

the terms for a century-long debate over what it means to make art in America.

Corn dissects the antagonism between Alfred Stieglitz (and his followers), who embraced a romantic “soil and spirit” idea of art, and the “machine age” aesthetic imported by Europeans influenced by futurism, cubism, and Dada. To the latter, America was not a vast country with a complex history but rather an edgy, jazzy place (they rarely ventured outside New York City) whose skyscrapers, bridges, and bright lights were icons of modernity. The author takes amused pleasure in the enthusiasms of the Europeans; especially acute is her account of how the wealthy, Yale-educated expatriate Murphy, with his precise, hard-edged renderings of commercial products such as safety razors, fountain pens, and watches, fulfilled “French expectations of how a modern American was supposed to paint and act.”

Ultimately, though, her sympathy lies with those Americans—Demuth, O’Keeffe, and Sheeler—who learned from the Europeans but also got out from under their expectations to create a way of seeing that was both modernist and deeply rooted in the American experience. “It is more difficult in America to work,” Demuth wrote in 1921, then added, “perhaps that will add a quality.” This book comes as close as any to capturing that elusive quality.

—Martha Bayles

BRUCE CHATWIN:

A Biography.

By Nicholas Shakespeare. Doubleday.
618 pp. \$35

As he neared death at age 48, British novelist Bruce Chatwin (1940–1989) blamed his illness on, variously, a visit to a bat cave, a rotten thousand-year-old egg he had eaten in China, and a fungus previously reported only in a handful of Asian peasants and “a killer whale cast up on the shores of Arabia.” Chatwin was really dying of AIDS, but mythologizing lay at the heart of his life as well as his five novels.

Now Shakespeare, a novelist, reveals the man behind the myths. Although Chatwin burned piles of papers during his illness, the biographer still had plenty to work with. Chatwin’s widow offered access to family papers and to restricted material at Oxford University. Shakespeare also gathered interview tapes, letters and diaries, and recollections from nearly everyone who crossed paths with Chatwin.

The result is a comprehensive portrait of a man so multifaceted that art critic Robert Hughes called him not a person but a scrum. By the time Chatwin published his first novel, *In Patagonia* (1977), he was only in his thirties and had already been a renowned art expert at Sotheby’s, a journalist, and an archaeologist whose pet theory was that settling down engenders human aggression.

His literary output was equally unclassifiable. Noting that Chatwin “made life difficult for booksellers, but vastly more interesting to readers,” Shakespeare calls his work “the most glamorous example of a genre in which so-called ‘travel writing’ began to embrace a wider range: autobiography, philosophy, history, *belles lettres*, romantic fiction.” *The Songlines* (1987), the bestseller about a journey across the Australian outback, was even up for a prestigious travel-writing award until the author reminded the judges it was a novel.

As Shakespeare explains, Chatwin’s life was full of paradoxes. He carried on a not-so-secret life as a gay man even as he shared a deep bond with a wife of almost unearthly patience. He was a middle-class boy from Birmingham who grew up to have an address book in which Jackie Onassis’s phone number appeared just before an oryx herder’s. While idealizing nomads’ ability to travel light, he spent a lifetime collecting beautiful objects. He traveled the world despite a bad case of hypochondria, toting a rucksack filled with pills. He was an impossibly handsome charmer but a difficult—and frequent—houseguest who never offered to do the dishes. Unlike *With Chatwin: Portrait of a Writer* (1997), editor Susannah Clapp’s slim memoir, this first-rate biography shows Chatwin in all his complexity.

—Rebecca A. Clay

BLOOMSBURY AND FRANCE:

Art and Friends.

By Mary Ann Caws and Sarah Bird Wright. Oxford Univ. Press. 430 pp. \$35

Generations of artists have escaped the pressure of conformity and the conventional pieties of their time by going abroad, even if only across the English Channel. The resulting encounters have often brought unexpected growth, cross-pollination, and a bountiful alchemy in the exile’s later work. E. M. Forster found freedom in Italy and India, Paul Bowles his true voice in Tangier. From Ernest Hem-

ingway to James Baldwin, the sharpest observers of American life went to Paris (always Paris) to find the distance they needed.

Caws, a professor at the City University of New York, and Wright, an independent scholar, contend that such alchemy goes a long way toward explaining the high-modernist carryings-on of the English clique known as Bloomsbury. The members of the Bloomsbury group frequently visited France to relax, to paint, to visit friends. The Bloomsbury artists, particularly Roger Fry, Duncan Grant, and Vanessa Bell, spent years in a succession of rented Provençal villas, painting fishing boats and still lifes and writing enthusiastic letters home about the quality of the light. A few of the writers—notably Dorothy Strachey Bussy, Lytton Strachey's sister, who translated André Gide's work into English—contributed significantly to the flow of French literary ideas to England.

But all this is very far from demonstrating that France exerted a formative influence on any of Bloomsbury's truly major figures—

Virginia Woolf, say—or that, as the book jacket claims, “without France there would have been no Bloomsbury.” The text falls far short of such arguments, instead providing a compendium of Bloomsbury travel trivia, an album for aficionados who want to hear not what the artists and writers discussed at Pontigny but rather that Lytton Strachey when there “suffered terribly from the absence of his usual egg at breakfast.” The authors report every detail of the Woolfs' cross-Channel trips, including the fact that, while driving south on March 26, 1928, Virginia “had to replace her woolen jersey with a silk one because of the increasing heat.”

This is not the stuff of which significant cross-cultural influence is made. Whatever the role of the French connection in the English avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s—and hints dropped here and there suggest that it was, indeed, more than trivial—it is not to be unearthed from this catalogue of Bloomsbury's ultimately run-of-the-mill Francophilia.

—Amy Schwartz

Religion & Philosophy

THE HEART IS A LITTLE TO THE LEFT:

Essays on Public Morality.

By William Sloane Coffin.

Dartmouth/New England. 95 pp. \$15.95

HERE I STAND:

My Struggle for a Christianity of Integrity, Love and Equality.

By John Shelby Spong. Harper. 464 pp.

\$25

FAITH WORKS:

Lessons from the Life of an Activist Preacher.

By Jim Wallis. Random House. 400 pp.

\$23.95

If the Protestant Right is too much with us, where is the Protestant Left? These three books may help us see.

William Sloane Coffin is the ghost of Christian Liberalism Past. Chaplain of Yale University during the Vietnam years, then senior minister of Riverside Church in New York City, he stands for engagement in the

world. Like liberal Protestant leaders since the early 19th century, he brings the Christian voice to the public table in a genial, reformist, and nonproselytizing way. In this slight collection of college talks, Coffin comes out foursquare for love, multiculturalism, and helping the poor, and against national self-righteousness, homophobia, and war. There's not much help here for those looking to sort out the moral conundrums of our time. The discussion of war raises hope that he will wrestle with the challenge of dealing with Iraqis, Serbs, and other contemporary aggressors, but Coffin, president emeritus of the nuclear freeze campaign, smoothly veers off onto the comfortable terrain of anti-nuclearism.

No less self-assured is the ghost of Christian Liberalism Present—John Shelby Spong, the just-retired *évêque terrible* of the Episcopal Church, Diocese of Newark. Spong has made himself notorious by using academic biblical criticism to assail traditional Christian orthodoxy. Along the way, he has championed a liberal ecclesiastical agenda, beginning with