

Literary Review

Cult cock- OUP

Scientology

Edited by James R. Lewis
(Oxford University Press,
£18.99)

THE clock starts striking 13 very early in this book, which claims to consider Scientology from a standpoint of scholarly objectivity.

In the opening essay, "Birth of a Religion", J. Gordon Melton sets out "an overview of the life of L. Ron Hubbard anchored by the generally agreed facts". The general tone can be deduced from his conclusion: "After a suitable pause to acknowledge the founder's life and accomplishments, the church continued its forward march." In another chapter, David G. Bromley claims that "the basic outline of L. Ron Hubbard's life is not contested".

What poppycock. Scientologists believe that LRH was a war hero who fought in all five continents, a great thinker and a man true to his philosophy that modern psychiatric drugs are bad for you. The sceptics, with evidence, say that LRH lied about his war record, wrote pulp science-fiction books, then came up with a cock-and-bull story about Lord Xenu and the Thetans, called it a religion, made millions and died with his bottom pin-pricked with a psychiatric sedative used for anxiety-ridden geriatrics. Everything about Scientology's founder is contested, though no one reading this book would realise that.

Take the war record. In *Scientology*, Melton asserts that LRH's ship, sub-chaser PC815, did heroic work, sinking a Japanese sub off the coast of Oregon. Russell Miller's biography, *Bare-Faced Messiah*, tells a wholly different story. Miller, backed by US Navy records, says that a panicky Hubbard ordered depth charges against a blip on the radar caused by magnetic deposits on the seabed. A few months later, LRH's ship fired its three-inch guns at goats on uninhabited islands off Mexico. He was then relieved of his command, his admiral rating LRH "below average" and noting that he lacked "essential qualities of judge-

ment, leadership and co-operation".

None of this merits a mention in the OUP's *Scientology*. Nor will you find Judge Breckenridge's ruling in the Los Angeles Superior Court in 1984: "The organisation clearly is schizophrenic and paranoid... its founder... virtually a pathological liar." Or Mr Justice Latey's ruling in the high court in London in the same year that Scientology was "immoral, socially obnoxious, corrupt, sinister and dangerous... because it is out to capture people and indoctrinate and brainwash them so that they become the unquestioning captives and tools of the cult".

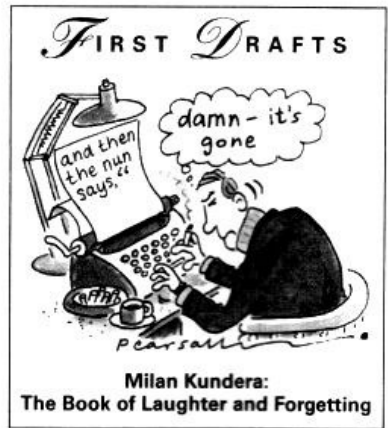
Evidence of editorial mumbo-jumbo comes thick and fast. On page four, editor James R. Lewis lambasts an unnamed critic of Scientology for being a computer scientist rather than a sociologist or a religious studies scholar. Yet at the very end of the book there is an astonishingly uncritical essay entitled "Pastoral Care and 11 September: Scientology's Non-traditional Religious Contribution", co-authored by Justine Digance, who is a senior lecturer in, er, "tourism management" at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia. Digance praises Scientology's "own self-understanding" of its role at Ground Zero, quoting its claim that fire-fighters attributed their lack of injuries as they crawled over mountains of twisted steel to the "assists" received from volunteer ministers of Scientology.

No surprise there: far from being a neutral scholar, James Lewis is a veteran apologist for cults, or "new religions" as he prefers to style them. "Many of us in academia," he has said, "look on the anti-cultists as being far more dangerous to liberty than the so-called cults." Several contributors to *Scientology* worked on his previous white-washing jobs such as *Sex, Slander and Salvation* (1994), a sympathetic study of the Children of God (now rebranded as The Family), the cult notorious for child sexual abuse and "flirty fishing". Melton liked The Family so much he later appeared in a PR video for the sect, praising its "very positive view of sexuality".

After the lethal Sarin gas attacks on Tokyo subway passengers in 1995, Lewis flew to Japan to defend the Aum Supreme Truth cult, which had perpetrated the crime. He told

an audience of disbelieving Japanese hacks that the cult was innocent and benign, a victim of religious persecution and police pressure. It could not have produced the Sarin used for the murders, he insisted. How did he know? That's his prerogative. What the Aum Supreme Truth cultists had told him so. They also paid his airfare, hotel bill and living expenses.

Lewis seems never to have met a cult he didn't like. That's his prerogative. What is utterly mystifying is why one of the oldest and most respected publishing houses in the world chooses to give its imprimatur to this tendentious drivell. Did anyone at OUP read it before pressing the print button? "Certainly this book was peer-reviewed," an OUP spokesman assures the *Eye*, without revealing who the peers were. Lord Archer and Lord Black, perhaps?



Milan Kundera:
The Book of Laughter and Forgetting

groin height, such is the concentration on the tune he dances to his own libido.

As with Kinsey in the *Inner Circle*, whose activities were depicted through the eyes of one of his researchers, Boyle approaches Wright through the device of a fictitious student who joined his architectural fellowship in the 1930s and who supposedly witnessed or learned about his master in sufficient detail to write it all down. The student, Tadashi Sato, is Japanese and one of the conceits of his narrative is that he constantly refers to Wright as "Wrieto-San", which soon grows tedious. But the book is written, or rather overwritten, in a florid, purple style quite at odds with the idea of a Japanese narrator, and this is apparently owing to the fact that Sato, now an old man, has allowed his recollections to be imaginatively worked up into the present novel by his young "translator", Seamus O'Flaherty.

All this seems a rather elaborate charade to excuse some thoroughly embarrassing prose: "She read through the letter a second time, then a third, every nerve and fiber of her stirring with the highest regard for the nobility of this man, for his grace, his beauty, his truth and wisdom, and she immediately wrote back, and what she wrote was so deep and so true she might as well have opened a vein and written him in blood." There's a lot of this sort of stuff here, and it offers a jarring contrast to the clean simplicity of Wright's architecture (of which you get little sense in this book).

The story is told in three tranches, dealing in reverse chronological order with the women he installed in succession in his rural domain at Taliesin, Wisconsin. Wright had built the house (or "love bungalow" as the press called it) in 1911 as a home and studio, but also as a refuge from the censorious gossips of Oak Park, the suburb of Chicago where he had received so many of his early commissions.

Leaving his first wife Kitty and their five children in Oak Park, Wright had eloped to Germany in 1909 with his mistress, Mamah Borthwick Cheney. She was the wife of one of his patrons and a devotee of free love, but their relationship was anything but free, since it cost them both their reputations and had to be conducted on the run. In 1914, having eventually been installed in Taliesin, she was murdered, along with six others, by a mad axe-wielding cook. The local population, scandalised by the rela-

Nookie & Corners

The Women
TC Boyle

(Bloomsbury, £12.99)

TC Boyle currently lives in a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, so his interest in writing a book about the great architect is perhaps easier to explain than his prurient delvings into the sexual behaviour of the "pioneering" sexual behaviourist, Dr Kinsey, in his earlier novel, *The Inner Circle* (see *Eye* 1128).

But it is one thing to live in a man's house; quite another to recreate his life and loves, which is what Boyle purports to do here with Frank Lloyd Wright. The problem for Boyle is that, as an architect, Wright was unique, and therefore uniquely interesting. But as a man, and especially in his sexual behaviour and relationships, he was unhappily no different from any other arrogant, opinionated, needy, attention-seeking egotist.

Yet it is on Wright's manhood, rather than his genius, that Boyle devotes the vast bulk of this long and repetitive novelisation. "He was one of those sexually charged men who couldn't live without a woman at the centre of his life." The result is that Wright, who was not a tall man, is barely glimpsed above

