

GUARDIAN BOOKS

Companion of honour

by Gwyn A. Williams



POLITICIANS, SOCIALISM AND HISTORIANS,
by A. J. P. Taylor
(Hamish Hamilton,
£12.50).

THE professor of history who initiated me into what was evidently intended to be a dark, sullen and painful craft would not permit any book by A. J. P. Taylor to sully his university library. He created a black market in bardic name) of positively Polish dimensions. AJP used to circulate secretly through post-war west Wales like some samizdat document of incalculable value.

At much the same time, having offered my service to the Yugoslavs in the construction of their optimistic Brotherhood and Unity Highway between Belgrade and Zagreb and, for my pains, having been thrown into jail in Trieste (or Trst) I discovered that AJP, as a defender of the Slovenes, was circulating in much the same manner through Istria.

It must have been about then that I first read his Habsburg Monarchy, an experience from which I have never wholly recovered. I hope I never shall.

AJP, in his autobiographical Accident Prone reprinted here, says he is "still reasonably content" with his Habsburg Monarchy. How arrogant can even a Lancastrian get? That marvellous book will be read and savoured until all the holy

cow of history come home. If its author hasn't slaughtered them in the meantime. After all these years, I still don't know whether its brilliant, blinding paradoxes are the subject's or the author's.

Levi Strauss, the anthropologist, used to say that, before tackling any job, he'd immerse himself in Marx's 18 Brumaire as in a cold shower. Marx himself said no one could become a socialist unless he went through the fire-bath of Feuerbach. I think no one can really become a historian unless he or she has wrestled with AJP's Habsburgs.

You can say much the same of this book. It's no weighty tome. It's a collection of his reviews over last 20 years with a couple of essays in autobiography written with eye deceptively mild and tongue occasionally in cheek. Chucking the kitchen sink at us, say you? Feeding us through a sieve, say I. Don't put your daughter on the historical stage, Mrs Worthington, unless she's read these essays. If her response is negative, let her take up something useless like accountancy or harmless like English or gormless like sociology. For this is an introduction to vintage AJP, which means it is an introduction to the practice of history as a creative art.

But how horrible the English of Substance have been to their Thucydides! For once, I am content to accept AJP's endless snipes at the word "Britain." That professor who banned him from the library — a very decent

Englishman, I should add, and a historian of impeccably Mancunian formation — used to consider "pro-German" AJP's then contentious argument that Hitler was Just Another One of Them? Obtuseness of that impregnable quality just has to be structural, doesn't it?

You may recollect an equally stupid response to his by now celebrated aphorism that Munich represented the triumph of all that was best in British life. Maybe I was lucky. I ran into this typical kick in the groin after some years' immersion of Baptist totality in the papers of Dr Thomas Jones, C.H., the T.J. who wrote most of Baldwin's speeches except the bits about the pigs and who tried to smuggle Ribbentrop's son into Eton. What does Godless Taylor say today, his tabloid paper used to cry. We had no difficulty in understanding him.

In Britain, of course, it was not AJP who was made a Companion of Honour. For AJP, and this is, I think, essential to his sheer presence as a historian, is a man of a particular honour.

The trouble with a Legend, I find, after spending some time on a couple of them, is that it generally encapsulates an uncomfortable quantum of truth. AJP has become a Legend. Good God, the man writes even better than Hazlitt. He pretends to the same plain man style as Orwell and like the latter's, his is a carefully wrought artefact. His wit is an implausible and frequently unhelping concatenation of Thomas Paine and Neil Simon. He

can effect major historical revisions without that barrage of methodological and conceptual argument which has become customary but also without losing his grip on the *forces profondes* whose presence in his work (which he quite correctly reaffirms here) is sometimes rendered almost invisible by the sheer lucidity of his prose. Like Chaucer in his treatise on the astrolabe, AJP can stand a conventional wisdom on its head in a few sentences of limpid Saxon.

He also has the very English and supremely Lancastrian capacity to drive a reader clean round the bend with sheer, rationally argued perversity.

Characteristically, the only honour he claims on his title page is that of Fellowship of the British Academy. No less characteristically, he has abandoned it, in the service of an honour at once more discriminating and more yeoman. AJP Taylor, to quote the French, has deserved well of his country. His country has accorded him no honour, except of course the supreme accolade of the affection and respect of most of his fellow countrymen. He has earned the honour due to an English grand-master of history and a superb English craftsman who has served for a generation now as an unfailingly stimulating, irritating, inspiring, invariably invigorating and — in case he has some doubt on the score — hugely cherished Non-Regius Professor of History to the people whom, in tiny dissidence, I will persist in calling British.