

'Never has so much military, economic, and diplomatic power been used as ineffectively as in Vietnam'

— Richard M. Nixon
(Campaign speech, 1968)

**Vietnam Shadows:
The War, Its Ghosts, and
Its Legacy**

By Arnold R. Isaacs
The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press.
236p \$25.95

During the final years of the Vietnam War (1972-75), Arnold Isaacs was assigned to South Vietnam as a correspondent for The Baltimore Sun. He left aboard an American evacuation helicopter on April 29, 1975, the day before the fall of Saigon. In 1983 he published a moving account of the conclusion of the war, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia*. In *Vietnam Shadows* he turns to the puzzling legacy of the war, weaving together personal memories and impressive scholarship to produce a wise and superbly written account of the war's enduring legacy in American life.

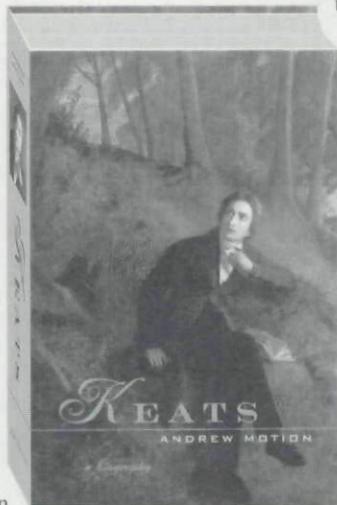
As Isaacs notes, the escalation of the war in 1965 came at a peculiar moment in the nation's history, only 20 years after the end of World War II. America's great success in that war brought unprecedented prosperity at home and a new era of American predominance abroad, but those shaped by the war and its aftermath were unprepared for the bloody stalemate in Vietnam. As the war grew in scale and intensity, most Americans could not understand how it had become a quagmire, or how the nation had become so deeply divided, or how their leaders had miscalculated so badly.

America's failure in Vietnam left the nation confused and searching for scapegoats. Few would accept responsibility for mistakes or misjudgments. The endless quarrels over what went wrong, or how the war could have been fought differently, reflected the inability of many Americans to

accept the reality of defeat. Some vital piece of America's vision of itself had been lost in Vietnam, whether it was a loss of trust, unity, shared myths, or a belief in the benevolence and ordained success of American power. As Isaacs notes, the war "lingers in the national memory, hovering over our politics, our culture, and our long, unfinished debate over who we are and what we believe."

Vietnam Shadows explores various facets of this sense of loss with skill and imagination. Those who served in Vietnam found that the war did not fit into the

traditional American war story. Their Vietnamese enemies were elusive and displayed a fanatical devotion to their cause, while their Vietnamese allies seemed venal and unreliable. It was a formless war that bred disillusionment, and the novels and memoirs of veterans led "to a kind of moral and emotional dead end." Having served in a war that seemed to lack meaning, veterans



THIS WEEK'S REVIEWERS

Charles E. Neu, professor of history at Brown University, Providence, R.I., recently delivered one of the Albert Shaw Lectures on the legacy of the Vietnam War at The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Md.

Donald C. Maldari, S.J., is associate pastor of St. Ignatius Loyola parish, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Nicholas Jones is associate professor of English at Oberlin College in Ohio.



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returned to a nation that blamed them for the failure in Vietnam. Most young men, however, did not serve in Vietnam, and a chasm developed between those who fought and those who stayed at home, one that still affects the Vietnam generation. For those on both sides of this divide, as Isaacs observes, "the legacy of Vietnam was moral confusion, not clarity."

The nation's leaders emerged from the war with a much more cautious attitude toward the use of force abroad. During the

Vietnam War the American public had been remarkably patient in trusting its political and military leaders; the failure in Vietnam fractured this trust and left the public wary of its government and of foreign adventures. Isaacs traces the effect of the ghosts of Vietnam on a series of post-1975 interventions, especially on the Persian Gulf war. In every way, it served as a contrast to Vietnam; but the overwhelming success there, while it brought a surge of patriotism, proved ephemeral. The triumph in the Persian Gulf did not funda-

mentally alter the mood of the nation or move the American people out of the shadows of the Vietnam War.

Many Americans had difficulty putting the war behind them. Recent polls reveal that two-thirds of the American people, contrary to all logic and evidence, believe that the Vietnamese Government still holds U.S. prisoners of war. Isaacs argues that the persistence of this mythology represents a "culture of denial and distortion." He is critical of "a society and a people grown so spoiled and self-indulgent that they demand a simple, satisfying solution for every mystery, gratification for every need, a cure for every pain." Rather than accept the reality of our failure, many Americans found a refuge in fantasies of conspiracy and revenge.

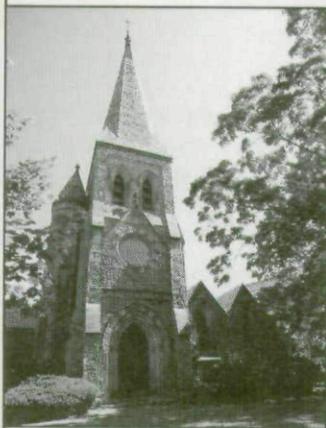
Isaacs views the Vietnam War as a "colossal devastating mistake," one based on ignorance of revolutionary forces in Vietnam and on spurious geopolitical theories. In part America fought in Vietnam to contain Chinese expansion into Southeast Asia, only to discover eventually that a unified, Communist Vietnam stood as a barrier to the spread of Chinese influence. But if he is conscious of the waste and irony of the war on the American side, he is also conscious of the terrible sacrifices it imposed on the Vietnamese people. Over 224,000 South Vietnamese soldiers died defending their country, the now-vanished Republic of Vietnam, while over 924,000 North Vietnamese soldiers and their southern allies died to bring about the Communist triumph in the spring of 1975. Communist revolutionaries fulfilled their vision of a unified nation under their rule, but at enormous cost to their own people, and in the postwar years Vietnam descended into an economic and moral crisis.

As aging Communist leaders clung to power and continued to proclaim official myths of revolutionary sacrifice and glory, a younger generation emerged ignorant of the war, while some of those who had lived through it wondered if the victory had been worth the price. This troubling question, expressed in popular Vietnamese novels like *The Sorrow of War* (1991) and *Novel Without a Name* (1995), could not be put to rest in the new Vietnam.

Isaacs is aware of the fact that Americans of his age (he was born in 1941) are a "kind of last survivors," since their youth was shaped by the great success of World War II, while their early adulthood was dominated by the disaster in Vietnam. As Morley Safer writes in *Flashbacks: On Returning to Viet-*

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nam (1990), "[W]e are still imprisoned, to one extent or another, by that place and that time." The journey to Vietnam that so many Americans began in the 1960's is still far from over. Isaacs' book provides a sensitive guide to the twists and turns of this journey and to the anguish and uncertainty that it has produced.

CHARLES E. NEU

Heart of Flesh:

A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men

By Joan D. Chittister, O.S.B.
William B. Eerdmans, 187p \$20 (paper)

Joan D. Chittister's latest book, *Heart of Flesh: A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men*, is both a critique of a spirituality of oppression that prevents people from blossoming into full human beings and a proposal to replace it with one that respects and promotes the dignity inherent in everyone and, indeed, in everything. Chittister, currently the executive director of Benetvision, the publications and communications office of her Benedictine community in Erie, Pa., where she has been prioress, is an impassioned writer. She argues that "patriarchal society—any society in which men, the males of the system, own, administer, shape, or control all the major facets of the culture—is a stifling thing." Feminism, she concludes, must lead a "revolution of the heart" that will expose the fallacy of patriarchy and liberate humanity from its oppression.

Chittister specifies three theses in her book: (1) the feminine is to be defined not by men but by women; (2) dominance that oppresses must be critiqued ("a society built on exclusively male values and norms is a crippled society"), and (3) a genuine spirituality depends on an understanding of these propositions. "Spirituality," she notes, "that does not release the feminine dimension in both women and men leaves them half souled." She contends that "masculinist" power, force, control and domination have overshadowed feminist peace, freedom, dignity, respect, compassion and mutuality, to the detriment of all.

Chittister decries the separation between the public and private dimensions of faith and asserts that true spirituality must promote the life of faith in everyday life. Two effects of this dualism are the devaluation of women by men and the rise of the world view that she labels "patriarchy," which privileges men, although "to talk about patri-

archy is not to talk about maleness as such," she clarifies. She specifies that maleness is not the problem since feminism does not ask men not to be masculine. Patriarchy favors dualism, hierarchy, domination and essential inequality that prevent both women and men from becoming fully human. Feminist spirituality corrects the patriarchal worldview, urging all to live by the insights of the Gospel and not the norms of today's culture. When this happens, Chittister suggests, "Christianity emerges in feminist form."

Chittister proceeds to explore the contributions feminism can make that would correct the evil that patriarchy inflicts on the world. Christian feminists value feeling and emotion and promote nonviolence in combating evil, qualities that men have been taught to eschew. In one beautiful chapter Chittister explores the 12 degrees of humility in the Rule of St. Benedict and, interpreting them from a feminist perspective, shows how they promote the good of all creation. In her critique of patriarchy, she notes the absence of women's perspectives in the



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church. Feminist spirituality teaches consensus rather than the control valued by patriarchy; it values compassion over patriarchal perfection and competition. Chittister calls for a new cosmic vision of creation, replacing the pyramid of patriarchal domination with the circle of feminist companionship and relationships.

Chittister correctly critiques an oppressive system that victimizes women. Her demand that the church recognize all women is both a call for justice and an opportunity to enrich the whole world. To do otherwise would be to limit or to ignore the contributions of half of humanity. Her contention that an authentic Christian spirituality must be one that promotes faith in everyday life is crucial and too often ignored, and her emphasis on the value of feeling in developing one's authentic humanity is of paramount importance, as are her observations concerning the strength that flows from powerlessness.

Heart of Flesh, however, is not without some difficulties. I question whether the feminine is best defined by women alone. Would not a dialogue between men and women be useful in defining the feminine as well as the masculine? In spite of Chittister's protests that she values the contributions that men make to spirituality, she makes it difficult to imagine what they could be. After identifying myriad feminist values, she cites no apparent male contributions to the good of humanity.

If feminism is a "mirror image" of Christianity, as she maintains, what role can "masculinism" play? All the men whom the book praises, including Jesus, are identified as feminists, rather than simply balanced people. Her critique of "patriarchal" men sometimes slips into caricature, as when she states that "purely masculine values [do] not work"; "pride is a very male thing"; "men...determine who in the circle holds the power. Then they decide whether, like rams locking horns on a mountain top, they can unseat whoever has it...." One wonders if women who have adopted the patriarchal world view have done so "only because they been victimized themselves...and become what men want them to be," with no other personal responsibility. It is surprising to read that "the concept of spirituality, the notion that all of life must be lived conscious of the divine in the mundane, is a relatively new one," in light of the Benedictine principle of *ora et labora*. And the women of Afghanistan may be relieved to learn that "Christianity is the most...male-privileged of all the major religions on earth."

Unfortunately Chittister identifies the worldview of oppression with patriarchy and not with sin. She needs, moreover, to evaluate the contributions to culture and spirituality of both genders to further her important insights and demands.

DONALD C. MALDARI

Keats

By Andrew Motion
Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 578p \$35

John Keats's short life holds the elements of a wonderful story—an apprentice apothecary who could rival Shakespeare but is held back by the lack of a gentlemanly education, the financial muddle of his family and the vitriolic prejudices of reviewers. He nonetheless bursts through with pugnacious energy and formidable talent to achieve a body of unforgettable poems. All the while, the family disease blossoms in him, to carry him away to a lonely death at 25.

The story has been told many times, most importantly by the poet himself. Keats was so congenial and at the same time so lonely that he wrote letter after letter, packed with speculations, confessions, fantasies, anecdotes, outbursts and jokes—all transcribed, annotated and treasured. Keats's name has hardly been "writ in water" (the epitaph he dictated for his gravestone). Over the past century and a half, his poems have been memorized, performed and analyzed in forums from high school English classes to the M.L.A. convention, and the life told and re-told in countless biographies.

Familiarity is the biographer's challenge: to deal with his great predecessors and at the same time against them. As the definitive biographer of Keats for the turn of the 21st century, Andrew Motion, in this eloquent and strong-minded study, looks with both respect and competitiveness at the Keats biographers of the past. Motion, an accomplished biographer who won the Whitbread Prize for his 1993 biography of the poet Philip Larkin, gives us a more intensely human Keats than we have known before—more fiercely masculine, more conflicted about women, more embedded in political liberalism, more anxious about his own powers and his will to create and more subject to a debilitating, near-clinical depression. This Keats is multifaceted and earthy, and Motion rightly places him in a complex and fascinating historical world of personalities and ideologies.

Robert Gittings, in his 1968 biography,

revealed Keats as a sexual being. Motion goes far beyond Gittings in his picture of a sexually experienced, disillusioned, self-proclaimed outcast from love. Most readers remember Keats's enigmatic ballad, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," with its encounter between a fairy and a knight-at-arms. Was this love affair a moment of fulfillment ("And sure in language strange she said—/ I love thee true"), or a teasing mockery, the knight abandoned "On the cold hill's side," or a failure of the imagination (the knight-poet allowing his own doubts to destroy his own happiness)? In Motion's biography, Keats is a knight-at-arms who has cynically and deliberately chosen the bleakness of the "cold hill's side" because the "torments of isolation from women are preferable to the agonies of involvement with them."

In Motion's narrative, the trouble started with Keats's mother, Frances, and the anxiety of a series of abandonments caused by her husband's death, financial insecurity, remarriage and her early death from tuberculosis. That anxiety haunted Keats, causing him to experience ambiguous feelings about women, as he sought a bachelor's life, like Shakespeare's Benedick in "Much Ado About Nothing," deeply distrustful of any moves to marriage. Yet he sought sexual fulfillment for money and was known to be flirtatious, but in a guarded way. Such an attitude can likewise be seen in his jealous rages with his fiancée, Fanny Brawne, to whom he clung with desperate desire and yet from whom he consistently distanced himself in fear. The highly sexed and intensely masculinist Keats of Motion's biography is not an altogether pleasant person: a Romantic, but resentful of women, capable of misogynist rage and loathing himself for it.

This biography emphasizes national politics as well as sexual. Motion's Keats is a political liberal in almost all that he does, bringing his working-class exuberant sympathies to live and write as a liberal in an age of Tory repression. Even in his choice to study medicine—usually seen as a decision forced upon him by an unsympathetic guardian—this Keats is forward-looking, linking himself to the practitioners most sympathetic to political reform. The Keats of this biography is not an escapist, but a critic of privilege and corruption. He may momentarily long for the ideal world of beauty, the nightingale's world "of beechen green, and shadows numberless." But that world is sought not as an end in itself but as a cure for the world's pain: "A thing of beauty is a

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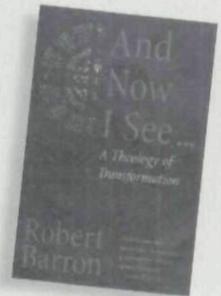
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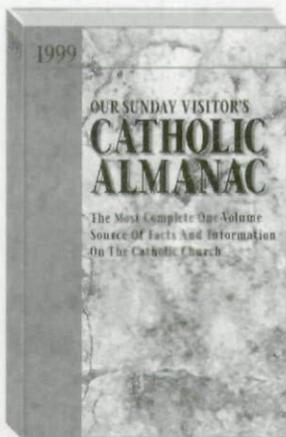


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joy for ever." In Motion's reading such beauty is "not an escape but a medicine...not a way of arresting the destructive flow of time, but of criticising corrupt power."

Even Keats's powerful theory of the growth of personal identity—the world as a "Vale of Soul-Making"—becomes in this account an outgrowth of liberal politics, an insistence that salvation will never be found in established religion or inherited systems, but in the individual's own responsibility to understand suffering and integrate it into his own destiny—a valuable corrective to the usual tendency to see Keats as solely an aesthete, unconcerned with daily life.

This biography reshapes our view of Keats in important ways, for our age rightly demands that poetry be seen as politics, especially sexual politics. Necessarily but unfortunately, the result is a Keats with less joy and a lesser sense of beauty—though perhaps more of truth—than Walter Jackson Bate showed us in his great 1963 biography, which so lovingly detailed Keats's achievements of language and imagination as bulwarks against a darker world. Those achievements are here less stirring, though the poems are deftly and skillfully presented. This Keats is so frequently overwhelmed by depression, by what he calls his "horrid Morbidity of Temperament," that the narrative sometimes feels over-determined, as if all that Keats thought and wrote and did had been prescribed from the start by his masculinity, anxiety about abandonment, class and lack of money.

At its best, this biography shows us a tragic Keats—a man intensely seeking to understand and feel his own suffering, self-contradiction, anxiety, sadness and ironic consciousness of defeat. This is certainly one side of Keats, who wrote to his friend Bailey, "I scarcely remember counting upon any Happiness." But that same Keats immediately went on to tell of the human capacity to negate sorrow and to move through sensation into a different realization: "The setting sun will always set me to rights—or if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existance [sic] and pick about the Gravel." That sparrow was later to become his nightingale, singing the "self-same song that found a path/ Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home./ She stood in tears among the alien corn." In Motion's powerful narrative, I miss the Keats of such imaginative surprises and transcendental moments.

NICHOLAS JONES

