

Books in Brief

Dulles: A Biography of Eleanor, Allen, and John Foster Dulles and Their Family Network

by Leonard Mosley
Dial/James Wade, 530 pp., \$12.95

Some political families thrive on public performance and elections, others, on private influence and the assignment of power. *Dulles* is the story of a family of the second kind, a family who dominated American foreign policy in the 1950s; whose taste for political authority united self-interest and morality; and whose mixed legacy haunts us still.

The three Dulles siblings (of five children) shared a lifelong devotion to diplomacy, but each expressed that devotion differently. John Foster was always the grave statesman: analytical and moralistic, possessing a shrewd sense of realpolitik and self-promotion. Allen was the adventurer: high-spirited, humane, a bon vivant and a congenial devotee of intrigue for its own sake. Eleanor was the thoroughgoing professional: Though curtailed in her diplomatic career because she was a woman, she remained hardworking, unpretentious, effective, and genuinely dedicated to advancing international equity and order.

Mosley unfolds the lives of these three gifted people and the implications of their personalities in the urgent, anecdotal manner of a novelist. There are some compelling sequences, especially those devoted to Allen's wartime cloak-and-dagger operations, but, alas, the subject deserves better than Mosley's breathless narrative. For besides plot, personality, and anecdote, politics involves ideology, and to this Mosley is blind. The cold war, in which Mosley's characters played the decisive roles of their lives, is simplistically explained here as Soviet hostility and American resistance. The Dulles family are thus cleansed of all ideological motives for their actions, a tactic that makes for a fast-paced story but not for history.

Yet, intellectual lapses aside, the book illuminates one dark passage in American political life: how Foster's untouchable authority at State protected Allen's romantic individualism at the CIA, granting the CIA a life and morality of its own and sanctioning an atmosphere of secrecy and conspiracy in government. This is the same atmosphere Allen so relished in espionage, in which "sometimes one

never knows until the day of judgment who, after all, is deceiving whom."

—JAMES SLOAN ALLEN

Fifth Avenue: A Very Social History

by Kate Simon
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 371 pp., \$12.96

In her account of the glittering social events held at the Waldorf-Astoria around 1900, Kate Simon seems bemused by the wide-eyed curiosity seekers on the street, for whom such spectacles were "fantasies of the good life." In its own sophisticated way, however, Simon's book gawks dreamily at the same pedigreed world. Ambling up Fifth Avenue in a leisurely, neo-Proustian fashion, the author mixes elaborate architectural commentary with an unauthorized biography of nineteenth-century American nobility. The walking tour might just as well have been titled "A la recherche des maisons perdues," since many of the buildings Simon discusses have been gone as long as the various Whitneys and Astors who built them.

Furthermore, Simon's appetite for the intimate life of fashionable society—the scandalous opulence and the opulent scandals—is a little too prodigious for her own good. That Tiffany scornfully turned up its nose at Diamond Jim Brady's request for gold-plated, jewel-encrusted bicycles; that Mrs. William Kissam Vanderbilt di-

vorced her husband and subsequently became Mrs. Oliver H. P. Belmont; that Anna Gould married a French aristocrat who proceeded to squander \$11 million of her money on gambling and other women—all this may be of interest, but only to people for whom gossip is a valid form of history.

Then too, the gamiest anecdotes in the book are already well known to us from the works of John Dos Passos, E. L. Doctorow, and Stephen Birmingham, none of whom receives an acknowledgment. (The omission in Birmingham's case is particularly regrettable, since Simon's chapter on prominent Jewish American families follows *Our Crowd* as faithfully as an Irish terrier.)

The horror vacui to which Simon attributes the systematic overdecoration of so many of the buildings she describes must be contagious, for it infects her prose as well. From Washington Square all the way to Harlem, her inventory of ornate splendors continues unrelentingly in a style that is frequently corrupted by its subject. The following is typical: "The bar [was] decorated with twenty-five thousand dollars' worth of Bouguereau nymphs gamboling with satyrs and a Pan leaping with heated bacchantes in a spacious ambience of textured ceiling, cut glass, fancy pilaster and shining top hats." Densely packed and overripe, Simon's book about Fifth Avenue is an exhausting social history.

—ROBERT F. MOSS



FINE PRINT

Perfect Pitch in Albany

by Doris Grumbach

ONCE LIVED in or around Albany, New York, for a stretch of almost 20 years. I thought I knew something about its history; its geography; its heavily Irish Catholic population; its patriarchal, dictatorial, and benevolent Democratic political machine, run, until his recent death, by Uncle Dan O'Connell. But after reading William Kennedy's exciting, mad, rich new novel, *Billy Phelan's Greatest Game* (Viking, \$8.95), I realize that I hardly knew the old place at all.

Kennedy is a born-and-bred patriot of Albany. He knows more about his special Hibernian turf than anyone else. He knows every bar, hotel, store, bowling alley, pool hall, and whorehouse that ever opened in North Albany. He knows where the Irish had their picnics and parties—and what went on at them; where their churches were; where they bet on horses, played the numbers, and gathered for poker. He can re-create with absolute accuracy the city room conversations at the *Albany Times-Union*, where his hero, Martin Daugherty, works (and where Kennedy once worked and found the material for his first novel, *The Ink Truck*, about an Albany Newspaper Guild strike).

Most important for this new book,

Kennedy's pitch is perfect. His is the true comic spirit, conveyed by a tumult of fierce and wonderful language. Conversations in places frequented by his bookies and gamblers and politicians are quick-witted and often filled with unsavory, irreverent street talk and with brawling, wise guy, barroom argot. Kennedy is the unquestioned authority on the dialogue in the State Street bowling alley on that momentous night in 1938 when Billy Phelan rolls 299 against champion Scotty Strech (who "lived with his bowling ball as if it were a third testicle"). At the end of the game, Scotty falls dead. "Holy Mother of God, that was a quick decision," says Charlie McCall, an onlooker who is "the most powerful young man in town."

Charlie's subsequent kidnapping is the novel's main event. Politically and socially, the McCall family rules the city, determining the present and future of its population. Rescuing Charlie takes some days, during which minor events play themselves out. An entire *Decameron* of anecdotes, memories, and details of small lives enriches the narrative, so by the time Charlie is back home, we too are authorities on the corrupt politics and on the life of the bum; the small-time bookie; the call girl; Martin's old father and young,

priesthood-bound son; Melissa (mistress at the same time of Martin and his father) doing a play in town; Billy's long-absent father; and Billy's lady friend, Angie, who wants to marry Billy and tries to pull a neat trick on him. To these, add a few non-Irish characters like Ben Berman, who was the city's best tailor; his son, Jake, the liberal lawyer who tries to run against the McCall machine; and Jake's son, Morrie, the black sheep in whom "the worthy Berman family strain had gone slightly askew."

Kennedy works them all into a rich gallimaufry, seasoned by his own unsavory language. The meat in this Irish stew is fathers, sons, uncles, and grandfathers, for Albany's Irish society is heavy on the male side and its activities take place in men-only sanctums. The other sex is present, in bed or at home, but women are usually on the minds of these men only when everything else fails or closes.

Kennedy's affection for the goings-on in Albany during the Twenties and Thirties was first manifest in *Legs*, a book he wrote a few years ago about Jack Diamond. "He [was] not merely the dude of all gangsters, the most active brain in the New York underworld, but ... one of the truly new American Irishmen of his day: Horatio Alger out of Finn McCool and Jesse James ... a pioneer, the founder of the first truly modern gang, the dauphin of the town for years." The same rolling prose and informed anecdote that distinguished Kennedy's first-rate, fictionalized account of *Legs* Diamond are present in his depiction of the McCall gang and its friends and enemies—those who make up the close and closed society of Colonie Street: "They all clustered together ... to live among their own kind, and the solidarity became an obvious political asset." Fighting, challenging, and defending one another, profoundly Irish and equally profoundly American, the cast of *Billy Phelan* is, quite simply, a wonder—a magical bunch of thugs, lovers, and game players. No one writing in America today (I say this with assurance, being prepared at the same time for contradiction from some quarter or other) has Kennedy's rich and fertile gift of gab; his pure, verbal energy; his love of people, and their kith and kin. Like his characters, he too is a wonder. ●

