

CURRENT BOOKS

Reviews of new and noteworthy nonfiction

Melancholy Dane

KIERKEGAARD:

A Biography.

By Alastair Hannay. Cambridge Univ. Press. 496 pp. \$34.95

Reviewed by David Lodge

I should perhaps explain that my only qualification for reviewing this book is that a few years ago I wrote a novel (*Therapy*) whose chief character, a writer of TV situation comedy, becomes incongruously obsessed with the life and work of Søren Kierkegaard during a more than usually acute midlife crisis. Kierkegaard (1813–55) was a Danish philosopher and theologian who challenged the Hegelian philosophical orthodoxy of his day and was hailed in the 20th century as the first existentialist. But what particularly interested me about Kierkegaard, and led me to use him for fictional purposes, was the connection between what he called his “melancholy” (and we should call depression) and his writing, and how the latter was a kind of therapy for the former. “Only when I write do I feel well,” he noted in his journal. “Then I forget all of life’s vexations, all its sufferings.” His greatest suffering, however, was self-imposed. In 1841, he broke off his engagement to his beloved Regine Olsen, on the paradoxical grounds that he was bound to make her unhappy. He kept the psychological wound of this parting open by brooding on it for the rest of his life.

I turned to Alastair Hannay’s new book hoping for more light to be thrown on the life and personality of this fascinating and baffling figure. I was disappointed, but

that is the publisher’s rather than Hannay’s fault. The preface describes the book as an “intellectual biography,” and that is exactly what it is; but the epithet does not appear on the title page. As a guide to the development of Kierkegaard’s thought in his writings, it could hardly be bettered, but there is little about those specific details of the subject’s daily life that make a historical personage live in the reader’s imagination. As far as I can judge, Hannay has discovered no significant new facts about Kierkegaard’s personal and emotional life, and indeed he deals more cursorily than previous biographers with such topics as the somber drama of the Kierkegaard family history (the father’s first wife died childless, and within a year he married his housekeeper after making her pregnant; she bore him seven children, most of whom died young, which he interpreted as divine punishment for a blasphemy committed in his youth) and the agony of the breach with Regine.

Hannay’s treatment of the latter event, surely the pivotal moment in Kierkegaard’s life, is brisk and rather dismissive: “On 11 October, Kierkegaard went to say that the break was final. There followed a wrought conversation sadly reminiscent of television soap-opera, after which Kierkegaard ‘went straight to the

theatre.’” I am not sure what Hannay’s source is for this conversation, but the dialogue between Kierkegaard and Regine that took place shortly afterward, as recorded in his journal (Walter Lowrie’s translation), seems to me almost unbearably poignant: “She asked me, Will you never marry? I replied, Well, in about 10 years, when I have sowed my wild oats, I must have a pretty young miss to rejuvenate me.—A necessary cruelty. She said, Forgive me for what I have done to you. I replied, It is rather I that should pray for your forgiveness. . . . She said, Kiss me. That I did, but without passion. Merciful God!”

This is not, then, a biography of Kierkegaard that will kindle interest in those unfamiliar with his work, but one for committed students and fellow specialists. An emeritus professor at the University of Oslo, Hannay is a distinguished scholar of Kierkegaard who has translated and edited several of his books. He is well informed about the genesis and composition of all of them, and a reliable guide to their interpretation. What these books really mean is very difficult to establish because of Kierkegaard’s idiosyncratic method of composition, especially his practice of publishing many of them as the work of pseudonymous editors and narrators with fanciful names (Victor Eremita, Johannes Climacus, Nicolaus Notabene), and constructing them out of different kinds of discourse—essays, letters, short stories, treatises—in which he expresses radically different points of view. In this respect, his writings are more like the work of a novel-

ist—and a rather ludic, metafictional novelist, such as Laurence Sterne—than of a conventional philosopher.

His first major work, *Either/Or* (1843), became a literary success and established Kierkegaard as a subversive, avant-garde writer. When planning a second edition, he contemplated adding a typically teasing postscript: “I hereby retract this book. It was a necessary deception for deceiving people, if possible, into the religious, as has been my constant task all along. . . . Still, I don’t need to retract it. I have never claimed to be its author.” The book contrasts the “aesthetic” attitude to life with the “ethical,” an opposition Kierkegaard later abandoned in favor of an existential commitment to the “religious.” But it would seem, too, that he was somewhat disconcerted by the book’s acclaim and was tempted to disown it or to reinterpret it retrospectively. He takes cover finally behind the purely literary convention of pseudonymous authorship—a transparent subterfuge, because by this time everyone knew he was the author.

The complexity and playfulness of Kierkegaard’s mode of writing have opened his work to assimilation by a great variety of mutually incompatible views and attitudes. Lately, efforts have been made to read him as a kind of proto-postmodernist or deconstructionist who demonstrated through paradox and irony the impossibility of ever attaining a stable truth. Hannay will have none of this. He believes there is a core of positive, nonironic meaning to be found in even the most complex and confusing texts, and addresses himself patiently and persuasively to the task of



uncovering it. In short, he takes Kierkegaard's commitment to "the religious" seriously.

One learns from this biography that Kierkegaard was aware of the work of David Friederick Strauss, and therefore of the impending wave of demythologizing biblical scholarship that was to shatter the faith of so many intellectuals in the second half of the 19th century. We might therefore see Kierkegaard's life work as a kind of preemptive strike against the Higher Criticism, based on his conviction that because scientific method and supernatural religious faith could never be logically reconciled, some other ground must be sought for faith in

individual consciousness. Hannay's scrupulous study would support such a view. The fact is, however, that because Kierkegaard used so many fictional devices in his most characteristic work, neither Hannay nor Kierkegaard himself can set limits on what readers may find in it.

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Military Unreadiness

WAR IN A TIME OF PEACE:

Bush, Clinton, and the Generals.

By David Halberstam. Scribner. 544 pp. \$28

Reviewed by Gary Hart

Almost three decades ago, David Halberstam led a movement that redefined journalism. His *The Best and the Brightest* (1972) opened the councils and processes of government by seeming to open up the minds of key participants. The book offered an authoritative voice and omniscient point of view with minimal reliance on immediate documentation.

A generation of journalists and writers, among them Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, owe Halberstam a debt of gratitude. Out of this movement came tidal waves of anonymous sources, self-serving leaks, treachery, internal dissent within administrations, and problematic policymaking. Not only was journalism revolutionized; the very process of government would never be the same. What was to follow—Watergate, assassination plots, foreign policy disasters, out-of-touch presidents, feuding staffs, and a scandal a minute—didn't merely serve the notion of the people's right to know; it also altered their perception of their government.

If everything was a scandal, was it possible that nothing was *really* a scandal?

The scandal exposed in Halberstam's new book is America's near-total failure to anticipate, understand, or prepare for the post-Cold War world—a scandal that contributed to a thousand deaths in Somalia (including 18 Americans), tens of thousands in the former Yugoslavia, and (at least indirectly) 800,000 to a million in Rwanda, and now some 7,000 on American soil. The decade following the collapse of the Soviet empire saw a shift in the nature of warfare, from confrontation between massed armies of nation-states to low-intensity urban conflict among tribes, clans, and gangs. The new strife seemed more in keeping with the 17th century than the 20th. Neither the first Bush administration nor the Clinton administration was ready.

Indeed, both Republicans and Democrats, governing under the heavy influence of public-opinion polls, decided rather by