

as finger exercises are to a pianist—warm-ups for work to come, experiments in sheer technique. Topics range from the history of contraception to the rich research potential of the computer. In two fascinating chapters, Ladurie reviews the work of a dozen scholar-detectives who are piecing together the history of the Earth's climate. Their tools: tree rings, fossil pollens, the oxygen isotope O-18 in glaciers, and fragmentary evidence about wine harvests a millennium ago. Ladurie's well-directed curiosity is everywhere evident.

**AARON BURR: The Years  
From Princeton to Vice  
President, 1756–1805**  
by Milton Lomask  
Farrar, 1979  
443 pp. \$17.50

Twice during his life, Aaron Burr (1756–1836) saw his innocence vindicated—once while on trial for the killing of Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton in an 1804 duel, and again three years later at a federal court hearing on charges of conspiring to head a Western secessionist empire. Given the views of many contemporaries and most historians, the courts appear to have held a minority opinion. In this first of two volumes, historian Milton Lomask joins novelist Gore Vidal (*Burr*) in defending Burr. He finds Burr too self-absorbed and ambivalent during emotional crises to serve his best interests. (Andrew Jackson saw the former Vice President differently: “As far from a fool as I ever saw and yet he is as easily fooled as any man I ever saw.”) When the presidential election of 1800 was thrown into the House of Representatives, Burr failed to push his cause with tie-breaking Federalists; in the end, they preferred Jefferson's “radical” positions to Burr's unpredictability. Lomask stresses Burr's admirable side: the superb political organizer who wooed New York voters with the first intensive canvassing by a political organization; the aspiring writer who wanted to chronicle the unsung heroes of the Revolution; the appreciative husband and father. Perhaps the final verdict on the man comes from Burr himself: “He is a grave, silent strange sort of animal, inasmuch as we know not what to make of him.”