BOOKS and REVIEWS

The Americans

By Daniel J. Boorstin, 374 pp. New York. Random House.

Reviewed by
FREDERICK G. BAHR

Dr. Boorstin, Professor of American History at the University of Chicago, has written a very important reinterpretation of pre-Revolution American history. He presents an excellent case for the proposition that Americans are a breed unto themselves; we are not transplanted Europeans but, for better or worse (mostly better), a people whose background has set us on ways of thinking and acting entirely alien to any other area of the world.

Part of American strength has been ability to adapt. The Puritans dominated and built Massachusetts, while the Quakers very early abdicated most of their power in Pennsylvania.

"While the dogmas of Quakerism grew more fixed and uncompromising, those of Puritanism tended more and more toward compromise. Puritanism—proverbially rigid and dogmatic—expanded and adapted; while Quakerism — traditionally formless, spontaneous, and universal—built a wall around itself."

THIS NEED for compromise and practical thinking permeated the mores of areas other than religion. The Virginian, thinking he was building a New World English squiredom, was forced to become something that far dwarfed his model. The successful plantation owner had to be a farmer, lawyer, judge, businessman, land speculator, doctor, legislator and so forth, all rolled into one. These practical demands produced the still undimmed galaxy of eighteenth and earl nineteenth century Virginians.

America also produced, says Boorstin, a new concept of learning and knowledge. We were unencumbered by a priesthood of both clerics and formalized philosophers. Results, not abstract ideas, were all important. Thus, that which produced the best results must be the truth; experience was the best teacher.

THE BOOK analyzes our early scientific achievements. Americans made the experiments and did field work; Europeans drew conclusions and catalogued. Language and reading habits, law and medicine, education and politics, all are covered and fitted into Dr. Boorstin's theme.

That this is an important contribution to American thought there can be no doubt. There are some difficulties, however, for the average reader. The book, of necessity, presupposes some general knowledge of early American history. Your reviewer, with a minor in that subject, found his knowledge adequate but not much more.

Moreover, the style is not relaxed and flowing. The book must be read and understood, not skimmed. Dr. Boorstin forages pedantry and obscure words but uses the everyday language with such economy and precision that each sentence expresses an exact thought. While Dr. Boorstin has not written a textbook, he has written in order to provoke thought.

YOUR reviewer sincerely hopes, however, that the fact that "The Americans" is not relaxing reading will not scare the potential reader. In fact, he with the "casual reading" habit is the one who will benefit most by this book and will find one explanation of why he and many other Americans traditionally shy away from books of this type.

The Rainbow and the Rose

By Nevil Shute. 310 pp. New York. William Morrow and Company. $3.95.

Reviewed by
ROBIN BAHR

In his 22nd novel, "The Rainbow and the Rose," Nevil Shute returns to his favorite subject matter—aviation.

It is the story of seasoned flyer Johnny Pascoe, who at 60, has retired from Australian Canadian airlines to operate a small airport in Tasmania. On a flight into the back country to rescue a child stricken with appendicitis, Pascoe's plane crashes and his skull is fractured.

A former pupil, Ronnie Clarke, whose life has been intermittently linked with and influenced by Pascoe, volunteers to fly in a doctor. After two unsuccessful attempts and before a third try, Ronnie Clarke spends the night in Pascoe's bachelor home. Surrounded by Pascoe's belongings and mementos, Ronnie falls to sleep.

HIS restless dreams—which form the bulk of the book—slowly reconstructs the life of Johnny Pascoe—his pilot days in WWI, his actress wife and subsequent divorse, his tragic love affair with Brenda Marshall, and finally, his connection with the young nurse who is to accompany Clarke on the next day's flight.

Shute, formerly an aeronautical engineer, is well qualified to write on flying and does so with authority, a great deal of interesting details, and a certain sense of excitement lacking in the rest of the story.

THE flashback technique is a little contrived; the characters—honorable, admirable people—are a little dull; the romances—rather colorless. And the story as a whole lacks the significance of Shute's last book, "On the Beach," with its frightening picture of radiation death in WWIII, to which situation his purposely undramatic style was so well fitted.

Nevertheless, Shute, as always, is a skilled novelist. In spite of its weaknesses, the story is smoothly told in simple, readable prose and remains continuously, if only mildly, interesting.

Our Man in Havana

By Graham Greene, 247 pp. New York. Viking Press. $3.50.

Reviewed by
DONALD A. YATES

Graham Greene labels his latest novel an "entertainment." From this category in the past the author has given us "Brighton Rock," "This Gun for Hire," and "The Ministry of Fear," among others. Whereas the earlier adventures have been characterized by effectively drawn terror, intrigue and violence, "Our Man in Havana" is an ironic moralistic tale which emerges from an innocent enough comedy of errors, set sometime in the near future.

Mr. Wormold, vacuum cleaner representative, is the British Secret Service's man in Havana. He is, to judge from his public manner, a mild, rather ineffective man with a 17-year-old daughter who would seem to be more than a match for her father and his modest earning power.

ONE DAY, in a moment of awareness of his dead-end existence, Mr. Wormold casually sketched some rather ominously overscale vacuum cleaner parts and sends the drawings on to his head office. Things immediately change for Mr. Wormold from the routine to the highly dramatic.

His daughter's relationship with Captain Segura of the Havana police assumes new significance, enemy agents make their presence and their concern known to Wormold and his associates, and these tensions soon erupt into murder. Mr. Wormold thus finds himself in the midst of a situation which is beyond his control. Ultimately, he escapes from his homemade peril, but only by the narrowest of margins.

THE story is narrated with the characteristic Greene mastery, and is really quite entertaining, though, compared with the author's recent work, this fable of the future seems lacking in significance.