
NONFICTION

AN OLD MAN'S DIARY. By A. J. P. Taylor. (David & Charles, \$17.95.) "I have become quite interested in the signs of old age," the English historian A. J. P. Taylor, who is 79 years old, writes. "My hand trembles slightly. . . . I actually enjoy going to bed for the afternoon." Between naps, Mr. Taylor remains a master of the robust opinion. "An Old Man's Diary" is a grumpy, entertaining collection of chitchat drawn from his weekly columns in *The Listener* and *The London Review of Books*, in which he affects a cheerful crankiness about practically everything, not least his aging condition. He thinks England's major political parties resemble "three motor coaches hurtling along a mountain road with no one in the driver's seat." He finds Marx's philosophical writings "unreadable." His frequent queries nearly always bear sad tidings about the current state of civilization: "Where can I find tripe and onions?" he asks, and "Why are there never . . . any hooks in hotel bedrooms nowadays?" Color television does not appeal to him because "the so-called controls are baffling" and "all human faces are bright red." Travel by train, in his view, is preferable to travel by car, and walking beats both. "At any rate," he remarks on returning to London from a wearying lecture date in Manchester, "I have finished with long journeys or getting out late at night in order to deliver stale thoughts on stale subjects." Mr. Taylor wraps such minor complaints inside a major lament: he thinks we are all doomed by nuclear war. "When Malcolm Muggeridge and I were young," he writes, "we used to speculate about the end of civilization. Little did we expect it would come in our lifetimes." The book bristles with cosmic epitaphs. As Mr. Taylor might put it, seldom has the human race been dispatched so amusingly. — *Richard J. Margolis*