
pages when Segal has time to supply only a paragraph, or a provocative sentence. Thus, of America in the 1930s he writes: "The arrival of the Great Depression led to a Democratic federal government whose New Deal was freighted with old discrimination." The sentence needs sustaining by more than the subsequent dozen lines of documentation. (His chapter on contemporary America is entitled, predictably, "The Wasteland of the American Promise.")

Such criticisms do not diminish the achievement. It is instructive to have the full sweep of the tragedy, and to be reminded anew of how many nations were complicit in it—not just the United States, but the British, the French, the Dutch, the Portuguese, the Spanish. Slavery planted a canker at the core of civic life in much of North and South America and the Caribbean, and its destructive power is never more evident than when Segal tells of the struggle of black against black, or lighter black against darker black, for status and economic advancement. The infection can cause blindness: "In 1988, a congress was held at the University of São Paulo to mark the centenary of the abolition of slavery in Brazil. At the formal opening, there was not a single black to be seen on the platform."

In the end, Segal wants the black diaspora not just for subject but for audience, and his message to it is moral and hortatory. To free itself, he argues, the diaspora must do something it has not yet done—"accept its past, as a source not of degradation, but of dignity." Above the din of five centuries, Segal lifts his voice bravely, improbably.

THE AGE OF HIROHITO: In Search of Modern Japan. By Daikichi Irokawa (trans. by Mikiso Hane and John K. Urdá). Free Press. 179 pp. \$25

Pivotal historical figures who survive being the pivot usually tell their stories, in Tokyo no less than in Washington. That the Emperor Hirohito never reflected publicly on his tumultuous reign (1926–1989), the longest of any Japanese emperor, is a measure of how much he remained, even decades after World War II, the focus of intense debate over the nature of the state. In this brief

but closely argued book, Irokawa, a historian at Tokyo University of Economics, provides background to that debate and seeks to illuminate the shadowy figure at its center.

Though his main purpose is to describe the emperor's personal role in World War II and the effort to hide that role after Japan's catastrophic defeat, Irokawa does not confine his criticism to Hirohito. He apportions it throughout Japanese society and across seven decades. For the war, he blames military leaders and the ambitious, greedy industrialists who encouraged them; leftist intellectuals, who were blinded to events by their devotion to Soviet ideology; and even the Japanese people, who were all too easily distracted from political issues.

The favorite means of exculpating Hirohito has been to claim that he was a figurehead, with little influence on policy. He himself said that because he was a constitutional monarch his authority was narrowly circumscribed. But by examining the emperor's policy decisions and claims to authority before and during the war, Irokawa refutes the latter-day efforts at justification. "Despite the emperor's general inaction," he writes, "on numerous occasions he did exercise the authority of the supreme command." He did not merely reign; he ruled—and he could have stopped the war. A strong stand by Hirohito against leaders of the military and their expansionist plans would have compelled their assent. He was, after all, their highest recourse, their god.

Japan surrendered, but the fight to protect the emperor continued, and, ironically, Hirohito acquired a surprising new ally—the Americans. Calculating that Japan would be more tractable if the emperor remained in place, the prosecution at the Tokyo war crimes trials refused to accept testimony against him. He was allowed at last to assume his full stature as figurehead.

Arts & Letters

WALKER EVANS: A Biography. By Belinda Rathbone. Houghton Mifflin. 308 pp. \$27.50

Before tattered signposts, desolate streets, and desperate, unposed people became fashion-



able subjects for photographers, Walker Evans (1903–74) discovered them through the lens of his Leica. Best known for the hauntingly plain images of southern sharecroppers in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941, with text by James Agee), Evans took to serious photography after he dropped out of Williams College in 1923 and made unsuccessful forays into business and writing. The prominent schools of photography at the time—impressionistic pictorialists and slick, surreal modernists (who loved to shoot eggs and angled skyscrapers)—had little use for the realism that Evans favored. They deliberately distanced photographic art from ordinary life, and, as Rathbone, a historian of photography, argues that Evans was, with his painfully honest eye, the first great photographer of the ordinary.

Evans turned to the camera even though he professed to find photography disreputable and “ludicrous.” Drawn to the streets, warehouses, and back alleys of Brooklyn and Manhattan, he thrived on the tense images he found there. But when he showed his early work

to Alfred Stieglitz, the self-established god of the growing photography industry, Stieglitz was not impressed. “Technically uneven” is Rathbone’s own measured judgment of the work.

Evans did not turn professional until 1930, when his friend, the struggling poet Hart Crane, insisted that Evans’s bleak photos of the Brooklyn Bridge illustrate the text of his new poem *The Bridge*. Evans repeatedly sought his subject in urban landscapes. “The right things,” he wrote to a friend, “can be found in Pittsburgh, Toledo, Detroit (a lot in Detroit, I want to get in some dirty crack, Detroit’s full of chances).” He craved the unposed and took to the New York subway to photograph weary, oblivious subjects with a concealed miniature camera.

James Agee drew Evans out of the city in 1936 to the back hills of Alabama, where he produced some of his bravest work. The photos he took of a family of white sharecroppers were stunningly intimate. They captured the dignity as well as the poverty of each family member, and they refrained from judgment. Evans rejected the conjurer’s tricks of light and angle and forced posing used by contemporary photographers such as Margaret Bourke-White. He shot straight on and created intensely personal portraits that kept the photographer at a distance.

Like her subject, Rathbone keeps her own graceful distance in this, her first book, and the first biography of Evans. She portrays in detail Evans’s taste for married women (his two marriages began as adulterous affairs), the intense friendship with Agee, the explosive, devastating passions, including a youthful homosexual experimentation with 21-year-old writer John Cheever, the increasingly frequent bouts of alcoholism, and the sharp peak and steady decline of his professional career. Keeping supposition to a minimum, she allows the contradictions in Evans to stand. And so he remains—the artist of the ordinary who fastidiously pursued the socially elite; the sensual collector of junk (“For him, trash was the contemporary equivalent of the ruin”); the surly, unfaithful husband; the driven, unpredictable genius.