Book Reviews

ARIEL IN A BRICKBAT'

The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft, by
Claire Tomalin. Penguin. £1.50.

Claire Tomalin's qualities make this a very good book, as well as one about a fascinating and to me a sad eighteenth century feminist. The writer is painstaking, affectionate about her subject.

My only cavil is minor, and I will get it over quickly. I don't like asterisks, and numbered references to notes contained in pages at the end of the book, however clearly those pages are arranged. I like to read in one flow, so I want the writer to judge whether matter is germane and to be included, or redundant, and excluded.

Mary Wollstonecraft was an impoverished woman of scant education, who not only managed to live according to her humanist convictions, but became a writer, and so left a testament to her passionate sense of the injustice of women's social role, and her convictions about alternative ways of living.

In a largely repressive age, she used her early experiences of being passed over in family inheritance for being only female, and of becoming a governess in an aristocratic family in Ireland, to sharpen her resolve to live independently and to express her views. She was helped in this by the patronage of her publisher, and by finding a support group among the Dissidents at Stoke Newington. From there she went enthusiastically to Paris, to witness the early stages of the Revolution.

In Paris she saw women going about the streets in trousers and, rather more importantly, being allowed an equal voice with men in some political clubs and public discussions. She saw passed the remarkable but short-lived Divorce Laws of 1792. These granted divorce by mutual consent, or by one person's petition on fairly wide grounds. The procedure of the divorce was by meeting with a group of friends before a municipal officer for a discussion and attempt at reconciliation. Three failed attempts at reconciliation led to divorce being granted in one to six months, with an equitable sharing of property and family responsibilities. This when divorce in England was extremely frowned on, expensive, long and difficult to obtain.

She stayed long enough to see the reversal of much of this kind of progress, and the execution of many of her Reformist friends. She also stayed long enough to revise her apparently puritanical views about sexual union, take a lover, and soon bear him a daughter. The lover deserted her, and she set up house back in London with the child and a nurse. In her late thirties she married William Godwin, and died tragically of septicaemia in bearing her second baby. She left a good deal of usually passionate writing. Two memorable pamphlets are her 'Vindication of the Rights of Man', written

in reply to Burke's reactionary 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', and in 1792, a 'Vindication of the Rights of Women'.

As Mrs Tomalin reports this often harassed and eventful life, it seems to go in a series of pendulum swings. For part of her time Mary not only saw clearly the real issues of male oppression of women, but acted in the light of that understanding. Which is more than I see many insightful and fluent contemporary women achieving, including me. And for the rest of her time she was still, unsurprisingly, caught in that conditioned vulnerability which made her ashamed of seeming unattractive to men, then ashamed of revealing herself to her family as an unmarried mother, and later, liable to send plaintive dependent bleats from her avant-garde separate establishment to her apparently more independent husband.

But the poignancy of her life lies in a different contrast. She travelled so far towards emancipation, from a standing start, and with only the support for much of her life of a few Dissidents in this country, and soon-imprisoned Reformists in France. She communicated herself and her beliefs enough to make herself famous and feared, enough to shake her generation. And then. Dreadful. From the time of her death there was such a reactionary movement against what she stood for, that her struggle seems for a generation or two to have been useless. 'Daughters of England,' wrote Belof in 1817, 'be not beguiled; be assured that the study of politics is not essential to female accomplishments, that the possession of Machiavellian knowledge will neither make you better wives, mothers nor friends.' And women gave in, and let themselves be re-directed to the role men found convenient, a mixture of slave and decorative object, chiefly to be praised for obedience, good manners, compliance, passivity.

Some of my everyday work is to comment on the process of large groups. A common phenomenon in loosely-structured large groups is the way new ideas are apparently ignored in them. I often hear people allege that if an idea, a suggestion, is ignored by the group, then the timing of it was wrong. And they point to the comparative ease with which the same course of action is adopted later, when it is no longer new. I have a different view: that large groups are very often frightened and are therefore deeply conservative. So in a way, new ideas always come at the wrong time for them, since their newness is their most threatening quality. But it is because someone ventures, someone speaks out and is howled down or passed over, that the new idea gradually becomes more familar, and may in time be adopted.

The large group which is British society has a long way to go before it stops oppressing many women. Mary Wollstonecraft looks to me like one of the early, now strident, now wavering voices, that we can thank for the present comparative openness about the issues she was vilified for raising.

Gaie Houston

James Thurber. Let Your Mind Alone.

Harper and Row Paperback. Price not quoted in sterling.

Me working on a review of James Thurber's 'Let Your Mind Alone' is an unusual noise. It begins like a saucepan boiling over, and proceeds into honks and snorts, interspersed with moments of straining silence followed by long rasping rattling indrawn breaths. It is a sound reminiscent of a man dying of whooping cough in an overcrowded pigsty. It is me laughing to myself.

This book came into the world first at about the time I did, in the thirties. So the New Therapies were not enough in evidence for Thurber to resist, line by line and comma by comma. He had instead to content, or infuriate, himself, by chewing the trouser legs of what he calls the science of Happiness boys: David Seabury, Dale Carnegie and others. He does so with the heightened, honed, super-aware perceptiveness of an entrenched neurotic. As he points out, the sort of problems these people set up and then solve are unimaginative and pedestrian: 'The little fusses at the breakfast table, the familiar worries over money and health'. Whereas Thurber lives in a world nearer that of the Marx Brothers, from whom he quotes,

GROUCHO: *It is my belief that the missing picture is in the house next door.*

CHICO: *There isn't any house next door.*

GROUCHO: *Then we'll build one.*

A magnificent destruction of linear thought and conventional reality.

Thurber comments primly, 'I have not always, I am sorry to say, been able to go the whole way with the Freudians.' And my guess is that the Freudians, Adlerians, Jungians and you name them would find it easier to go up Everest on roller skates than attempt to go the whole way with Thurber.

I wish he had lived long enough to tilt at current windmills. He puts the perspective of absurdity on earnest theorists and over-blown theories. There is plenty of material nowadays for him to work on.

Gaie Houston

John Shaw. *The self in social work,* Routledge 1974

This is an extermely good book for anyone who has been trying to come to grips with Maslow's ideas, or who has been trying to explain or defend Maslow's views in the face of objections from colleagues or friends. It takes self-actualization seriously as something to be pursued and talked about and acted on.

John Shaw takes the idea of personal development and shows how it runs through a number of different approaches to human psychology - particularly those of Charlotte Buhler and Erik Erikson. He then takes the idea of the self-concept, as outlined by Rogers, Reich, Angyal, Schachtel and others. Linking the two together, he asks the question 'How can people transcend their existing self-concept when they need to do so?' And he considers one-to-one counselling and group approaches as means to this end.

Then comes one of the most helpful parts of the book, an assessment of self-actualization theories. Shaw makes the basic distinction between the 'real self' and the 'false self' very clear here, and goes on to consider the sociological concept of alienation as having an important bearing on this.

Shaw then applies the whole theory thus established to the practicalities of social work, and shows that it gives a host of day-to-day insights which are useful in solving the detailed problems which are met with when the topic of self-actulization is raised, both from Freudians and Marxists. He distinguishes very well between narcissism and natural self-affirmation, between selfishness and self-love, between self-obsession and self-acceptance. He ends by saying:

> If a social worker does not see in himself a process of 'becoming' and development, then he is hardly likely to see his client creatively. Self-actualization theory, therefore, is primarily a challenge to oneself.

James Crippledini

COMMUNITY GROUPS

The Association For Self Help And Community Groups are running residential weekend training workshops on June 17-19 and October 28-30 at a cost of £8 each.

The June weekend is particularly designed for those who are interested in starting or running self-help groups for unemployed young people, and is a direct result of the response to correspondence in the Guardian.

Both weekends will use the concept of role clarity, role conflict and authority, and both will be useful to anyone contemplating community or family self-help groups how to start them, how to organise them, how to lead them and how not to, what local financial and human resources are available, what free publicity can be found in the national, local and professional press.

A sample syllabus is also available to anyone who wants to start similar courses at local technical colleges or adult education centres. Further details from ASHCOG, 7 Chesham Terrace, Ealing, London W13 9HX.
