

## OTHER TITLES

*History*

**CHINESE ROUNDABOUT:** Essays in History and Culture. *By Jonathan D. Spence. Norton. 400 pp. \$24.95*

With China's old guard dying off and the country seemingly poised on the eve of a new era, many observers are now searching the nation's past for possible clues to its future. They could not hope for a more congenial guide than Yale's Jonathan Spence.

The historian's breadth, wit, and subtlety are all on display as he ranges from the Ming Dynasty in the 17th century to the tragedy of Tiananmen Square, from a Chinese scholar in 18th-century Paris to the contemporary poet of protest Bei Dao. *Chinese Roundabout* is something of a smorgasbord, one that even offers an essay on "Food." Reading Chinese history through its menus, Spence tells how, during the famines in the late Qing dynasty, the poor fed on ground leaves, sawdust, and peanut hulls, while the boy emperor P'u-i (immortalized recently in the film *The Last Emperor*) still followed the 17th-century imperial protocols of dining. "Processions of eunuchs brought tables of lavish dishes to his presence on his command, each silver dish placed upon a porcelain dish of hot water to keep it warm . . ." In fact, P'u-i's stomach was too delicate for the 900 pounds of meat and 240 chickens and ducks prepared each month for his nightly ceremonial banquets. After the official repasts, the boy emperor would consume a modest meal in his consort's kitchen.

Spence warns the reader to expect only "a certain overenthusiastic or even harebrained eclecticism" from his book. But through this eclecticism runs Spence's major theme: Western notions cannot be applied to Chinese history or society. Spence also overturns many a long-held idea about China's past. For example, greedy, unscrupulous Westerners are usually blamed for spreading opium through Chinese society. But the Chinese, Spence shows, had their own reason for smoking the drug: It made the bruising lot of the poor, the laborers and

rickshaw drivers, bearable. As for the rich, Spence tells of one aristocrat who encouraged his son to smoke in order to dampen his reformist zeal. (But how representative is this example? That is often the question about Spence's work.) Spence likewise challenges the conventional wisdom that communism was like a bomb that obliterated the old Confucian social order. He shows (as Harvard's Tu Weiming does elsewhere) that the basic Confucian family structure and hierarchy have survived Mao's revolutionary fervor.

John King Fairbank was the dean of a pioneering generation of China specialists who dealt with the general, the overview, the large subject. Spence belongs to a younger generation who treat the particular, the local instance, and the foibles of the past. Before he died last September, Fairbank praised Spence's *Search for Modern China* for giving "us the sense of immediacy, of almost personal contact with the subject . . . of history." The doyen seemed to be naming his successor.

**DRIVEN PATRIOT:** The Life and Times of James Forrestal. *By Townsend Hoopes and Douglas Brinkley. Knopf. 587 pp. \$30*

Michael Forrestal once observed of his father that if he had been more balanced, he would have been less interesting. Forrestal and his elite peers—Dean Acheson, Robert Lovett, and John J. McCloy, among others—served in World War I, helped steer the Allied effort during World War II, and then created the mechanisms to wage the Cold War. But while those others may have had their personal failings and career setbacks, only Forrestal broke under the pressure of real and imagined disappointments. He committed suicide in 1949, one year after becoming America's first sec-



retary of defense. Yet his tragedy illuminates more about modern American history than do the successes of his talented peers.

Forrestal's resume was, on the surface, typical of the era's elite: an Ivy League education (Princeton), followed by a brilliant career in finance (Forrestal's was at Dillon, Read, now a preeminent blue-chip banking firm, then something of an ambitious Wall Street upstart). In the 1940s, his formidable capacity was harnessed to a national purpose when, like so many of his Wall Street brethren, he moved to Washington to run the war bureaucracy. Eventually, as secretary of the navy, he directed what was possibly the largest navy in history. Known to all who mattered, Forrestal impressed everyone with his commanding presence and political savvy.

Whence came the wound? Like McCloy, Forrestal was from the wrong side of the tracks. But McCloy was at least a Protestant, while Forrestal was Irish Catholic, born in Beacon, N.Y., in 1892, the son of an immigrant. He believed it necessary to abandon both family and religion in order to succeed. (At Forrestal's funeral, the 29-year-old Michael met his father's relatives for the first time.) Forrestal used his power and renown to build not a network of social alliances but rather a wall of privacy around himself. He confided in no one, not in his wife (even before her alcoholism) nor in any of the succession of women he saw outside his marriage. Driving himself, he refused to take a badly needed respite from government work after the war (as many of his peers did). His triumph, his appointment as secretary of defense, was followed so closely by his tragedy that Washington and the nation were stunned.

Hoopes, who had a long career in government service, came to know Forrestal while working under him at the Defense Department. He and coauthor Brinkley, an historian at Hofstra, have produced a sympathetic yet unblinking portrait of the man. Beyond Forrestal's life story, they tell how government grew too large to be controlled by even the most towering of individuals. Before World War II, Washington was so small and informal that it resembled an 18th-century clique—far from the outsized bureaucratic maze that it started to become during the war. Effective infighter that he was, Forrestal nonetheless sidestepped the

growing complexities by adhering to overly simplistic loyalties. He took the Navy's side against military unification so effectively that he sabotaged the newly created Department of Defense. Then, when he was appointed its first secretary, he faced the herculean task of undoing his own damage. Men more at peace with themselves, with friends and family to comfort them, overcame worse blunders. Forrestal had no such resources. Late one evening in 1949, a Defense Department aide suggested to Forrestal that he go home. "Go home?" Forrestal replied. "Home to what?"

#### **HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL WRITINGS.**

*By Carl von Clausewitz. Edited and trans. by Peter Paret and Daniel Moran. Princeton. 397 pp. \$29.95*

**UNDERSTANDING WAR:** Essays on Clausewitz and the History of Military Power. *By Peter Paret. Princeton. 229 pp. \$24.95*

The strategic analyst Bernard Brodie has declared that Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* is "not simply the greatest, but the only great book about war." On the face of it, this is slightly puzzling. The book—if that is the right word for the work-in-progress, unfinished when Clausewitz died at age 51 in the cholera epidemic of 1831—is really a set of essays riddled with gaps and inconsistencies. Given that *On War* also reflects the personal experience of a unique time and place—Clausewitz's familiarity with war was limited to fighting the Republican and then the Napoleonic French—the book might well have failed to live up to his hope that it "would not be forgotten after two or three years."

Yet anyone who reads Clausewitz will immediately see why he has endured. Both in *On War* and in the essays collected in *Historical and Political Writings*, Clausewitz reveals an endlessly invigorating capacity to transcend the limitations of his sprawling material in his attempt to study war systematically. Where other writers have tried to construct a science of war, Clausewitz does not disguise the recalcitrance of the subject. He announces his idea about "friction" (the tendency of things to go slightly wrong at every stage): "Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is very diffi-