

What to Give

DAVID LOUGH'S "No More Champagne: Churchill and His Money" (Picador, 532 pages, \$32) is the first account of the politician's attempts to balance his own books, and if you feel sheepishly profligate yourself, cheer up: It turns out that you're not that wicked after all. Mr. Lough, a wealth-management sage, reveals that in the six years before World War I, Churchill spent in excess of \$1,700 at his wine merchants—the equivalent today of over \$150,000. And he always paid late.

Some literary figures take hold of the imagination, and Ted Hughes, the lantern-jawed English poet forever associated with his American first wife, Sylvia Plath, is one. Jonathan Bate is a dazzling scholar, and in **"Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life"** (HarperCollins, 662 pages, \$40) he sheds new light on the poet and his times—note the word "unauthorised" in the title. I especially loved Mr. Bate's insightful pages on the farm poems in Hughes's 1979 collection "Moortown." As with the

Churchill biography mentioned above, reading it makes one feel better about one's inadequacies in the personal department. Mr. Bate's book, it seems to me, embodies what the writer Hugh Kingsmill called the touchstone of good biography: the complete sympathy of complete detachment.

Jonathan Bate is an eminent Shakespearean, and a volume I enjoyed on that endless topic this year was James Shapiro's **"The Year of Lear: Shakespeare in 1606"** (Simon & Schuster, 367 pages, \$30). I welcome the trend of "biographies" that slice out a short period of a life (Mr. Shapiro himself previously gave us "A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599"). In 1606 the Bard finished not only "King Lear" but also "Macbeth" and "Antony and Cleopatra"—not an unproductive 12 months.

For action men and women, I recommend the entertaining **"Waterman: The Life and Times of Duke Kahanamoku"** by David Davis (Nebraska, 315 pages, \$26.95). Kahanamoku (1890-1968) was possibly the greatest surfer who ever lived. The

son of a Honolulu police clerk, he was a Homeric figure—"the most magnificent human male God ever put on this earth," as one admirer put it. He used a board more than twice as tall as himself made from 150 pounds of finely hewn redwood. Mr. Davis reveals how the dignified Kahanamoku overcame anti-Hawaiian prejudice to win a place on the Olympic swimming team. He took gold and silver in Stockholm in 1912, two golds in Antwerp and a silver in Paris in 1924.

It was a good year for surfing literature. William Finnegan's memoir **"Barbarian Days"** (Penguin Press, 447 pages, \$27.95) would make an excellent companion gift to "Waterman." It's a gorgeous memoir of a lifetime surfing in Hawaii and elsewhere by the New Yorker writer.

The fabled Kahanamoku and his board appeared in another "biography" this year: one of the Pacific Ocean, by veteran scribe Simon Winchester, **"Pacific: Silicon Chips and Surfboards, Coral Reefs and Atom Bombs, Brutal Dictators, Fading**

Empires, and the Coming Collision of the World's Superpowers" (Har-



per, 492 pages, \$28.99). Like micro-biographies of a single year, "lives" of non-human entities have enjoyed a vogue since Mark Kurlansky's 1997

best-seller "Cod." Mr. Winchester has already done the Atlantic. This excellent latest should really be called "The Pacific and its Rim," as it includes a history of those lands bordering the big blue as well as digestible chapters of lucidly explained science. I enjoyed the account of an oceanographer whose team discovered that life existed further down than anybody dreamed, without light or oxygen, because sea water was mixing with something (it was sulfur). "We all started jumping up and down," the man remembered. That discovery significantly altered the course of scientific research. Personal accounts of Mr. Winchester's experiences as a foreign correspondent in the region leaven the mix. While he was investigating the crater of a recently erupted volcano in Indonesia, his kayak melted. Now what about a biography of the kayak for next year?

—Ms. Wheeler's latest book is *"O My America! Six Women and Their Second Acts in a New World."*