

'Danton' a Stark and Powerful Film

By Michael Gallagher
New York (NC) — Acclaimed Polish director Andrzej Wajda has in "Danton" (Triumph) made a stark and powerful film about the conflict between two revolutionaries: the cold

admitted that Robespierre could be compared to General Jaruzelski and Danton to Lech Walesa, which is one reason why it will be a good long time before this French film can be seen in Wajada's native land.

ideologue Robespierre and the warm, passionate humanist Danton. It was a conflict resolved with the

Though the drama, based upon a Polish stage play, is set against the tumultuous background of the revolu-

death of Danton on the guillotine in 1794, but in a sense, it goes on even in our own day.

tion, it is essentially an intimate drama, revolving around the personality of its two protagonists.

Wajda, for example, has

The two meet but once,

however. Danton (Gerard Depardieu), heedless and trusting far too much in the of power his personal magnetism to rally support when a crisis comes, invites the dour,

puritanical Robespierre to dinner. After tempting Robespierre (played by Polish actor Woljciech

Pszoniak) with the best of wine and one succulent dish after another only to be rebuffed with cold politeness, Danton begins to drink

compulsively and to berate his antagonist for his lack of humanity only to fall off into

a drunken snooze as he offers Robespierre his head. It's an unforgettable scene.

The conclusion is also extremely powerful: Danton and his fellow accused — not a few of whom cordially detest him for failing them —

riding to their execution in tumbrels, their hair shorn and their shirts ripped to make the executioners' work easier.

Another problem is that without a thorough knowledge of the history of the time, it's difficult to appreciate all the nuances of the

situation when Danton returns to Paris in the spring of 1794 to attempt to restore the original ideals of the revolution. Then, too, there are indications that Danton's end has a large measure of poetic justice about it, but to what extent there is blood on his hands, too, is not made clear.

Despite its flaws, however, "Danton," is a picture that no one seriously interested in films should miss. Its beyond the historical and speak to the conflicts that still are very much a part of the world in which we live.

The film has some graphic

violence in the execution scene. The U.S. Catholic Conference has classified it A-II — adults and adolescents, and also recommended it. There is no Motion Picture Association of America rating.

The dubbing presents difficulties. Pszoniak creates a complex persona as Robespierre — you can see humane impulses and quite palatable dread breaking through his cold, steely mask, but it's evident sometimes that he is not speaking French. And this was probably also a factor in limiting the exchange between the two antagonists. (Pszoniak speaks hardly at all in his scene with Depardieu.)

BOOKS

"The Catholic Heritage," by Lawrence S. Cunningham. Crossroad (New York, 1983). 229 pp., \$14.95.

Reviewed by Father Richard F. Costigan
NC News Service

"Martyrs, Ascetics, Pilgrims, Warriors, Mystics, Theologians, Artists, Humanists, Activists, Outsiders and Saints." All these, listed like a sub-title on the title page, are the subject of Lawrence Cunningham's very admirable new book.

Troubled by the realization that his students in religion classes at Florida State University lack any background knowledge of Catholic history, he sets out to fill in a great deal of this in a very concrete, specific way.

He simply tells about a lot of very interesting persons who, in their strikingly different ways, lived out their fidelity to the Gospel in their respective life-situations, and in such memorable ways as to find a permanent place in the tradition of the church.

Treating in succession each of these kinds of people, he names numerous vivid examples and offers many comparisons to their counterparts in parallel situations today, starting with martyrs and ascetics.

It is with pilgrims that Cunningham really warms to his subject, weaving together a rich array of historical data with the poetry of Chaucer, Petrarch and Dante to communicate a vivid sense of the involvement of great numbers of people in the quest of the holy.

In the chapter on warriors, Cunningham rejects the moralistic contention of some today that "Christian warrior" is a contradiction in terms, dwelling on some positive human values and spiritual ideals of knighthood and crusade and showing how much of this is to be found not only in Joan of Arc but even in the spirit of Francis of Assisi.

Mystics have made profound contributions to the spiritual growth of the church

community, and the author has perceptive pages on Julian of Norwich, Meister Eckhart, and especially on Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.

Theologians, pursuing the path of "fides quaerens intellectum," faith seeking understanding, are the prime articulators of the common faith of the church. But there are differences among them: Thomas Aquinas and Blaise Pascal, for example, are strikingly distinct in temperament, style and emphasis, yet both earnestly devoted to the Catholic faith.

Artists constitute another very interesting chapter, starting with the makers of icons, those visible channels of prayer and adoration, theology in color. Architects like Abbot Suger of Paris created the "Gothic light" of towering cathedrals. Michelangelo, in essays that Cunningham draws on, spells out some norms for the artist who approaches religious themes.

The word humanist should not be equated with secularist, as Cunningham very correctly says in describing persons who have developed a Christian understanding of human values. His leading example of a humanist of our time is Pope John Paul II, who teaches a vision of humanity rooted in his profound studies of Catholic theological tradition.

Activists, who despite opposition, courageously press for the realization of Christian goals, and outsiders, who though alienated, still stimulate the church in direct ways, also make contributions to Catholic Christianity. The concluding chapter on saints offers perceptive comments on the challenges experienced by the Catholic Church today, especially in the United States. Every chapter is followed by good suggestions for further reading on the persons and issues that have been mentioned.

(Jesuit Father Costigan is an associate professor of theology at Loyola University of Chicago.)

"Catholic Bishops: A Memoir," by John Tracy Ellis. Michael Glazier (Wilmington, Del., 1983). 182 pp. \$10.95

Reviewed by Father Robert Emmett Curran, SJ
NC News Service

In the course of American Catholic historiography over the past centuries, three names have stood out: John Gilmary Shea, Peter Gilday and John Tracy Ellis. Shea was a layman, Gilday and Ellis priests who were made monsignors in recognition of their scholarly achievements.

For a community that has been largely indifferent to its history, American Catholics have done well indeed to have produced these three.

Several years ago Msgr. Ellis set out to write his memoirs. But if there is little enough of a market for American Catholic history, there is even less for the lives of its historians.

Finding little interest among publishers in his autobiography, Msgr. Ellis settled for his recollections of the prelates he had known over the past half century.

We are certainly poorer for that lack of interest. Still, as Msgr. Ellis reminds us, "even fragments of knowledge can be instructive, provided they deal with real life in a spirit inspired by a desire to recreate a portion of one's past with fidelity and sincerity." His "fragments" do that and more.

He confines himself to deceased prelates, from his first ordinary, Edmund Dunne, the Bishop of Peoria, to Cardinal Terence Cooke of New York, who died just as Msgr. Ellis was sending his text to press. The tone is friendly but frank, as though he were entertaining the reader in a private after-dinner conversation.

Few can match him as a raconteur. Fewer still have been in his position to observe the episcopal movers and shakers of the American church in this century. The result makes for a delightful book.

Through his memory we see the private as well as the public side of the prelates. There is a marvelous account of his first encounter with Cardinal William O'Connell, when the young priest had gone to Boston to audit some courses at Harvard.

"Remember, Father," Cardinal O'Connell instructed him, "you are a priest first; do not try to be a Harvard man."

In response, Father Ellis "mumbled an assent" — dissent was unthinkable in this context. The cardinal then began to inveigh against Theodore Maynard's then-recent book, "The Story of American Catholicism," for not having treated the church "reverently" enough. "You are in a position to do something about it," the cardinal

roared. Meanwhile his dog proceeded to sniff over Msgr. Ellis.

Forty years later he can remember that "even the dog bore an air of high disdain."

Such phobia about dissent, indeed any criticism of the church, was all too characteristic of the episcopacy in Cardinal O'Connell's generation. Such close-mindedness contributed much to the failure of American Catholics to develop a vigorous intellectual life, an unhappy truth which Msgr. Ellis first called to our attention in the mid-'50s.

For him, the ideal bishop is one who has vision, is deeply spiritual, and above all, can lead. Of all the bishops he remembers, Archbishop Paul Hallinan of Atlanta comes closest to this ideal. In responding creatively and courageously to some of the most important issues confronting American Catholics of this generation — racial justice, women's rights, disarmament and liturgical reform — Archbishop Hallinan showed, Msgr. Ellis concludes, how a bishop can inspire.

Father Curran is an associate professor of history at Georgetown University.

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"Eccentric Travellers," by John Keay. Jeremy Tarcher, Inc. (Los Angeles, 1983. Distributed by Houghton Mifflin, Boston). 209 pp., \$12.95.

Reviewed by Patricia B. Hoffman
NC News Service

The adventures of seven eccentric travellers as told in this most entertaining book put a fiction writer's wildest fantasies in the shade.

Who would dare to write a novel about a man, totally blind, who crossed Russia alone, and was finally expelled by the czar for no particular reason? This was James Holman in 1823. Upon losing his vision as a young man, this intrepid traveller took up wandering about the earth as a means of combatting self-pity and boredom.

Or how about the peculiar Thomas Manning? He was determined to visit China in the early part of the 19th century. Baffled by refusals to allow him to enter that country, he decided to sneak in the back door, as it were, crossing the Himalayas, into Tibet and then into the Forbidden Land.

Accompanied by assorted guides, laden with all sorts of impedimenta, ranging from cherry brandy to ice skates (the latter to impress the natives with his skill), Manning had a dreadful, exhausting journey. He did reach Lhasa, becoming the first foreigner to do so, and

was much impressed by the young Dalai Lama. No account of this epic trek was published, but Manning's diary was discovered later.


Possibly the most entertaining of the strange travellers was the naturalist Charles Waterton. He published several books on his travels and discoveries, which were largely disbelieved. One of his feats was wrestling with a large boa constrictor while on a collecting trip in South America. He finally removed his suspenders to tie up the reptile's mouth, brought it back to camp, and finally dissected it.

Mrs. Hoffman is a freelance writer based in Indiana.

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