

The New Criterion

Notes & Comments December 2019

Peter Collier, 1939–2019

On the life and work of Peter Collier.

There are some occasions when the editorial “we” is almost viscerally inadequate. Writing about my friend Peter Collier—the prolific biographer and novelist, literary impresario, and tireless cultural warrior—is one such. Although he made it a full decade beyond the biblically sanctioned allotment of three score and ten, the announcement early last month that Peter had died, at the age of eighty, still came as a shock.

It’s not that eighty, no matter what the tabloids tell us, is the new fifty (though for some it seems to be the new fifteen). It isn’t. But Peter always seemed so vibrant, so vital. He was habitually solicitous about my health, beginning most conversations with a pressing question or two, but his palpable buoyancy led me to take his for granted. Often when we spoke by telephone he had just come from the squash court near his house in bucolic Nevada City, California. He was always busy with a new literary project or helping his lifelong friend David Horowitz (another perpetual motion machine) run the eponymous David Horowitz Freedom Center, with its myriad sub-enterprises. A friend we had in common gave me the news of Peter’s death in a codicil to an email about another subject. Much to my mortification, I hadn’t even known that he had been ill, but he had been, gravely, first from leukemia, then from the wretched chemotherapy that killed his cancer and then killed him.

I cannot fix the date or place of my first meeting with Peter. It must have been some time in the later 1980s, after he and David famously had their “second thoughts” about their youthful left-wingery and had at first drifted, and then galloped, to a robust pro-American conservatism. It was in 1985 that the duo published their notorious manifesto “Lefties for Reagan” in *The Washington Post*. To their comrades on the left, it had the effect of Luther’s ninety-five theses. Ronald Reagan? It was an announcement of apostasy, a declaration of war. The two were transformed overnight into personae non gratae, enemies of The Movement. Peter and I must have met around then, certainly before 1989, when Peter and David’s book *Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts About the Sixties* was first published, and, coincidentally, the year I began working full time at *The New Criterion* (I had been writing for the magazine since 1983). But it was not until after Peter started Encounter Books, in 1998, that we became friends. In 2000, Encounter published my book *The Long March: How the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s Changed America*. Peter liked to describe *The Long March* as the “second-best book about the Sixties”; I said the same

about Destructive Generation. Connoisseurs, I am told, maintain that no library containing one is complete without the other. Fortunately, Peter never wrote about what has happened to the academic study of art history, so when, in 2004, Encounter published *The Rape of the Masters: How Political Correctness Sabotages Art*, I had the field to myself. I well remember the frisson of anticipation that coruscated across the conservative firmament when Encounter Books was announced. Although Encounter was at first based in San Francisco, the main launch party was in Washington, D.C. Tout le monde from the conservative side of the aisle was in attendance, along with some skeptical members of the press. "Serious Books for Serious Readers" was one early motto. The aptness of the tag may be inferred from a sampling of titles from those first years. Let's leave aside that second-best book about the Sixties: Peter also published such classics as *Mexifornia* by Victor Davis Hanson, *On Two Wings: Humble Faith and Common Sense at the American Founding* by Michael Novak, *The Prince of the City* (a biography of Rudy Giuliani) by Fred Siegel, *Against All Hope: A Memoir of Life in Castro's Gulag* by Armando Valladares, *Diversity: The Invention of a Concept* by Peter Wood, *Heaven on Earth* (a brilliant anatomy of socialism) by Joshua Muravchik, and *Black Rednecks and White Liberals* by the great Thomas Sowell. That last book started a precedent: it wound up at the scrappy upstart Encounter because I none of the mainstream houses had the courage to publish it. I suppose that Aristotle might have called Peter the efficient cause of Encounter Books. The material and formal causes came from the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation via the late Michael Joyce, the foundation's director and the fecund source of so many conservative initiatives, and his far-seeing colleague Dianne Sehler, who with Peter worked out the plan for the enterprise. The final cause, of course, was to illuminate the most exigent political and moral questions of the day and by so doing to help change the world for the better.

The history of Peter's association with Encounter, and of my intersection therewith, demonstrates the sly operation of what some call coincidence, others Providence.

Encounter Books was named after the English monthly Encounter, one of a suite of intellectual magazines started after the Second World War with the help of an organization called the Congress for Cultural Freedom. There was *Preuves* in France, *Der Monat* in Germany, and others in Africa, Brazil, India, Italy, and elsewhere. Encounter, whose founding editors were Irving Kristol and Stephen Spender, was always the flagship of the lot. The only two still surviving are *The China Quarterly*, based in the United Kingdom, and *Quadrant* in Australia, flourishing in recent years under the enlightened editorship of the historian Keith Windschuttle. I of these periodicals shared, in broad outline, an ideological perspective. They were obviously liberal but also staunchly anti-Stalinist. Encounter's contributors were a who's who of contemporary writers and academics, from W. H. Auden, James Agee, and Kingsley Amis to Daniel Bell, Cyril Connolly, Arthur Koestler, Philip Larkin, Mary McCarthy, Nancy Mitford, Susan Sontag, C. P. Snow, Evelyn Waugh, and on and on. In 1990, after my book *Tenured Radicals* was published, I was asked if I would like to edit Encounter. The long-time editor, Melvin Lasky, was nearing retirement and it was thought that a younger man with my general outlook might be the ticket. London being my favorite city, I responded with an enthusiastic Yes.

I flew to London, discussed the position with Mel and the magazine's publisher, and everything seemed set. I began reforming my orthography, writing "centre," "honour," "programme," etc., and nibbling on kippers and steak and kidney pie. There was just one catch. *Encounter* had been struggling financially for some years. The Bradley Foundation, which had suggested the scheme, was willing to help, but only if additional funds could be raised in England.

Alas, the habit of private philanthropy is stunted in England—in Europe generally—and the funds were not to be found. *Encounter* closed in 1991 and the Bradley Foundation bought the name and settled its affairs.

Back up to 1966. A young, left-wing firebrand named Peter Collier had recently left Berkeley, where he was working on a Ph.D. thesis about Jane Austen (his choice of subject shows his inherent good sense), and joined the staff of *Ramparts* magazine. No magazine was more radical, or more influential, than *Ramparts* in its heyday. At its peak, it boasted a circulation of some four hundred thousand. It helped launch Hunter S. Thompson and spring Eldridge Cleaver from jail by publishing parts of what became *Soul on Ice* (the literary bijou that infamously described rape as "an insurrectionary act"). It also helped to make the Black Panthers—a thuggish group that Peter later rightly described as "a black version of Murder Inc."—a national phenomenon. *Ramparts*, Peter wrote, was "an open mic for Castroism and helped author the myth of Saint Che by secretly obtaining and publishing the Guevara diaries." *Spécialités de la maison* were articles exposing the cia's covert support of various seemingly independent enterprises. Soon after Peter arrived, the magazine published its first big scoop, an exposé of the cia's secret infiltration of the National Student Association. Then, in 1967, Peter was behind an article that revealed something that had been rumored but never documented: the cia's covert support for the Congress for Cultural Freedom and hence its even more covert support for all those Cold War magazines, *Encounter* included.

The revelation precipitated outrage on the left. There were gleeful articles savoring *Encounter's* embarrassment in the mainstream media. Stephen Spender (who must surely have known about the connection) quit in a huff. My own view is that it was about the best and most effective money ever spent by the agency. Those magazines championed Western values and open debate, at a time when both were under concerted threats from Soviet tyranny. Many writers disagreed, however, and competed with one another to find the highest horse upon which to climb and announce their disgust and determination never to write for the magazine again. The tempest almost sank *Encounter*.

Fast forward to the late 1990s. An older, wiser, more politically mature Peter Collier was tapped to take the reins of the fledgling book-publishing company called *Encounter*. Peter ran *Encounter* from 1998 until 2005, when he retired and I was once again asked whether I would be interested in taking on *Encounter*, this time to publish books, not a monthly magazine. We moved *Encounter* to New York at the beginning of 2006. It was then, and for the next several years, that my friendship with Peter really flowered. We spoke nearly every day, sometimes several times a day, as he guided me through the byzantine complexities and economic absurdities of the book

publishing industry. He was an invaluable counselor and confidant, a man whose judgment about **M**atters personal as well as political, literary, and cultural I trusted absolutely. Most of the many notices about Peter's death have minimized his various literary triumphs. Together with David Horowitz, his co-author, he was the dean of the American dynasty, with bestselling books about the Rockefellers, the Fords, the Roosevelts, and the Kennedys, a subject of special fascination for Peter (he left behind a novel about that strangest of families). Peter also wrote several books extolling the virtues of the American military, including a sumptuous celebration of recipients of the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military honor. Peter donated the proceeds of that book to a charity supporting the award. He told me that he regarded that gesture as a way of making amends for his youthful anti-American radicalism.

One element of Peter's life that is missing from the obituaries I have seen concerns religion. In his later years, anyway, Peter was a devout Catholic, a near-daily communicant for at least part of the time we were closest. One day, we happened to be discussing the Mass and we agreed that the most moving part of the ceremony came towards the end, right before Communion, when the congregation repeats the repentant Centurion's solemn words: "Domine, non sum dignus ut intres sub tectum meum: sed tantum dic verbo, et sanabitur anima mea": "Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof: but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." *Requiescat in pace.*

—Roger Kimball

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 38 Number 4 , on page 1

Copyright © 2019 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com
<https://newcriterion.com/issues/2019/12/peter-collier-19392019>