

with the end of the relatively egalitarian distribution of income that prevailed from 1947 to 1973, with the onset of inflation and the low economic growth of the years 1973–82, with the cultural revolution that produced no-fault divorce, and with the growing emphasis on abortion and other noneconomic issues. It coincided, in other words, with the change from an industrial America dominated by big government, big business, and big labor to a postindustrial America that is more decentralized, more culturally various, more Tocquevillian. And a Tocquevillian America without the strong parties of the Jackson era does not seem to produce the high turnouts of the 1830s.

Which may not be so bad. “Citizens can be monitorial rather than informed,” Schudson argues. In a time when war does not rage and economic survival is not threatened, sensible people can go about their business just keeping a weather eye out for political trouble. In-depth news about politics and government is available, and in increasingly diverse forms, but citizens are free to consult it only when they need it (television news ratings spiked upward with the onset of the Persian Gulf

War). It is easy to vote in America—far easier than it was 35 years ago, when states required up to two years’ residency for voters and almost half of all blacks were barred from the polling places. Registering to vote today is as simple as getting a driver’s license—indeed, one can register while getting a driver’s license. How many Americans sit at home unable to go anywhere because they haven’t had a chance to get to the motor vehicle bureau?

Yet as painless as voting is, half of all Americans don’t bother. Is there any reason to believe that the political process would be improved by the votes of people so little interested in civic life? Those decrying low turnout must assume there is. Not so Schudson. “Monitorial citizens,” he writes, “have no more virtue than citizens of the past—but not less, either.” Democracy will never be perfect and the citizenry can always stand improvement, but Schudson argues persuasively that we have less to bemoan than many think.

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Chronicler of a Dying World

ANTON CHEKHOV:
A Life.

By Donald Rayfield. Henry Holt. 674 pp. \$35

CHEKHOV:
The Hidden Ground.

By Philip Callow. Ivan R. Dee. 428 pp. \$30

by Clive Davis

At the end of the 1880s, after he had already enjoyed success with his short stories and his first full-length play, *Ivanov*, Anton Chekhov submitted a new work for the stage, *The Wood Demon*. Back came an abruptly frank rejection from the actor-manager Alexander Lensky: “I will say only one thing: write tales. You refer scornfully to the stage and to dramatic form. You esteem them too little to write a play.” Although the play was eventually

taken up by another company—Chekhov was too desperate for a 500-ruble advance to refuse the offer—the clumsy production was comprehensively ridiculed and closed after just three performances. Bruised by the entire experience, Chekhov refused to allow *The Wood Demon* to be published.

But this is not the usual tale of a strong-willed genius thwarted by hacks and philistines. As the English novelist and poet Philip Callow records in his thoughtful

biography, Chekhov was sufficiently self-critical to agree with Lensky about his lukewarm attitude toward the theater: "I haven't got the time, the talent, nor, probably, enough love of the craft for it." Eventually *The Wood Demon* was reworked and transformed—by a process of alchemy which, as both Callow and Donald Rayfield admit, remains mysterious—into the work we know as *Uncle Vanya*.

A century later, we acknowledge Chekhov as the father of modern theater. Yet one of the more fascinating aspects of his short life—he died of tuberculosis at 44 in 1904—is that the plays for which he is remembered emerged in the final phase of his career. *The Seagull* appeared in 1896, to be greeted with bafflement at its premiere in Saint Petersburg. Revived two years later by Konstantin Stanislavsky's new Moscow Art Theatre, it was swiftly followed by *Uncle Vanya* and *Three Sisters*. The most celebrated of all Chekhov's works, *The Cherry Orchard*, opened in January 1904;

less than six months later its creator was dead. As in the case of Gustav Mahler, another figure who simultaneously looks to the old certainties of the 19th century and to the convulsions of our own age, Chekhov's journey was cut short.

Chekhov is, as Callow declares in the final line of his study, as modern as the new century before us. The knowledge that the playwright's widow, the actress Olga Knipper, survived him by more than 50 years prompts tantalizing thoughts of what might have been. Then again, we also know only too well what befell Chekhov's ineffectual squires and aristocrats in the first half of this century. If his admirer, the resourceful and tirelessly proletarian Maxim Gorky,

could be ground down by the routine brutality of Lenin and Stalin, what hope would there have been for Chekhov? Harrowing though it may be, his factual report on a tsarist penal colony, *The Island of Sakhalin* (the fruit of a heroic journey of discovery to the Far East in 1890), pales in comparison with almost any page taken at random from the recent accounts of the Soviet Revolution by the historians Richard Pipes and Orlando Figes.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of both new biographies is that they help bring Chekhov's short stories back into focus. One of Chekhov's translators and biographers, Ronald Hingley, once remarked that of every 20 English people who have seen *The Cherry Orchard*, probably 15 have never heard of "Ward No. 6," a bleak tale that has been seen as a precursor of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*. If that comment was true 30 years ago, the ratio of theatergoers to prose readers has probably risen sharply since then. (One of the hottest tickets in London last year was for David Hare's adaptation of *Ivanov*—although

no doubt the presence of Ralph Fiennes in the title role had something to do with the success.) Yet in "Ward No. 6" or "The Lady with the Dog," that beautifully chiseled, enigmatic tale of adultery, Chekhov bequeathed us images of his society as compelling as any to be found in the plays.

Part of Chekhov's attraction is that he was more than a man of letters. Born into a lowly family in the southern port of Taganrog, he studied medicine and qualified as a general practitioner. Since his father, Pavel, had shown little acumen as a shopkeeper, it had long been apparent that he and his brothers would have to rely on their own wits. Chekhov



learned this lesson in his midteens, when his father decamped to Moscow (where his two eldest sons were studying) in the hope of escaping his ruinous financial problems. Chekhov's mother joined him soon afterward. The young scholar was left to cope in Taganrog for the next three years. Decades later, Rayfield observes, the playwright channeled his memories of the family's travails into the plot of *The Cherry Orchard*, the inexorable dissolution of Mme. Ranevsky's household mirroring the indignities endured by Chekhov and his relations.

Years later, even after he had established himself first as a critic-journalist and then as an author, Chekhov remained ambivalent about his vocation as a writer. He could be as ruthless as any exponent of art for art's sake in subordinating his personal relations to his craft; marriage to Olga Knipper came only at the end of his life. At other times, all too aware of his duty to support his relations, he could find ample solace in practicing medicine.

At least in our imagination, the archetypal Russian writer is a noisy, domineering figure, as much evangelist as author. We tend to think of the all-embracing philosophizing of Tolstoy, the tormented mysticism of Dostoyevsky, or, in the present day, the tireless exhortations of Solzhenitsyn. Chekhov is a very different case. Callow describes how, during one of Chekhov's recurrent bouts of illness, the writer received a sickbed visit from Tolstoy. Ignoring the clinic's 10-minute time limit on visits, not to mention the patient's obvious exhaustion, the great man subjected him to a half-hour monologue ranging from immorality to aesthetics. Chekhov, too weak to offer much response and too diffident to ask the visitor to leave, suffered another hemorrhage early the next morning.

Chekhov's aversion to speechifying, his unerring ability to disappear behind his work, appeals to modern readers. That skill did not prevent him from wondering, in moments of intense self-doubt, whether he possessed the temperament of a true artist. Self-deprecation and self-mockery became a form of armor, writes Callow:

"He was a perfect example of the kind of artist defined by Auden as an Alice, in a scheme the poet derived from *Alice in Wonderland*. 'Alices never make a fuss. Like all human beings they suffer, but they are stoics who do not weep or lose their temper, or undress in public. Though they are generally people with stout moral standards, they are neither preachers nor reformers. They can be sharp, usually in an ironical manner, and tender, but the passionate outburst is not for them.' Auden's chiding of artistic pretensions—'Art is small beer'—would have pleased him, as would Auden's reason for writing, 'to try to organize my scattered thoughts of living into a whole, to relate everything to everything else.'"

If all this gives the impression that Chekhov is a candidate for sainthood, Rayfield sets out to present a fully rounded portrait. In the age of Kitty Kelley, that may lead us to expect revelations of all manner of debauchery, but Rayfield's accumulation of domestic detail—largely gleaned from Chekhov's sprawling correspondence—reveals nothing to interest the *National Enquirer*. Though no stranger to prostitutes, Chekhov seems to have had difficulty sustaining a full physical relationship with women who were close to him. As he himself explained, talking of the female sex in uncharacteristically coarse terms, "You screw her once, but the next time you can't get it in. I have all the equipment, but I don't function—my talent is buried in the ground." While there is certainly a self-centered streak to Chekhov's treatment of the women around him, particularly his loyal sister Mariya, this is not the stuff of grand juries. And we should not forget that his determination to preserve his inner peace was also the act of a man who knew that illness would claim him sooner rather than later.

There is no shortage of domestic color in Rayfield's narrative. Professor of Russian Literature at Queen Mary & Westfield College in London and the author of *Chekhov: The Evolution of His Art* (1975), Rayfield spent three years in the archives, and he possesses unassailable knowledge of his subject. Yet the book

refuses to come to life, in part because Rayfield is determined to keep the man and the artist almost entirely separate. "Biography is not criticism," he declares in his preface. Plays and stories alike are passed over at breathless speed. Rayfield prefers to lunge from phase to phase of Chekhov's domestic life, working his way forward in brief chapters based on almost a day-by-day chronology. Friends and relations wander in and out of the narrative, and we learn how many pounds of pork breast and candles were delivered to Chekhov's Melikhovo estate on April 15, 1893. It is not long before the reader is overwhelmed with data, some important, much trivial. Of course, there is plenty to mull over here at conferences and Russian lit seminars, but notwithstanding the generous praise from Arthur Miller on the dust jacket, the general reader is likely to fall by the wayside long before journey's end.

Callow, by contrast, brings a novelist's lighter touch to the proceedings. Though

he has not studied Russian and has never visited Chekhov's homeland, he sketches vignettes that bear eloquent tribute to a writer who bore "the stigma of genius." Callow openly acknowledges his debt to Rayfield's two studies, but makes a much more satisfactory job of sculpting the raw material. If his book is unlikely to displace V. S. Pritchett's earlier biography, it still offers an elegant introduction to an enigmatic chronicler of a dying world.

"Enigmatic" indeed seems an understatement where Chekhov is concerned. Both biographers address the perennial argument over the comic element in the plays. On the surface, Chekhov's own views appear explicit: *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Seagull* are both described in the text as comedies. Stanislavsky seems to have preferred to see all of the late dramas as essentially tragic. Subsequent generations have had their own views. Almost a hundred years later, we are still listening to the laughter in the dark.

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History

SECRECY: The American Experience.

By Daniel Patrick Moynihan.
Yale Univ. Press. 265 pp. \$22.50

Chairing a congressional commission on government secrecy in 1996, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D.-N.Y.) appended to its report one of the more brilliant historical essays to be found in the huge and generally lackluster archives of committee prints. Now he has expanded that essay into a book, providing a broader context for, and bringing new urgency to, the growing debate over how much secrecy the government needs.

Whatever may have been true in Asian despotisms or even in Europe, in the United States secrecy developed as a consequence of the great international conflicts of the 20th century, with that development most extensive during the administration of Woodrow Wilson. In 1915, Wilson called on Congress to pass laws to "crush out" those "born under other flags . . . who have poured the poison of disloyalty into the very arteries of our national life." "No president," Moynihan observes severely,

"had ever spoken like that before; none has since." Upon declaring war with Germany in 1917, Congress passed the Espionage Act. A clause granting extensive powers of censorship, for which Wilson lobbied passionately, was struck from the bill in the Senate by a single vote, but the penalties in the law remained harsh. A year later, Congress passed the even more severe Sedition Act, under which Eugene V. Debs, presidential candidate of the Socialist Party, was sentenced to 10 years in prison; a film producer was convicted because his movie, *The Spirit of '76*, was "anti-British"; and a minister got 15 years for suggesting that Jesus was a pacifist.

As well as pointing to such excesses of the past, Moynihan develops the housekeeping case for limiting government secrecy: far too many documents are classified and many are overclassified, practices that are expensive and wasteful. While the Clinton administration has reduced the number of officers and officials classifying documents, the number of documents classified has gone up. Higher productivity!