

Balancing the Books

An Aura Of Sadness

By Father John S. Kennedy

Michael J. Arlen writes of his mother and father in "Exiles" (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$6.95).

Michael Arlen, the father, was an Armenian who changed his name, wrote glitteringly of the glittering 1920s, and at an early age became an international celebrity. He married a titled Greek beauty of partial American ancestry. They moved in the same showy world, the same exclusive circles as the F. Scott Fitzgeralds.

But the Arlens seemed more compatible and more stable and never were in the financial straits the Fitzgeralds knew. Yet this book has an aura of sadness.

It comes in some measure from the creative doldrums in which the senior Arlen spent, roughly, the last 25 years of his life. During that long period, his specialty was no longer in demand, and his lot was enforced and unhappy idleness.

The sadness stems chiefly from the fact that, as the author puts it, the Arlens were exiles, comfortably circumstanced but cut off from their origins and first fame. Their son, in turn, saw them as foreign and exotic, while he longed for the Anglo-Saxon normality represented by the families of his schoolmates at St. Paul's and Harvard.

Michael J. Arlen's early life was very different from that of most Americans, but in this admirable book he catches well nigh perfectly emotions common to all of us.

Such is not the case with "Principator," a first novel by Tom McHale (Viking, \$6.95), which is a blistering, black-comic attack on Catholics whom the author obviously takes to be representative, and indeed definitive, of the Church.

Angelo Principato is a Philadelphia somewhere in his thirties. His mother is devout, and his in-laws, the Corrigans, are fanatics. His father on the other hand, has broken with the Church 35 years ago and is determined to die unreconciled.

Now his death is imminent. A fierce contest begins. The Corrigans plan their strategy and prime their guns to drive old Principato into submission. They put maximum pressure on Angelo to cooperate in this good work.

Angelo is anxious about his father, but finds the methods of the Corrigans distasteful, then disgusting. He recalls how he was trapped into marrying the ill-favored and chronically whining Cynthia, whose chances of getting a husband seemed nil. At college, Angelo was in a theology course taught by her priest-uncle, and the latter threatened him with a failure unless he courted Cynthia.

Monstrous? Yes. Impossible to credit? Literally, yes. But Mr. McHale exaggerates in order to give a whopping to the unprincipled use of authority and power. But, in art, even exaggeration must be held within limits if the intended effect is to be made. Unfortunately, Mr. McHale does not know when to stop, and his indictment gets out of control.

Father Matt J. Menger, author of "In the Valley of the Mekong" (St. Anthony Guild Press, Cloth \$5.50, paper \$3.95), is an Oblate missionary who has spent 13 years in Laos.

He was first assigned there in 1956, a complete stranger to the world of Asia and to the language which he would have to master in order to communicate with the Laotian people.

He struggled to learn the language, but his wrong intonation had a disastrous effect on an announcement he was making. The announcement was intended to be that "all able-bodied men were requested to help plant the posts for the new church immediately after Mass." But his rendering, to the astonishment of the congregation, made it into a request that all able-bodied men help steal young girls immediately after Mass.

His book gives some account of Laotian history and of the present ordeal of the country. His love of the people is obvious, and his concern for the preservation of their identity and freedom.

But mostly he addresses himself to describing his life and ministry, both of them laborious and beset with troubles, yet never overwhelmed by adversity. He has many good stories to relate, many personalities and incidents to describe. Tigers and cobras make their chilling appearance, as do the engines of war which plunge ordinary folk into misery.

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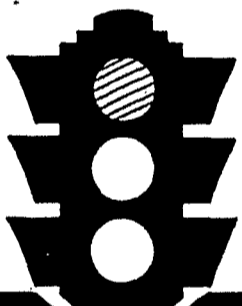
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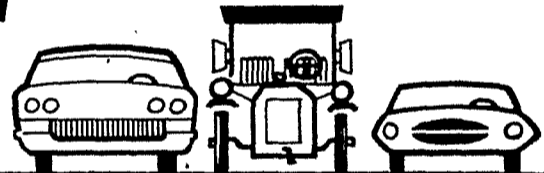
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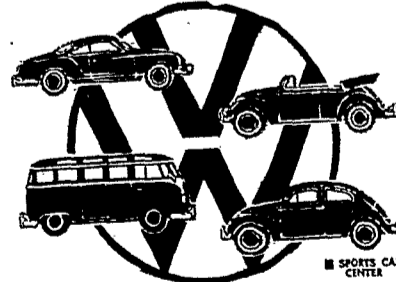
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