

has written more than 30 books about the movies and iconic American figures such as Walt Disney, Clint Eastwood, and D. W. Griffith. But he is also the author of the thoughtful study *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity* (1985), which, with what he calls here “a certain contempt for the false pieties and hypocrisies of our old public culture,” explores America’s enduring fascination with manipulated (and manipulating) images. The contempt is more rueful than sour.

In this memoir, he aims to weave together an unremarkable boyhood with the movies that informed it and, at the same time, to bring perspective to the “greatest generation” myth that wraps a flag around the realities of a dreadful war, much as wartime movies did. World War II films “always insisted on putting heroism within reach of ordinariness,” he writes. “This was, of course, nonsense. It may even have been—in the long run, for me and my generation—dangerous nonsense. Dangerous in the sense that it created false anticipations of adulthood, falsely idealized expectations—at least in me, trying so hard to decipher the mysteries of the universe.”

Schickel acknowledges the uplift, reassurance, and hope imparted by such films as *Mrs. Miniver* and *Since You Went Away*, with their sanitized parables of home-front courage and unity. They provided solace; they served freedom’s cause. Yet they also

“shyly, secretively, but authoritatively spoke” in the tongue of “wartime lies” for the “official culture.” He writes with an immediacy derived from having looked again at every film he discusses. Best image: captured nurse Veronica Lake hiding a live grenade in her cleavage as she lures a leering Japanese soldier to a fatal tryst in *So Proudly We Hail*.

The hateful Japanese, we can see now, were easier to demonize than the hateful Germans because, with so many Americans of European extraction, Hitler and fascism could be made to seem temporary aberrations. And never mind about the Holocaust, which virtually no American movie even mentioned, despite Hollywood’s and Washington’s certain knowledge of the developing horrors.

If this sounds merely revisionist or iconoclastic, Schickel’s tone is elegiac and humane. Deploring the feel-good fraudulence of *The Story of G.I. Joe* and, postwar, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, he writes that “if we cannot remember truthfully, we cannot think clearly or behave decently”—goals this honest, gracefully written book achieves. It is surely accidental, but Schickel’s pages are made more potent by the unavoidable parallel to our contemporary moment of bumper-sticker rhetoric as newer generations—ours and theirs—serve and fall in missions far from Main Street.

—STEVEN BACH

HISTORY

**THE IRISH WAY:
*A Walk through Ireland’s
Past and Present.***

By Robert Emmett Ginna. Random House. 298 pp. \$24.95

The walk through Ireland’s past promised in the subtitle of this book is far more compelling than the author’s walk through the present. Robert Emmett Ginna, who calls himself a “history-besotted writer,” has a sharp eye and a sure feel for the castles, forts, great houses, monasteries, and other places that contain so much vivid Irish history. He is adept at bringing to life the narratives embedded in the

landscape, and especially at summoning up a sense of “the dust of distant battles.” Visiting the Famine Museum in County Roscommon is an occasion for an abridged history of Ireland’s worst catastrophe. Elsewhere he recaps the 1798 Rebellion (the so-called Year of the French), and artfully recounts the battles waged at Birr Castle in County Offaly and the legends surrounding the Rock of Cashel, which include everyone from St. Patrick himself to Brian Boru. He is also gifted at resurrecting the memory of a select crew of departed luminaries, including Ireland’s most renowned composer, the blind harper Tur-

lough O'Carolan (1670–1738), and Oliver Goldsmith (c. 1730–74), author of the still-treasured poem “The Deserted Village.”

Most of Ginna's book, however, is not so colorful and memorable as these sporadic history lessons. Noting the recent economic prosperity that has made Ireland the “Celtic Tiger,” he tells us early on that “I wanted to learn in just what ways this new affluence had affected the land and the people I'd long known. . . . I was eager to see what the Irish had accomplished, what they had gained for themselves and perhaps had lost, and what they had preserved from a rich and tumultuous past.” The problem is that this quest too often leads him into the realm of the ephemeral and dull. Instead of, say, an incisive interview with Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams or even Unionist leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner David Trimble, we get platitudinous blather from the Lord Mayor of Cork: “He emphasized the resources and opportunities Cork offers to its youth: ‘Each can become an engineer or a window cleaner,’ he said. ‘Each one of these children can become whatever he or she wants to be. The opportunities are there.’” Ginna never digs under the façades. Everything the various entrepreneurs, politicians, and military men tell him is taken at face value.

What we learn about our author/traveling companion over the course of the book must be extracted from passing comments—he's 74 when he decides to embark upon this walking tour of Ireland, he “loved toy soldiers as a lad,” he's “reasonably” religious, he's originally from the vicinity of Fifth Avenue and 50th Street in Manhattan, he was a university teacher, and he “had become close” with playwright Sean O'Casey. But these little details are parsimoniously distributed, and one can't help but feel that the book would have been far more engrossing if its author had shared more of his own history and interior life. The most inexplicable instance of Ginna's holding back, especially in a book like this, is a passing reference to “County Cavan, whence my maternal grandmother hailed.” And that's it for poor, nameless granny. A bit of research resulting in a paragraph or two for her is the sort of touch that would have given this book more soul.

—TERENCE WINCH

***THE LAST REVOLUTIONARIES:
German Communists
and Their Century.***

By Catherine Epstein. Harvard Univ. Press. 322 pp. \$29.95

The truly remarkable revelation at the heart of *The Last Revolutionaries* is how little the German Communists changed over the course of the 20th century. While the world around them was transformed—by war, politics, culture, the growth of a complex interdependence—the pre-1933 radicals who became the dictators and propagandists of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) hewed to a static worldview. This rigidity, the Communists maintained, was the only way East Germany could steel itself against the capitalist, imperialist West. In the end, though, their refusal to change hastened the unraveling of the corrupt and backward GDR regime.

A history professor at Amherst College, Catherine Epstein puts this changelessness into sharp relief by tracing the rises and falls of some of the most prominent German Communists, from the Weimar Republic to the Third Reich to the Cold War to the post-Cold War era. These include the only two men to rule the GDR during its four-decade existence (1949–89), Walter Ulbricht and Erich Honecker, as well as lesser-known figures such as Karl Schirdewan, Gerhart Eisler, Franz Dahlem, and Emmy Koenen. Their stories—which feature Nazi concentration camps, forced exile, the Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Gulag, and the ruthless autocritiques that became a hallmark of communist life—provide deep insights into socialist totalitarianism.

Particularly helpful is Epstein's discussion of the complicated interplay of personal and political forces. How, for example, could Marxists reconcile their ideology with the Hitler-Stalin Nonaggression Pact of 1939? Or the 1953 workers' strikes? Or a party that from the beginning impugned, imprisoned, and in some cases murdered many of its most committed backers, all in the name of the proletariat?

Unfortunately, Epstein doesn't really plumb the underlying psychology here. She piques our interest by pointing to the