

Shirer brought a sharp, journalistic eye to his work, and he was fond of quoting Thucydides on the paramount importance of firsthand testimony. Although many of the dispatches in *This Is Berlin* lack a distinctively personal element—he was working under intense censorship—they still provide insights into the period that preceded the onslaught of total war. The Berlin depicted in these pages is a city where much of daily life proceeds at a seemingly normal pace. A play—cowritten by Mussolini, no less—opens to full houses. In the bookstores, *Vom Winde Verweht* (otherwise known as *Gone with the Wind*) dominates the best-seller lists. Then, in November 1939, we learn that the Winter Olympics have been postponed.

Forced to rely on repetitive official dispatches, Shirer can only hint at events happening behind the façade. Unable to travel to conquered Poland, he describes newsreels showing Jews in forced labor units. His terse listing of the day's executions—for theft during the blackout or, as in the case of one Polish farmworker, for "immoral conduct"—must have given his listeners some inkling of the truth about the regime.

By mid-1940, Shirer had come to doubt that he had a worthwhile role to play in Berlin. Although he had tried to convey his skepticism about Nazi misinformation through changes of intonation and colloquialisms, he soon found that his every word was analyzed by a censor sitting at his elbow. With the Gestapo sniffing at his heels, the time had come to return home.

—Clive Davis

UNCOMMON GROUNDS:
The History of Coffee and How It Transformed Our World.

By Mark Pendergrast. Basic. 522 pp. \$30

THE DEVIL'S CUP:
Coffee, the Driving Force in History.

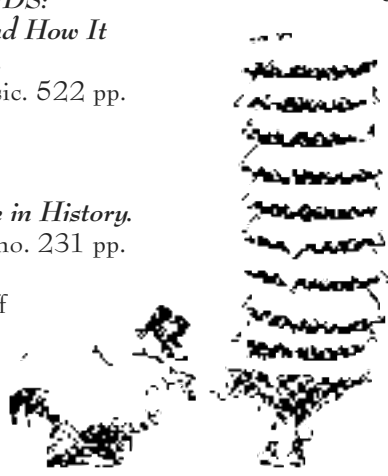
By Stewart Lee Allen. Soho. 231 pp. \$25

Thought to be the stuff of Satan and insurrection, coffee has been lambasted throughout history. In the 17th century, Turkish sultan

Murad IV banned it for fear that it made subjects disloyal, while King Charles II complained that British coffeehouses were breeding "false, malicious, and scandalous reports." Two books—an encyclopedic volume by Pendergrast and a playful romp by Allen—suggest that Murad and Charles were right about coffee's potency. With only a little facetiousness, the authors assert that coffee brought about the French Revolution, the poverty of Latin America, and most everything in between. They muster a surprisingly compelling case for their overcaffeinated thesis.

Pendergrast, author of *For God, Country and Coca-Cola* (1994), recounts the story from the berry to the last drop. Folklore has it that an Ethiopian goatherd named Kaldi discovered coffee sometime before the sixth century A.D., when his animals "danced" after nibbling the red berries. By the 16th century, the bean had conquered Turkey, where "a lack of sufficient coffee provided grounds for a woman to seek divorce." In the succeeding two centuries, coffee replaced beer as the drink of choice in Europe. Wired Frenchmen started getting revolutionary ideas; contented beer drinkers, Pendergrast suggests, would never have stormed the Bastille.

The author is especially detailed in mapping coffee's role in the United States. Competition among coffee roasters, he shows, spurred innovations in advertising, shipping, and technology, from brand-name recognition to vacuum-packed bags, which then found applications in other industries. Developments in coffee also paralleled societal shifts. Coffeehouses spread during the 1920s, when Prohibition shut down bars and sent Americans searching for new places to socialize. Postwar consumerism fueled the rise of instant coffee, and the hedonistic 1970s spawned a new appreciation for exotic, gourmet coffees. *Uncommon Grounds* is exhaustive but not exhausting, with anecdotes easing the reader through its 522 pages.



Written in the style of a travel journal, *The Devil's Cup* tells as much about the author's adventures as about coffee. Most of his time is spent in the Old World, where he sometimes manipulates or overstates for the sake of entertainment: "The entirety of 20th-century philosophy is simply the result of penny-pinching

Parisians [in cafés] falling prey to a dementia born of boredom, caffeine, and pomposity." Amusing at first, the self-conscious cleverness ultimately wears thin. *Uncommon Grounds* provides a more full-flavored account of how the coffee bean has changed the world.

—Justine A. Kwiatkowski

Arts & Letters

GEORGE ELIOT: *The Last Victorian.*

By Kathryn Hughes.

Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 384 pp. \$30

It must be almost impossible to write a boring biography of George Eliot (1819–80). Everything about her tantalizes, seduces, lends itself to narrative: the wise and sweeping authorial voice of the novels, the woman behind it who lived scandalously and fought in the thick of the headiest intellectual battles of her day, the dramatic landscape of the battles themselves and the underpinnings they furnish for today's wars over science and religion. There is no trouble about sources, since the subject left a wealth of self-revelatory letters, along with copious testimony from her great love, George Henry Lewes, and a wide circle of other indefatigably expressive Victorians. The novels, despite having been mined by critics for everything from class struggle to Orientalist bias, hold up pluckily under further discussion; the life remains satisfyingly complex even after having provided the jumping-off point for imaginative excursions on other topics, such as Cynthia Ozick's novel *The Puttermessa Papers* (1997), whose protagonist pursues a comically poignant quest to replicate Eliot's love life.

In this sprightly page-turner, Hughes, a lecturer at several British universities, has come up with what she sees as a fresh way to write of Eliot—or, more accurately, of Mary Anne Evans, the flesh-blood-and-brain woman behind the lifework. Little in the book is altogether new, but there is no sense that the author is rummaging among arcana, or pursuing tangential lines of inquiry somehow missed by other biographers. This is true even though *George Eliot: The Last Victorian* lists a dozen other full-length lives of Eliot in its bibliography and is the third one to appear in three years.

Hughes aims to trace Evans the woman, her

emotional makeup, and the kinds of support she sought in friendship and in love. Hughes's theme—of early family rejection and lifelong vulnerability—is, she concedes at the outset, one that long dominated views of Eliot, based on the testimony of the much younger man she married at the end of her life, John Cross. But despite the use to which it has been put over the years by condescending critics, Hughes argues, the pattern accords with Eliot's behavior and with her own views of herself.

That story starts with the coldness of Mary Anne's mother and the breaking of the young woman's treasured companionship with her older brother Isaac, a kinship she idealized in sonnets and limned more accurately in the relationship between Maggie and Tom Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). A succession of passionate epistolary friendships with older women followed, and, later, crushes on intellectual men who did not love her back, notably liberal philosopher Charles Bray, biblical scholar Charles Hennell, and *Westminster Review* editor John Chapman (with whom Hughes contends Evans had an affair).

Treading gingerly but gamely on the awkward ground of Evans's marked physical unattractiveness, Hughes draws a persuasive portrait of an insecure and intense woman (the word *bluestocking* is used a bit too often) whose search for love finally ends with the odd little man, George Henry Lewes, who gave her the devotion and companionship she needed to become George Eliot. Hughes suggests nicely how Evans's growing intellectual maturity gave her the groundedness to break with society in deciding to live with Lewes, who was legally barred from divorcing his wife because he had accepted her child by another man as his own.

Why Eliot was "the last Victorian" is never made clear, and her caution in regard to women's rights and other progressive causes,