

# CURRENT BOOKS

## SCHOLARS' CHOICE

*Recent titles selected and reviewed by Fellows and staff of the Wilson Center*

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**ALEXANDER POPE:**

**A Life**

by Maynard Mack  
Norton, 1985  
975 pp. \$22.50

Alexander Pope was born in London in 1688 and died in Twickenham in 1744. The son of a linen merchant, he was a hunchbacked dwarf with tubercular bone cancer. He was prone to incessant migraines, and equally prone to enrage fools, since he could not suffer them gladly. He was also the greatest poet of his era, one of the three or four towering eminences in the history of English literature, and the central figure in the most

remarkable group of writers, wits, and intellectuals to grace the literary landscape of any nation.

Mack was born in Hillsdale, Michigan, in 1909, two centuries and a full revolution or two in human thought after Pope. As a scholar at Yale, he has established himself as one of our most important interpreters of the Renaissance and the early 18th century—known as the “Augustan Age” of English literature.

Now, as the capstone to his career, Mack has risked a venture most scholar-writers would quail at. He has reconstructed a major 18th-century figure in terms that are comprehensible to 20th-century Americans. In doing so, he has also effectively reconstructed the 18th-century sensibility as the background to our own.

Neither of these accomplishments is easy. Pope, for all his genius, has gone down in readers' esteem during the centuries between his birth and Mack's. He has suffered because our idea of “writing” is radically different from his and that of his great compeers, Jonathan Swift and Henry Fielding. Since the “romantic revolution” of the 19th century (William Wordsworth, for example, could not really abide Pope), we expect poetry to be the expression of the *self*, the celebration of private passion in spite of public probity.

Pope, one should note, was not incapable of writing passionate love poetry or passionate celebrations of the autonomous self. But he and his great friends believed in the idea of literature as a moral activity whose aim was not self-expression but the articulation of those behaviors that make the good, or at least the decent, life possible. Of Pope's early masterpiece, *An Essay on Criticism*, written when the poet was all of 23, Mack says: “[The aim of the poem is] to practice the critical philosophy that the poem preaches—to acknowledge that the idiosyncrasies of intelligence and

taste must be tried and normalized against the collective principles of the community of educated men."

Tell that to Norman Mailer, one is tempted to sneer. But as we read Mack, and as we re-read Pope, we realize that Mailer, Saul Bellow, Graham Greene, and W. H. Auden are all indebted to Pope and to his age's vision, shining and perpetually deferred, of a true "community of educated men." Good writing, like good conversation, is always for *insiders*: those who get the joke, the allusion, the hinted-at convention. And Mailer's ideal of the hipster, despite differences of idiom, is not completely unrelated to Pope's ideal of the knowing insider.

Pope himself was born an outsider. He was deformed and cruelly taunted for his deformity by his enemies (it was not a gentle age). He was Roman Catholic in a sometimes hysterically anti-Catholic England. He was an avowed friend of the Tory cause in a predominantly Whig-controlled state. In short, he had everything going against him.

Yet, by dint of his talent, Pope joined the insiders. He did so, however, without completely losing his perspective as outsider. Indeed, precisely because he acquired a kind of double perspective, Pope became what he is and always will be for us—the greatest satirist in the language. Only an insider knows the jokes; but only an outsider knows how silly the jokes themselves are.

Pope and his circle were as ready to pick up a classical allusion or a Shakespearean nuance as are we, or our children, to see the shadow of one film in another or hear the echo of Chuck Berry in Bruce Springsteen. And Mack's ear is finely tuned to the allusive music that the Augustans heard.

Indeed, the breadth of Mack's scholarship never fails to astonish. Discussing Pope's early poem, *Windsor-Forest*, Mack gives us a virtual history of the pastoral tradition in poetry. Discussing Pope's magisterial translation of the *Iliad*, Mack teaches us not only to read Pope but also to rediscover Homer. His examination of the Pope edition of Shakespeare not only points up the glaring errors in that edition but becomes a mini-lecture on the craft of editorship. And his discussions of Pope's great works, *An Essay on Criticism*, *An Essay on Man*, *The Rape of the Lock*, *The Dunciad*, and the *Epistle to Arbuthnot*, are masterpieces of historical acumen and literary sensitivity.

The phrase "critical biography" often seems as logical as the phrase "squared circle." How, one asks, can one write a life of a writer that is faithful both to the merits of the writing and to the flaws of the man? Or—to be sure—vice versa? It is not easy, but Mack has succeeded.

—Frank McConnell '78

