Beecham did what few conductors had managed: he let musicians play their own way

THE MYSTIQUE OF THOMAS BEECHAM

SIR THOMAS BEECHAM
A CENTENARY TRIBUTE
BY ALAN JEFFERSON
Musson, 256 pages, $20.95

A MINGLED CHIME
LEAVES
FROM AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY
BY SIR THOMAS BEECHAM
Musson, 272 pages, $18.95

REVIEWED BY JOHN RAYMOND

Beecham in 1910: he contrived to work his will so the music was always his own

Those who study the art of leadership might well ponder the job of the conductor. Lacking an instrument of his own, possessing only a short wand with which to weave his magic, confronted with some 100 individuals of artistic temperament and distinct opinions, he yet contrives to work his will so that, whatever the piece being played, it goes his way.

Orchestral musicians can always be found to tell you that it doesn't matter what the conductor does: they make the music and his contribution is minimal. But this fails to explain why an orchestra sounds different under different conductors. Nor does it account for the unique results achieved by those comparatively few conductors who merit the accolade "great."

Sir Thomas Beecham was a great conductor. That is why the 100th anniversary of his birth is being celebrated this year with a spate of tributes, programs, reissued recordings and books. His activities as a splendid example of that exotic species, the English eccentric, provide a footnote of light relief to this central fact, while his role as a pivotal figure in England's musical scene for half a century as impresario, manager, and creator and maintainer of orchestras is of merely peripheral interest, especially to those outside that country.

Beecham's abilities on the podium have been amply documented not only by the evidence of recordings (which are not always an accurate reflection of the concert hall), but also by the published testimony of musicians who played under him. The scores from which he worked are available with his copious markings and, for those not able to gain access to these or evaluate them, Denis Vaughan, his assistant for a number of years, has provided comment.

Certainly the magnificent results Beecham so often achieved in the concert hall and on records are not won without leadership of a superior kind. Yet, as may be heard on a recording, he would joke his way through rehearsals — shocking musicians used to a different kind of leader. Jack Brymer, for many years his principal clarinetist, has written that a rehearsal often ended with the players having very little idea of what he wanted at the concert. Nevertheless, it is apparent that whatever function Beecham's urbane, eminently civilized wit served off the podium, at rehearsals it was consummately employed to contribute to an atmosphere in which the musicians could be inspired to give their very best.

Between rehearsal and concert, Brymer says, Beecham would painstakingly mark each player's score, indicating the effects he desired. Even then, according to Steven Staryk, a former concertmaster with the Royal Philharmonic, he did not always follow his own markings at the actual concert. In short, he trusted his players to be thoroughly professional and on their toes to the demands of the moment. They, in turn, responded by playing their hearts out, content because "Tommy just let us play." Or, as the great oboist, Leon Goosens, observed: "He made you feel you were doing the whole thing yourself."

At his frequent best, Beecham, a master of phrasing, brought out the charm, warmth, beauty and sheer joyfulness of music to an unsurpassed degree. He communicated love, which, after all, is what music is about, and he imparted a sense of occasion to almost everything he touched. This is conducting genius of the highest order, and it is this that makes his centenary worthy of celebration wherever music is played.

Jefferson, whose book is largely biographical, declares he has "sought the essence of the man from his background and his work." But it is the essence of Beecham that he has missed. Management activities and musical politics (including a great deal about money) are to the fore, while there is no attempt to penetrate the nature of the genius. The book is unleavened by examples of the subject's eccentricity and humor. Indeed, Jefferson has accomplished the seemingly impossible by writing a dull book about Beecham. The fact that it is handsomely produced and well illustrated cannot compensate for its central deficiency. Beecham deserved a better "tribute" than this.

To turn to Beecham's own account of the early formative years of his career, A Mingled Chime, is to experience much of what Jefferson has omitted. Here is the acerbic wit, the drollery, the choleric personality, joie de vivre and sheer gusto of the man, along with numerous musical insights. Although it, also, fails to disclose the secret of his mastery before an orchestra, at least Beecham the man is present in these pages and that is what makes the book worth buying.

John Raymond reviews classical records for The Globe and Mail.

William French

A powerful book, the result of a long apprenticeship in the theatre.

That rara avis, the novel that makes you say, now here's a *real* novelist

CROSSINGS
BY BETTY LAMBERT
Pulp Press, 284 pages, $5.95

It's a rare pleasure in this business when a novel arrives in the mail without advance notice or ballyhoo of any kind and turns out to be a solid winner. It's even rarer when it's a first novel by a Canadian, published by one of those small regional presses that can't hope to compete with McClelland and Stewart and the foreign branch-plant publishers. But Crossings is that rara avis, the kind of novel that makes you say, after the first few pages, now here's a *real* writer.

The author of Crossings, Betty Lambert, is a Vancouver playwright (born in Calgary in 1933) probably best known in Eastern Canada for her play Sqrieux-de-Dieu, which received admiring reviews when it was performed at Lennoxville, Quebec, a couple of summers ago and is now being produced off-Broadway. She has won awards for her short stories and has written 75 plays for radio, television and stage. All that was obviously an apprenticeship for this novel, but it was clearly a worthwhile one; Lambert has a sophisticated command of technique far beyond that of the average first novelist, and a sure grasp of characterization.

Pulp Press is a small Vancouver publisher that used to be identified with the hippie scene. Its main effort now is a fortnightly journal of poetry and anti-establishment commentary called 3¢ Pulp. I don't know how Lambert and the Pulp editors found each other, but it was a fortunate coupling, even though Pulp doesn't have the resources to promote the novel the way it deserves. The editors had the good sense to publish it in a quality paperback format at an accessible price; more of the bigger publishers should do the same, in these days of $12 to $15 novels.

In Crossings, Lambert tears a woman's psyche inside out and examines it with searing honesty. It's the kind of novel that feminists will applaud because the central male character, Mik O'Brien, is an almost grotesque model of the male chauvinist, who glories in the power of the penis and uses it to dominate, reward and punish his woman. Yet there's a certain sympathy for him in Lambert's portrayal, and male chauvinists who read the novel will see the woman character, Vicky Ferris, as a dumb broad who needs to be knocked around from time to time to keep her in her place, and who gets what she deserves. For her, the idea of equal partnership doesn't work; she needs to be dominated, although she is suspicious of her motives. But rarely has the complex subject of male-female relationships been dissected with such skill and subtlety.

The novel is visceral, yet filled with haunting imagery and symbolism (which the narrator, herself writing the novel, sometimes mocks); jellyfish in a lagoon, for example, float like blobs of semen slowly disintegrating. A bulldozer gouging the earth in a forest is a metaphor for Vicky of sex with Mik. The title refers to a bridge in Vancouver that Mik crosses to reach Vicky's place, but it is also a symbol of his crossing from one kind of life to another. The novel's form is somewhat circular; in fact it's apt that the narrator, Vicky, is asked apropos of one of her plays if she has been influenced by Bach, because the play has a fugue-like contrapuntal structure. So does the novel. Yet unlike Bach, it has a rivetting emotional intensity, the kind found in Elizabeth Smart's By Grand Central Station I Sat Down And Wept, but without the poetic histrionics.

Vicky Ferris is an intellectual woman, but her experience is a denial of reason over passion. She grew up in Vancouver, has sold plays to the CBC, is a teaching assistant at the university who can discuss Wittgenstein and Kant with ease and likes to listen to the Brandenburg concerti when she does the ironing. Yet as we meet her, she is prepared to humiliate herself, give up her dignity, even risk physical danger, to follow Mik O'Brien to a remote logging camp on Vancouver Island. Mik is virile, domineering, ungrammatical, the kind of man who has a tattoo on his chest that says Coffee over one nipple and Cream over the other (and the viewer is supposed to ask where's the sugar?). Mik spent time in prison for armed robbery, and hangs around the taverns in sleazy hotels with his wartime buddies. But Vicky, her life in emotional tatters after a nine-year marriage to an artist — whom she came to hate because he was too considerate — convinces herself she loves Mik, and is prepared to risk everything to be with him. How she got to this state is the substance of the novel.

Because Vicky tells the story in the form of a novel she is writing some years after the event, she is tempted to take liberties. At times she tries to deceive herself, and us, by skirting the truth, or telling not what happened, but what should have happened. She uses selective memory and imagination, but always forces herself to return to the truth, painful as it is. "I've built myself a trap with this book," she says at one point. "I thought it was going to be simple."

Gradually she fills in her life history for us — a repressive mother who loaded her with guilt, a too-early marriage, confusion over the new freedoms of the sixties, abortion, lovers, analysis and so on. The details are perhaps overly melodramatic, but it's a tribute to Lambert's writing skill that she makes the plot cliches credible. And the psychological underpinnings that explain Vicky's motivation and subconscious aims are valid.

Crossings, then, is a powerful novel of a woman discovering herself. And we discover a powerfully talented writer.

Voluminous. But Halberstam has become David Halberstam: institution. And the result suffers

THE POWERS THAT BE

BY DAVID HALBERSTAM
Random House
771 pages, $19.50

REVIEWED BY MORRIS WOLFE

David Halberstam's voluminous study of how the American media have grown in influence over the past half century focuses on two newspapers, the Los Angeles Times and the Washington Post, one network (CBS), and one magazine, (Time).

Unfortunately, it is seriously flawed. It frequently reads as if it were written by a slightly out-of-control human computer. Halberstam's facts and sentences pour out in an endless jumble. Otis Chandler of the Los Angeles Times, he tells us, "was, by the standards of Pasadena, unusually liberal, he had gone to prep school at Andover, where he had been easternized, his years as a star athlete had moved him into a world at least partially black, in the Air Force one of his closest friends had been Mal Whitfield, the great black runner." And that's not the *whole* sentence.

Halberstam is rarely content to say things once. His writing sometimes reads like a parody of students who, not confident of what they're saying, repeat the same point three times to make up for it. Henry Luce, he writes, "was impatient, he had not come this far by waiting on other men — he was a man to lead, others could catch up. He wanted to go ahead and he did not want to wait. If he waited, perhaps some other publisher might beat him to his idea." The trouble is that the Halberstam of Vietnam, and of The Best and the Brightest, has become David Halberstam: institution, and like others who take themselves too seriously, his prose suffers as a result.

He is too kind to those he admires — reporter Theodore H. White, for example — and too hard on those, such as Lyndon Johnson, whom he dislikes. (White is an example of a journalist whose writing declined sharply after *he* became an institution with his first The Making of a President book.) Halberstam doesn't really question White's decision to continue covering China in the forties, although his copy was regularly being rewritten and falsified by Time. At one point, questions not asked and answers not given were actually added by Henry Luce to a White interview with Chiang Kai-shek to make Chiang look good. Luce is criticized; White's acceptance of this intolerable situation isn't.

Like the media he's describing, Halberstam becomes so immersed in details he seems incapable of analysis, of putting things into perspective. He doesn't deal with the central question: why is it that the more im-MEDIA-te things have become, the more confused we've become?

Infuriating as the book is, it's difficult to put down. One suffers the flaws because the book is filled with intriguing facts and anecdotes: Roosevelt telling Orson Welles they were the two best actors of their time. I.F. Stone saying of the Washington Post of an earlier period that it was an exciting paper to read because one never knew on what page one would find a page-one story. John F. Kennedy studying the power structure of Time magazine as earlier politicians might study the interconnections of ward heelers. Richard Nixon hiring Frank Shakespeare to help him work out a TV strategy in 1968. CBS president William Paley admitting there's no way an Edward R. Murrow could get a prime-time show today: "The minute is worth too much now," he says.

Of particular interest are Halberstam's comments on the strengths and weaknesses of some of his fellow journalists. James Reston of the New York Times was a genius at working a town, at taking a tiny bit of information and making it grow — by calling sources and pretending he knew more than he did. Academe wasn't for Ben Bradlee of the Washington Post: "He lacked the patience for slow, dogged, serious work; journalism, with its adoration of the new at the expense of the old, was exactly right." Otis Chandler of the Los Angeles Times seems out of place in newspapers — he lacks "the restlessness to be the first to know and the first to tell that makes reporters such great professional gossips."

The Powers That Be would have been far better had it been shorter and more analytical. Still, it is compulsive reading because Halberstam is such a great gossip himself.

Morris Wolfe teaches at the Ontario College of Art and is editor of the annual literary anthology, Aurora.

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