

Books of The Times

Desolation on Main Street

By ELIOT FREMONT-SMITH

ILL-AT-EASE IN COMPTON. By Richard M. Elman. 207 pages. Pantheon. \$5.95.

RICHARD M. ELMAN first visited Compton, Calif.—a city of 75,000 that lies just south of Watts, about half-way between downtown Los Angeles and Long Beach—during the 1964 election. He had been sent there by an educational TV station to prepare a script about the community, which had been picked as a typically Democratic town and was to be paired with a typically Republican town in a voting-analysis TV program.

Mr. Elman's script was to explain why Compton voted the way it did. The main reason, or at least a very important factor, was immediately apparent, and Mr. Elman communicated it back to the producer in New York. It seemed that the population of Compton was nearly 50 per cent Negro. The producer was aghast. "I asked for Main Street, U.S.A.," he snapped, "and you've given us Harlem."

Inconveniently, it was too late to substitute some other "typical" American town, one more comfortably white, so Mr. Elman was asked to devise ways to "shoot around" the Negroes. This was done and the program duly appeared—"just another piece of skulduggery," Mr. Elman writes, "in that long, squalid chronicle known as broadcasting history."

He Turns to Writing

Shortly after this episode, Mr. Elman turned his talents to books. His grim examination of the welfare system and how it helps to keep the poor and degraded poor and degraded, "The Poorhouse State: The American Way of Life on Public Assistance," was published a year ago. His novel, "The 28th Day of Elul," in which an East European-born Israeli agonizes at length over the meaning of modern Judaism, came out earlier this spring.

Aided by a publisher's advance and a modest foundation grant, Mr. Elman returned to Compton last summer to do the searching profile that did not appear on television. He felt then, and feels now, that Compton represents the future for a great many Americans, white and black, and that that future is a kind of living death, bleak, without soul and, for those in it, already ruinous. It is a personal and extremely impressionistic profile, and one is not always sure where the facts of Compton leave off and the author's predilections and opinions begin.

For example, his selection of attitudes in Compton about Vietnam seems strongly and unadmittedly influenced by his own disenchantment with that war. It seems as if he had "shot around" the hawkish opinions that, his other observations suggest, may in fact, if somewhat apathetically, prevail. This may or may not be fair to Mr. Elman's intentions; the point is that for all his lucidity and informal ease of prose, he does not allay the suspicion that he has been too uncritically guided by opinions and a view of life held before he went to Compton.

Yet a subjective approach can do things a more "objective" or consensus study can-

not: it can burrow into vaguely defined, "sensitive" areas that are often crucial to accurate understanding, and it can convey a sense of immediacy and reality that impersonal studies tend, by tradition if not necessity, to mask. In these respects at least, "Ill-at-Ease in Compton" is a most informative and affecting book.

The physical conditions of Compton, as Mr. Elman describes them, are not so bad—or, rather, they consist of the defacements we have in this country grown used to. The difference is that in Compton, as in much of Southern California, (also eastern New Jersey, Florida, and lots of other places), the uncaring, flashy ugliness is pretty much unrelieved. There are freeways, endless motels, impersonal housing projects—"tract living," he calls it—and neon signs that beckon toward the irrelevantly antiseptic things and onanistic pleasures which, along with defense contracts, apparently keep the economy going, as the ad men like to say. The streets are mostly tree-lined, and there still are green areas, but these are not used and no pride is attached to them. The terrain is flat. The climate is hot and predictable;

Not so bad, then—just utterly depressing. The public conditions are no better. The political structure is impersonal, nonpartisanly cautious. The churches exist, little more. The local newspaper serves the private opinions of its single owner, who voices little hope for Compton's future. By the usual gauges, Compton is declining economically. By Mr. Elman's observations, the people are apathetic, sullen, suspicious. There is an air of having been cheated, and a sense that being cheated has become for them the American way of life.

Few Want to Stay There

Most of Compton's residents came there recently from other places. Many of the Negroes moved there from Watts, thinking it a move up. But as they did so, many whites moved out to the next town. According to Mr. Elman, hardly anyone in Compton, white or black, now wants to stay there. If they can afford to move—and the percentage who can is dwindling—they will do so, but not because they are hopeful about their prospects elsewhere, for those dreams are dead, but because rootlessness, too, the urge to move for no particular reason which seems to have infected many Americans (and has brought so many to California in the last two decades), seems endemic.

The people of Compton seem, in this report, as cut off from each other as from the rest of American society. They do not believe they can change things. They don't want—and are not being taught how—to think about changing things, or to care, and they are suspicious of those who do seem to care. The spiritual landscape is as ersatz and plasticized and humiliating as the physical landscape. They see no remedy—nor does Mr. Elman.

If this is our future, it is indeed hideous to contemplate. But if we do not contemplate it, and to some purpose, then, as Mr. Elman suggests, it may have already arrived.