Findings and Keepings: Analects for an Autobiography by Lewis Mumford
(Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich; 393 pp.; $15.00)

Joseph Amato

Findings and Keepings is little more than a collection of writings from Lewis Mumford’s adolescence and early manhood. Included in these writings are unpublished entries from his early notebooks, some revealing love letters, a few minor publications, a sensitive autobiographical statement at age thirty entitled "The Little Testament of Bernard Martin," and a bad play called "The Builders of the Brooklyn Bridge."

In his very short introduction Mumford refers to the book’s contents as crumbs, gleanings..., "this formless miscellany," and admits that at one point he thought of titling it "Flotsam and Jetsam." These impulses, obviously at war with others, led him in the introduction to assert that "this work is as selective and highly organized as any other of my works," that there is a Joycean character to its arrangement, and that in the course of assembling it he discovered "the importance of the Jungian principle of synchronicity." All this seems so much verbal hocus-pocus, an academically elaborate way for Mumford to say that in Findings and Keepings, as in his previous work Interpretations and Forecasts (a fine collection of many of his very best essays, published in 1973), he is in the process of summing up a long, productive, and brilliant career.

This work is fortunately more than simply the attie rummaggings of an octogenarian, more than the result of egotism and fame, the habit of writing and the presumption of being heard—vices that commonly afflict old, successful writers. There is some of that in it, but so is there some real humility and unusual honesty. Mumford knows that his life and thoughts form one path historians will follow in their search to understand the overall direction of American self-understanding from the 1920’s to the 1960’s. This is so by virtue of his contributions to American literary criticism (especially The Golden Day, 1926; Herman Melville, 1929; The Brown Decades, 1931); his pathfinding work in the history of architecture (Sticks and Stones, 1924); his brilliant and stimulating synthetic, historical explorations of the machine (Technics and Civilization, 1934; The Myth of the Machine, 1967 and 1970) and the city (The Culture of Cities, 1938; The City in History, 1961); as well as other timely and significant contributions on cities and on highways, war, and peace.

In Findings and Keepings Mumford is willing to let the scholars know a little more about less dramatic, sparkling, and intellectual sides of his life, going so far as to write: "If there has been any guiding principle in this jumble it is that individual items should throw some light on my 'life and times,' and be interesting in their own right—though I have not hesitated at times to dig up observations which will be boring to nine people out of ten, for the sake of sudden illumination the tenth will get."

For this reason scholars will be thankful for what Mumford offers here. Regarding his youth and early manhood, they now, for instance, can say in way of an initial portrait: Mumford got a sound secondary and college education. From his teen years on he identified with high nineteenth-century culture and on highways, war, and peace. To this end he spent nearly all his energies. Leaving behind some flirtation with notions of despair and supermanism, a verbal attachment to social radicalism and commonplace "suffering" over conflicts between thought and feeling, solitude and community, Mumford arrived, without major shipwreck, at emotional and intellectual stability relatively early in life. Aside from additional information offered on contemporaries and on his first mentor, Patrick Geddes, scholars will appreciate some of the personal insights Mumford gives us about his courtship with Sophia, to whom he has been married for the past fifty years and to whom he touchingly dedicated this work in these terms: "To Sophia, The best of my 'Findings,' and the most enduring of my 'Keepings.'"

As information like this will interest the scholar, it will bore the general reader, especially if he or she is a fan of the bold and prophetic Mumford who tells the "whole" history of cities and machines and how they came to imprison and kill their makers. This type of reader will judge Mumford’s journal entries to be without excitement, his love letters delicate but devoid of great passion, his sensibility more a matter of continuous cultivation than of savage passion, and Mumford’s life to be like that of most intellectuals: a forest of words, a desert of actions. If this reader doesn’t quit before the end—and this means reading straight through, resisting what I found the very strong temptation to jump off at the middle of that long, bad play, "The Brooklyn Bridge"—his or her patience will be partially rewarded by the last piece in the work: the postlude, entitled "Prologue to Our Times, 1895-1975."

This piece, recently published in the New Yorker, is from "pure Mumford prophet." In it he conducts in semiautobiographical terms another campaign against the priesthood of automatic progress. He declares that age and experience have only increased his spiritual affinities with the dark prophecies of Dostoevski, Burckhardt, and Melville. His dire prognostications lead him to new extremes. Using an analogy drawn from modern physics, Mumford suggests, offering us the only comfort he does, that "the impenetrable Black Hole might prove the shadow of a brighter sun." Decoded, the imminent and disastrous end prefigured by the world today might not come tomorrow or the day after; in fact our ignorance is great enough for us to distrust the reason that reads our times to mean our soon and certain end. "On that ultimate skepticism my own faith blithely flourishes. Let the curtain rise on the twenty-first century—and After!" There the book ends.

I read the "Prologue" as further proof of Mumford’s ultimate rendezvous with the pessimism of Henry Adams, that gloomy, brilliant patrician, who by the turn of the century came to conceive of man as his own victim: a reed without faith, caught in the anarchic, accelerating rush of forces and
events given rise to by his very own science, invention, and machinery. In the 1920's Mumford, young, aspiring, and above all else literary, did not accept or even understand the Adams he and his generation read. While uncomfortable about mass society and materialisms of life and thought, and already worried about the spiritual and communal implications of contemporary technology and the growing mass, industrial order, Mumford was still not ruling out new syntheses that might make an American marriage of the good of the old to the best of the new. His steepening path to pessimism—encouraged by Spenglerian notions of the decline of the West, made certain by the awesome world events of the 1929-33 period, and expressed rather vividly in his Technics and Civilization (1934)—was interrupted by Hitler. Quicker than the great majority of American literati Mumford saw the threat of worldwide fascism and consequently found values in America and the West worth defending. Reasons for soldiering, energies for victory, and designs for rebuilding require heroic optimism, not cosmic pessimisms.

Yet, as the immediate postwar period passed, old fears and new furies encircled Mumford as he witnessed cities and neighborhoods come undone, senseless highways and suburbs reach like cancers into the countryside. Like Adams before the First World War, he saw a technology, society, politics, a mankind without guiding faith or culture going remorselessly forward toward some undefinable but near-certain abyss. In the City in History (1961) Mumford's pessimism about the city, America, mankind (a constant equation in his writings) had deepened and intensified. The nuclear bomb had by now exploded many times in his mind, and his hopes could no longer fly free of Brave New World and 1984. The war in Vietnam, against which Mumford spoke out early and bravely, convinced him (to use the title of one of his more recent works) that America was caught in a "Pentagon of Power." Watergate, and then Ford's pardon of Nixon, only further convinced Mumford that the Republic had become a death city and a death machine.

It is to this pessimism, a pessimism even more stark and virulent than Adams's, that Mumford has arrived in 1976. As he continues to clean out his attic in secluded, rural Amenia, New York, where he has spent the majority of his time during the last half century, citizen Mumford will not be doing any bicentennial celebrating. And he certainly won't be alone, for it is tough "to find or to keep" anything worthwhile these days.

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Briefly Noted

Rousseau: The Self-Made Saint by J.H. Huizinga (Grossman/Viking; 283 pp.; $12.95)

By all those who have come—whether through intuition or, more likely, through the study of his works and life—to despise Jean Jacques Rousseau this book will be warmly welcomed. The author himself is puzzled by his having spent so much time and labor on Rousseau, thus magnifying a Rousseau industry already inflated by a sense of self-importance worthy of the "self-made saint" who inspired it all. The Rousseau portrayed in this biography, largely through his own publications and letters, is unshakable in his belief that he is "the best man who ever lived" and inconsiderable in his self-pity and in his contempt for a world that does not always recognize the obvious truth of that proposition. Rousseau would likely be gratified by the diligent attention Huizinga pays even the smallest detail of his existence, as Rousseau would be the first to acknowledge that such attention is no more than his due. He would not be flattered by Huizinga's conclusion that his work is for the most part an amalgam of conceit and incoherence, but then he would have anticipated his biographer's judgment, having long contended that his supposed deficiencies are but the necessary price of his self-confessed genius. In a too brief epilogue Huizinga tries to evaluate the extravagant claims that have been made for Rousseau's influence, both good and bad. He notes that there is irony in the political uses to which Rousseau has been put, since his views (amply documented in Huizinga's text) could have been exploited as easily by the right as by the left. Finally, however, Huizinga thinks Rousseau's influence has been much exaggerated by both the Rousseauphobes and the Rousseausists. The farthest he will go is to agree, and then only reluctantly, with his historian father who wrote: "With Rousseau triumphed the anti-stoical life-style," with him came the end of "the aristocratic culture which does not advertise its sentiment but remains sober and reserved in its manner of expression, stoical in its general attitude." Rousseau was an early proponent of last year's gospel: "Let it all hang out."

The Promise of Greatness: The Social Programs of the Last Decade and Their Major Achievements by Sar A. Levitan and Robert Taggart (Harvard; 314 pp.; $15.00)

Had Hubert Humphrey become the Democratic nominee, this book would no doubt be very important indeed. It pushes his basic theme that there was nothing wrong with the government social programs of the 1960's that cannot be cured by more of the same. Unfortunately, the authors do not come to terms with the most important criticisms pressed by their opponents. While documenting "economic benefit" to many through welfare, medicaid, and so forth, they fail to address the questions of dependency, disincentives, corrosion of the family and other mediating structures. To get "the other side of the story," this is a useful book, but it is most decidedly only one side of the story.
Prisoners of Conscience in the USSR: Their Treatment and Conditions

( Amnesty International; 154 pp.; $2.00 [paper])

Amnesty International recognizes that it is very difficult to determine how many Soviet citizens are now imprisoned for any other reason than political or religious dissent. The compilers of this unusually thorough report finally, and somewhat arbitrarily, accept the proposition that 1 per cent of the total prison population falls into that category, thus calculating there are from 10,000 to 25,000 "prisoners of conscience" in the Soviet Union (total prison population estimates run from 1-2.5 million). The terror, constant intimidation, psychiatric manipulation, and other brutalities directed against prisoners make clear that the Gulag Archipelago is not ancient history. The book contains a helpful summary of the ways in which information about political prisoners in the USSR is gathered and authenticated.

The Miracle of Jimmy Carter
by Howard Norton and Bob Slosser
(Logos; 134 pp.; $1.95 [paper])

The focus is on Carter as a born again Christian, but the relevant political material, most of it familiar by now, is included. With very few exceptions there is nothing new in information or interpretation, since the book draws heavily on Carter's own Why Not the Best? and on widely published interviews, such as Bill Moyers' early and extended PBS discussion with Carter on the relationship between Christianity and political practice. Precisely because it gathers so much together, however, the book is as useful a summary of Carter's background and positions as it is to be found between two covers to date. (Logos, the publisher, is based in Plainfield, New Jersey, and specializes in books for charismatic and usually conservative Christians.)

Correspondence (from p. 2)

consensus about what our role in the world ought to be (or, for that matter, what it now is). Current foreign policy debates are not simply about tactics; they reflect fundamentally differing values and presuppositions. It is not just that we disagree about what we should do; we don't even agree about why anything should be done.

Given our lack of agreement on the goals, purposes, and values that should guide our foreign policy, and given our radically differing perceptions of present international realities, it is no wonder that we can't agree about what ought to be done—about the kind of foreign policy strategy we should pursue. But it is not only in our view of world affairs that we have lost our bearings. There has been an even more fundamental breakdown in the fabric of attitudes and beliefs that have sustained our political community here at home.

We are no longer a nation possessed of the confidence to articulate great purposes and pursue large goals; we no longer embody a commitment to advancing a sense of common purpose against the demands of a myriad of separatist currents; we no longer have agencies (including a strong Presidency) invested with sufficient legitimation and authority to carry out policies aimed at serving the common good; and we no longer believe that the central moral and political values of the American experience have any relevance to the challenges we face beyond our borders. Dr. Kissinger and some of his critics to the "right" are quite correct in saying that the fundamental problem is one of will. So lacking are we a gathered sense of purpose and the will to pursue it, it is something of a wonder that we have a foreign policy at all, regardless of its content or direction.

If so negative and pessimistic an assessment of our national condition is accurate, then what we need in our next President is, of course, a sort of secular savior who can lay indisputable claim to our hearts and minds and lead us, as it were, to the promised land. It is unlikely, given the nature of human politics (much less the current crop of Presidential aspirants), that such a messiah will soon appear on the electoral horizon. It is even less likely that, if one did appear, we would be ready to follow. And that is the crux of the problem: The American people are not now prepared to respond to the kind of leadership it would take to make this country a positive and creative force for progress toward a more peaceful and humane world order.

Four years ago it would have been fair, I think, to characterize the mood of an influential segment of the foreign policy-attentive public largely in terms of the "unless"s" of the Vietnam war: that America was the single villain in the Vietnam tragedy; that our policies there were not accidental or mistaken but were the necessary consequences of the racist, corrupt, imperialist, and oppressive character of American society; and that the only right thing for us to do was to "get out." These core teachings that originated in the "radical" anti-Vietnam war movement have influenced—and their broader implications have come to dominate—much of the liberal community. In 1972 the Democratic Party put forward a candidate whose foreign policy views reflected these broader lessons:

...that American policy has been the primary obstacle to constructive change in the Third World;

...that our policies toward the Communist world have been marked by hysterical overreaction to threats which, if they do exist at all, are not nearly so dire as our leaders would have us believe;

...that, in fact, most of the world's major problems are the result of American overinvolvement (political, military, economic, cultural intervention) in the affairs of other nations;

...and that, therefore, we ought to establish a new ordering of national priorities aimed at "setting our own house in order," rather than trying to be the world's policeman or social worker.

McGovern lost the election. But that view of this country's role in world affairs continues to influence public attitudes toward foreign policy.

Added to this liberal isolationist thrust was a severe crisis of confidence in the structures and processes of our political system—a crisis brought on by the Watergate affair and reinforced and extended by the wave of (primarily) liberal attacks on the Presidency and on the very concept of legitimate authority in our political community. The attacks were a culmination at the national level in the mainstream of American society of currents of anti-authority, anti-institution, and separatist sentiments