BOOKS

THE OPIUM WAR, 1840-1842
by Peter Ward Fay
The University of North Carolina Press . . . $14.95

Reviewed by Charlton M. Lewis

Peter Fay's richly textured, evocative account of the Opium War revives a familiar question asked by Commissioner Lin Tse-hsu in a letter to Queen Victoria in 1839 and still asked by Chinese today. Why did the British send naval artillery and troops to China in order to protect the import of a pernicious drug? For the Chinese there has been only one answer: incorrigible greed.

With precise and copious detail, Fay illuminates the historical complexities of that verdict. From the initial description of the brown gum drawn from the seed capsule of the opium poppy (papaver somniferum), with its smell of new-mown hay and look of tar, to the concluding scene where mandarins "in their cumbersome boots, long petticoats, and conical caps," crowd the quarterdeck of Pottinger's flagship to sign the Treaty of Nanking (1842), the story moves with lilt and style.

Fay confirms what has not always been clear in Western accounts: that as the cloistered world of the old Canton trade burst apart in the late 1830's, the root cause was the English import of opium. Thrusting for tea, but short of exchange commodities with appeal in China — sandalwood, bird's nests, ivory, rattans — English merchants resorted first to bullion and then, as the trade burgeoned, to opium.

Made contraband by imperial edicts, the drug was delivered by "agency houses" such as Jardine's, Dent's and Russell's to receiving ships well out in the Gulf of Canton. Chinese took delivery in their "scrambling dragons" and "fast crabs," and vanished into the Pearl River estuary. As the Canton delta became saturated, smuggling spread up the coast. After 1830 the bullion flow was reversed, arousing the concern of the Court: Silver was leaving China along with the tea.

Fay brings out the irresponsibility on both sides. For the English, the firms which bought the opium from the East India Company in India did not import it into China; the agency houses that imported it did not actually smuggle it. No one was to blame. On the Chinese side, officials who were schooled to foster harmony in their jurisdictions averted their gaze, or perhaps squeezed from the traffic themselves. By the time Commissioner Lin forced the confrontation in 1839, opium so dominated the market that the British would not consider commercial retaliation without it.

In interpreting the war, Fay is sensitive to cultural anachronisms within China. While the ironclad British gunboat, Nemesis, wreaked havoc on the inland waterways, Chinese officials marshalled troops trained by shooting whistling arrows at paper targets. The Confucian world did not prize military efficiency. Weak and disorganized, the Chinese successfully reverted to an imperceptible moral righteousness. In the treaty negotiations, they refused to accept responsibility for the opium traffic, and the settlement (ultimately irony) said nothing about the drug.

Fay modestly disclaims qualifications as a China specialist. Yet this splendid popular history fills an urgent need that the specialists have too long neglected.

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ROMANTIC REVOLUTIONARY
A Biography of John Reed
by Robert A. Rosenstone
Alfred A. Knopf ............... $15.00

Reviewed by Peter Ward Fay

Ten Days That Shook the World, John Reed's firsthand account of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, was written in two months, sold 5,000 copies in three, and has since been published in translation in Russia (of course), Spain, Mexico, Brazil, Italy, Poland, Cuba, France, and God knows where else. (Only He does, by the way, since there exists no international register of these things.) Rosenstone happening to be in Japan — he and his wife, the artist Cheri Pann, spent the past academic year there — he was told that the Japanese translation of 1957 has already run through 21 printings. It is enough to make even Lafcadio Hearn turn whatever color the Japanese equate with envy.

Many people, myself included, have supposed that Ten Days is the only thing John Reed wrote, and that his short career — he died in the fall of 1920 at the age of 32 — was one continuous preparation for the writing of it. Not the least of the merits of Rosenstone's biography is the attention he gives Reed the poet, Reed the producer and playwright, Reed the journalist, lover (extended affairs with Mabel Dodge and Louise Bryant punctuated with brief liaisons), adventurer, and bohemian. Rosenstone is two-thirds done before we reach revolutionary Petrograd. If Reed's life pointed from the beginning in the direction of serious political involvement, Rosenstone does not show it and Reed did not know it.

What Reed did know even as a sickly child in Oregon was that life is something to be seized, experienced, lived furiously and heroically. At Harvard (Class of 1910) this made him pushy. In New York — Rosenstone is marvelous at recreating the social and intellectual life of Greenwich Village just before the war — a growing talent for writing led him to Max Eastman and the Masses. Covering the violent Paterson silk strike of early 1913 added four days in jail (the kind of raw encounter Reed loved) and generated the first installment of that radical conviction that eventually made him one of the found-
Letters

Guaranteed a Fegger

Potomac, Maryland
This afternoon I received my copy of Engineering and Science for October-November, and it could not have arrived at a better time. I had just finished teaching my Advanced Physical Science class and was contemplating the complexities of Markov Chains, a topic which my students are presenting for me, and thinking about how we would ease into an elementary example of a stochastic process, when a particularly tenacious student, once again started to question me about "Caltech." These scenarios generally start out with questions like, "...just what kind of a place is Caltech?" Today, I had some concrete evidence about your school.

I first pointed to the "FEG" formula. The student then asked, "Is that the Gray of that old battered chem text you have us read for the Advanced Placement Exam in Chemistry?" "The same," I said. The student then added "...and don't we have some books by Feynman in the school?" Again I concurred. We then talked about the "FEG" formula. Before the conversation ended, I turned to the back page of Engineering and Science and asked, "Are you so dedicated to science that you could ignore a 250-pound lion, in favor of a science lecture?" The student pondered this a moment and then said, "Caltech sounds like a fun place; I'm going to consider that school!"

Now, I don't know if this student will apply to Caltech or not, but I can guarantee that he will be a "fegger" — you can spot 'em while they're young — they're different. Whether or not you get this student, I want you to know that we enjoyed your publication. I might also add that science is alive and well in the secondary hinterland of this great nation.

Charles C. Phillips
Chairman
Science Department
Winston Churchill High School

Poetic Justice

Ricketts House, Caltech
Dr. Fowler's passage, "Resonance," (E&S October-November) is competently written, as prose. It is not poetry. A comparison of:

The realization
That the red giant stage
Of stellar evolution
Involved helium burning
Which transforms helium
Into carbon and oxygen
Was just as far-reaching
As the discovery
That the main sequence stage
Involves the conversion
Of hydrogen into helium.

with this passage by e. e. cummings:

What if a much of which a wind
gives the truth to summer's lie:
bloodies with dizzying leaves the sun
and yanks immortal stars away?

will make that fact clear.
Turning good prose into bad poetry does Dr. Fowler a disservice.

Nick Okasinski

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Robert Rosenstone and Peter Fay are both professors of history at Caltech.