Shadia Drury has written the first book on the thought of Leo Strauss (1899-1973). That none has preceded it is remarkable: in North America at least no figure has so affected the study of political thought, both classical and modern; none has found such passionate admirers or such angry, even obsessive detractors. Most of the detractors, however, have been loath to concede Strauss's significance, and to devote a book to a thinker is at the very least to concede that much. As for Strauss's students (and their students and their students' students, as there is now a third generation of "Straussians" who knew not Strauss and may not even know any of his original students), both reverence and diffidence have deterred them from attempting anything like a biography or a comprehensive statement of his position.

In Britain, of course, one is less likely than in America to encounter either obsession with Strauss or admiration of him. No "Modern Master" he; when British scholars write about him, it is as if he were a thinker from Mars whom they rather wish had remained there. For this reason I appreciate the willingness of Peter Nicholson to assign me Professor Drury's book. Although we have not met, Mr Nicholson doubtless divined from my work that I was a student, if not of Strauss, then at least of students of his. This I state at the outset, as is only fair, although with the disclaimer that there is much in Strauss's thought which I am conscious that I do not understand, including his position on what was for him the crucial question, that of reason and revelation.
Drury’s thesis begins from the obvious and incontestable. Anybody who has heard of Strauss knows that he taught that the greatest classical (and medieval and early modern) thinkers practiced esoteric writing, that (as he once described a youthful error of his own in reading Spinoza) one usually reads these writers too literally because one does not read them literally enough. For precisely this reason (and because he was open to the possibility that the understanding of any one of these thinkers might prove more compelling than that of those later ones commonly taken to represent progress beyond them) Strauss took the surfaces of the works of these thinkers more seriously than they had been taken at least since the 18th Century, combing them for nuances of meaning that had eluded other scholars. (It must be stressed, because it is so often misunderstood, that attention to the surface, not cavalier disregard of it, was Strauss’s one and only “hermeneutic” principle, which he once stated beautifully as follows: “The problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things.”1) According to Strauss these older writers practiced esotericism because of the tension that they perceived between the requirements of wisdom or philosophy and those of political society. This tension has been inevident to us since the Enlightenment’s rejection of it, but its plausibility has been confirmed by the problematic consequences of Enlightenment. The dynamic of modernity, culminating in Marxism or fascism, uncontrollable galloping technology which threatens the very existence of the race, and the intellectual impoverishment nurtured by nihilism and value relativism, refutes the presumed harmony between thought and society.

Obviously Strauss presents a controversial interpretation of the history of western thought. Drury, however, announces at the outset that she “will ignore altogether Strauss’s contribution to the study of the history of ideas” (p. ix). While ignoring it, Drury does not hesitate to