessment of the Worldwatch Institute's Lester Brown is disturbingly accurate: "Today the entire world is living hand to mouth, trying to make it from one harvest to the next."

The description by Roberts and Lansford of how the planet's climate machine works leaves no doubt that year-to-year weather is likely to be as variable in coming decades as it was in the one just ended. As for the hope that weather can be modified to protect crops, or that plants can be bred that will make weather variability unimportant, they make a strong case against expecting a solution from these or any other purely technical "fixes." While sound use of technology is essential, confronting the climate mandate successfully will require a committed response to a complex web of political and social issues.

In their final chapter Roberts and Lansford outline a compassionate and responsible program to meet this challenge. They construct a scenario based on the "premise that many lives can be saved and much misery avoided" using the great number and variety of tools already available for fighting hunger. One element of this scenario is develop-

ment of a "world food emergency reserve" that would mitigate the effects of local crop failures. Another, essential for long-term stability, is to reverse the trend of several decades by promoting agricultural self-reliance in developing nations. These goals will require close cooperation among the developed nations, including the superpowers.

The objection will be made, with ample justification, that past efforts requiring this kind of cooperation have usually ended in abject failure. But Roberts and Lansford offer a powerful inducement, arguing that "if we heed the climate mandate, and if we accept the fact that the Earth's people are bound together by material needs and expectations that must transcend our rivalries and contests, humanity should be able not only to survive but to prevail over the hunger and starvation that have threatened so many people for so many centuries."

With the chronically undernourished now estimated at one-fourth the population of the Earth, people of good will cannot ignore this prospect. [WV]

THE SHORTER STRACHEY
edited by Michael Holroyd
and Paul Levy

(Oxford University Press; xii + 274 pp.; \$15.00)

John Tessitore

"Ultimately the world is governed by moderate men. Extremists and fanatics and desperadoes may make a noise or a disturbance, they may even at times appear to control the course of events; but in reality they are always secondary figures—either symptoms or instruments; whatever happens, the great mass of ordinary, stolid, humdrum, respectable persons remains the dominating force in human affairs."

So the world seemed to Lytton Strachey in the spring of 1918, when all Europe hovered on the brink of collapse after four years of relentless and unparalleled warfare. The sentiment, one suspects, is largely subscribed to today, suggesting that we are as similar in temperament to the Georgians as were the Georgians to the Victorians—each age carelessly spilling over into the next, disrupting the tidy concept of "eras" so dear to many historians.

Strachey, of course, himself sub-

scribed to and promoted the notion that the "Victorian Age" was a period distinct unto itself and, more important, that it deserved the severest censure and reprobation. As the progeny of Victorians, the gifted Bloomsbury group ceremoniously set about through radically new approaches to literature, painting, criticism, education, and economics, to kill the collective Victorian father. Sir Leslie Stephen, father of Virginia Woolf, exemplifies this figure nicely.

In this mighty struggle no one fought as valiantly as Strachey, but the battle was not without cost. Just as James Joyce's atheism assumed the curious form of an absolute obsession with Catholicism, so Strachey remained obsessed, it seems, with his Victorian ghosts. Perhaps if he had simply ignored Cardinal Manning, Dr. Arnold, General Gordon, and various other more or less "eminent Victorians," they might have gone quietly to their places in history and remained there all but forgotten—while the world went on with its Great War and reconstruction, its labor movements and Sundays at the beach. But Strachey could not ignore them, happily for us.

The Shorter Strachey is a collection of thirty pieces written between 1904 and 1931, a period spanning nearly all the author's productive years. Consequently, the selections are varied and demonstrate a maturation of both style and choice of subject. Readers familiar with *Eminent Victorians* and *Queen Victoria* will expect to find here a droll humor coupled with satiric vision. They will not be disappointed. But as with one who, anticipating a fine lunch, discovers he is a guest at a feast, even our expectations are exceeded.

Strachey, we learn, can be more than comical, more than cruel. He can be, and often is, warm, respectful, candid, at times pathetic. And brilliant, always brilliant. Strachey does precisely what he tells us Matthew Arnold could not: "he leaves the broad flat road of traditional appreciation" to examine men of letters and the letters of men—both of them as something real, alive, and capable of being judged. Thus he tells us in a series of articles on English historians that Hume was "impartial," Gibbon "fortunate," Macaulay "Philistine," and Carlyle "energetic."

Naturally, Strachey has certain prevailing biases. His distaste for the utilitarian mind—one that serves "God and

Mammon at the same time"—is natural and transparent. But there are more subtle prejudices working here. When, for instance, Strachey indicts Carlyle for his ponderously long prose (by no means an unfair attack!), one is reminded of Poe's essays in which he identifies the short story as the highest form of prose. Strachey, like Poe, shined brightest when producing a small, polished gem, and it is the nature of the ego to praise most highly what one does best.

The Shorter Strachey is divided into seven sections, some more cohesive than others, but all—with hardly an exception—delightfully entertaining. The longest piece, on Voltaire and Frederick the Great, demonstrates the author's profound knowledge of and deep love for the eighteenth century, its history and literature. For Strachey the two are inseparable—an important lesson for any critic. Equally enjoyable are the works of less scholarship and more gossip. His *Asquith*, an irreverent biographical sketch of England's prime minister, raised a furor when it first saw print in the *Times* in 1972. Strachey would have been delighted.

While I do not know what Holroyd and Levy, Strachey's literary executors, have omitted from this volume, what is here is so thoroughly welcome one must conclude that they have done their task well. In this, the centenary of Strachey's birth, the gift comes from him to all of us. **WV**

Briefly Noted

ASPECTS OF THE PRESENT

by Margaret Mead
and Rhoda Metraux

(William Morrow; 320 pp.; \$10.95)

In 1962, Margaret Mead turned to the task of interpreting American culture for other Americans. Collaborating with Rhoda Metraux, her long-time colleague and friend, Mead produced for *Redbook* magazine a monthly column for the next seventeen years. *Aspects of the Present* is a distillation of the last ten years of that work. The period covered by the book, 1968-79, was one of resolution following what perhaps had been only the appearance but never quite the reality of a true revolution. One senses in these pieces that Mead and Metraux had appointed themselves mediators and explicators of the better world they thought was com-

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ing. They adopted a reasoned advocacy of the new social reality, "new designs for living" (family), "a new ethic" (bisexuality, abortion), and "new forms of community" (controlling crime).

There are lapses. Imparting dignity to "women's work" in the house by making housework more professional takes us right back to the feminine mystique; and a reference to the masculine preference for rational objectivity and the feminine for intimate understanding is almost unforgivable. But the book holds small treasures. Mead's rich, kaleidoscopic memories of Christmases throughout her life, her incisive pinpointing of the inconsistencies and anomalies of our society, the "broken connections" between belief and action that promote criminal deviance. But ultimately and inevitably, advocacy becomes monotonous, even when it deals with something as central as human rights. Monthly columns written for a mass audience suffer in the transition to book form. Rhoda Metraux reminds us in her introduction that there can be no future volumes of Mead's work. One can only regret this had to be the last.

—M.F.

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The drawing that accompanied "To Success and Good Friends" in the September book issue is the work of Janice Stapleton.
