

Checking PBS For Elitism

sional. The company receives 15,000 requests by individuals to have their report sent to their physician every year, says Day. Between 250 and 300 people argue with their reports.

A PERSON applying for life insurance enjoys none of the privacy rights and protections that a person applying for credit does, says Josh Kratka, an attorney with the Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group (MASSPIRG).

"MIB has agreed to abide by [the FCRA]. They will send those codes to your physician. Your insurance company is not under those obligations. . . . If you are denied life insurance, you have no way of knowing whether it was legitimate or based on an error in your records that is going to follow you around for the rest of your life," says Mr. Kratka.

In one case, says Kratka, a Massachusetts man told his insurance company that he had been an alcoholic but had managed to remain sober for several years and regularly attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. The insurance company denied him coverage and forwarded a code to MIB: "alcohol abuse; dangerous to health."

The next company the man applied to for insurance, Kratka says, learned of the "alcohol abuse" through the information bureau and charged the man a 25 percent higher rate.

In another case, he says, a clerical error caused a woman's records at MIB to say that she carried the AIDS virus. "It was only after unusual intervention by the state regulatory board," because the woman worked for a physician, that the records were corrected, Kratka says. MASSPIRG has filed state legislation that would extend many of the FCRA's protections to medical records.

As health-care costs continue to rise, say experts, consumers can expect less and less privacy regarding their medical records.

"Doctors, in order to get paid, are being asked more and more to identify a chargeable condition in their clients. . . . The breach in confidentiality is a natural consequence of the way in which third-party billing of physician's time is structured in this country," says Dr. Paul Billings, chief of genetic medicine at the Pacific Presbyterian Medical Center in San Francisco.

No federal law ensures the confidentiality of medical records. Some hospitals, Mr. Smith says, have even started using them for target marketing.

HAD enough of those upper-class British characters on "Masterpiece Theater"? Have you stopped following the costly adventures of homebuilders on "This Old House"? Through with the millionaire fund managers forever doing guest shots on "Wall Street Week"?

To be more direct about it, do you find the Public Broadcasting Service a bit elitist - featuring people and subjects that have little to do with the hard-pressed lives lived by 90 percent of the "public" mentioned in its title?

If so, you have plenty of company. People level all kinds of charges that broadly classify as anti-elitist in attitude - some of them even anti-intellectual: The entertainment is high-falutin', force-feeding viewers on things like ballet. The news shows are full of self-serving corporate types and academic theorists.

Alan Lomax, the legendary folklorist, tells me he thinks PBS is elitist in another way - ethnically - because it is dominated by British and Northern European artistic standards. And many say PBS, funded by taxes, airs too many British plays - a practice they view as snobbish - when it should be buying American.

That last point resonates in Congress when funding time rolls around. To show the flag, the network sticks an "American" label on any series it can: "American Playhouse," "The American Experience," "American Masters," "American Patchwork." Last June a Canadian drama about a Blackfoot Indian girl aired on "American Playhouse" (well, the theme was more or less American, the series explained).

But the most recent anti-elitist salvo involves blue- and white-collar working Americans. If you have the impression that labor is all but invisible on public TV, you are right. The City University of New York (CUNY) has taken an exhaustive two-year look at PBS's 1988 and '89 prime-time hours and found a giant hole where the worker should have been.

The lion's share of time - in programs of all sorts - went to people in the business and social upper crust. They accounted for 10 times more programming hours, in fact, than the average worker. There were plenty of movie stars, big-name athletes, and famous artists on PBS, but no equivalent of commercial TV's "Roseanne" or the movie world's "Norma Rae" and "9 to 5." And of the very few workers portrayed in dramas, most were British.

As for unions - forget it. One lonely 60-minute program about a union-management conflict showed up in the entire two years covered by the analysis, while many hours were devoted each month to business.

The clearest window on the forces skewering public programming in this way may be the story of Made in USA Productions, a nonprofit company that helped finance the CUNY study. It's been struggling for some 15 years to get a series about American labor on PBS, and you'd think public TV would have pounced on the idea. Where else on the schedule would you be able to find labor well-represented? Not on the MacNeil-Lehrer Hour, however well-done. Its guests tend to look as if they just stepped from a board room or think tank, according to one recent study.

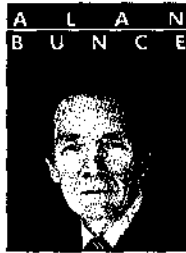
It took until 1984 for a pilot script - called "The Killing Floor," about the Chicago stockyards - to air on "American Playhouse," and to this day "Playhouse" has not accepted a second program that Made in USA is trying to get aired.

"Playhouse" says one problem is script quality. Someone at Made in USA tells me she thinks it has something to do with public TV's desire to appease future corporate funders by keeping labor's story at arm's length - along with union funding of such shows.

The real reasons are undoubtedly more complex, yet it's obvious an imbalance as flagrant as this one needs redressing. Public TV should turn its cameras on the richly dramatic history of working people and the place of labor in American society.

Will viewers - including union members - then start rushing home from work to turn on shows about union meetings and blue-collar life? Creatively that takes a great deal more than most entertainment is offering today. It takes people like Arthur Miller and Paddy Chayevsky and other explorers of the American soul.

Minorities now play a sizeable role in public TV's picture of American society - a fact to applaud. Now it's labor's turn.



19th-Century Models

By Merle Rubin

BRITISH novelist and biographer A. N. Wilson takes his title for this book from Lytton Strachey's famous quartet of biographical essays. Published in 1918, the final year of the Great War that had come to seem a horrific exercise in futility, Strachey's irreverent portraits of "Eminent Victorians" signaled a radical change in attitude among a generation deeply skeptical of their parents' values.

Wilson sees Strachey's "Eminent Victorians" as an "elegant and hilarious example" of the "literature of despair" that emerged in the wake of World War I. "The world has not got any nicer" since then, Wilson writes, "in fact, the reverse. But somehow, it is no longer possible to dismiss anyone, whether dead or alive, in quite the debonair spirit in which he caricatures his subjects. We share a common humanity with people in the past, even when they baffle us. . . ."

Strachey's brief, sprightly sketches were a marked contrast to the reverential, multivolume biographies that proliferated in Victorian times. Yet, his witty portraits of Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Dr. Arnold, who set his stamp upon English public (private) school education as headmaster of Rugby, and General Gordon, hero-martyr of Khartoum, are not without sympathetic insight into these characters, and in the case of Florence Nightingale, a spark of genuine admiration.

Although Wilson's aim in giving his own version of "Eminent Victorians" is to correct Strachey's mockery by providing a "simpler, less propagandist" view of some other eminent Victorians, his writing has a Stracheyan elegance. There is more than a touch of irony in his tone that lightens it even as he is commending Victorians for their undeniable greatness.

Wilson's book resembles Strachey's in its enticing blend of playfulness and seriousness, sophistication, and mock-simplicity. Both writers love to "explain things," whether it is the wretchedly inferior status of women in the greater part of the 19th century or the debates that racked the Anglican Church, a propensity that renders both versions of "Eminent Victorians" exceedingly accessible.

Certainly Wilson's attitude - and the figures he has chosen to sketch - show the Victorians in a kinder light.

In place of the flinty Cardinal Manning (a leading High Churchman who converted to Roman Catholicism), Wilson

gives us the far more intellectually and emotionally appealing figure of Cardinal Newman, whose conversion prompted charges of duplicity that led him to compose one of the 19th-century's great autobiographical works, "Apologia pro Vita Sua."

Wilson replaces the admirable Florence Nightingale by the still more impressive figure of Josephine Butler, an intensely spiritual woman whose extraordinary courage and compassion led her to champion the cause of that unmentionable class of person most shamefully victimized by the Victorian double standard: the prostitute.

The easily mocked figures of Dr. Arnold and General Gordon are replaced by those of Prince Albert and William Gladstone, both of whom have indeed been targets for mockery in the past. But both, Wilson reminds us, are well worth reconsidering: Albert reshaped the institution of monarchy in a way that would make it viable in modern times. Glad-

BOOKS

EMINENT VICTORIANS

By A. N. Wilson
New York & London: W. W. Norton
236 pp., \$25

stone, for all his eccentricities, had a largeness of vision epitomized in his declaration, "The ground on which we stand is not British, nor European, but it is human."

Wilson's weakest portrait is of the pioneering photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, who is simply not of the stature of the other eminences he has chosen to portray. One suspects she was chosen because she was the great-aunt of another Bloomsbury figure, Strachey's friend Virginia Woolf.

Wilson is on surer ground in his portrait of Charlotte Brontë. As a novelist himself, he understands the primacy of the writer's imagination in creating even a relatively realistic novel, let alone an impassioned, individualistic, near visionary novel like Charlotte's "Jane Eyre," or Emily Brontë's "Wuthering Heights."

Without a trace of the edifying solemnity traditionally associated with the Victorians, Wilson offers a strongly felt, instinctively sympathetic, and judicious look at the 19th century as embodied in its most impressive and appealing products: six great (or near-great) men and women, whom he sketches with something of Strachey's lightness and charm, but without Strachey's tendentious bias.

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