
BACKGROUND BOOKS

TRADITIONS

Man has always been shaped to some degree by tradition, whether in his personal relations, his economic life, or his capacity as a political animal. As late as the 18th century in the West, most people still ordered their lives (as historian Marc Bloch wrote of medieval man) "on the assumption that the only title to permanence was that conferred by long usage. Life was ruled by tradition, by group custom." The intellectual upheavals of the Renaissance and Reformation, and the triumph of the Enlightenment two centuries later, helped to change all that.

"Ignorance, superstition, clerical dominance, religious intolerance, social hierarchy, [and] inequality in the distribution of wealth"—all of these, writes sociologist Edward Shils in **Tradition** (Univ. of Chicago, 1981, cloth & paper), were blamed by Voltaire, Diderot, and other Philosophes on blind adherence to custom.

In France, the leaders of the 1789 Revolution set out to break with the past and create a new, egalitarian social order. Powdered wigs were frowned upon. Townspeople were to greet one another as *citoyen* rather than *monsieur*. On playing cards, Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity replaced Kings, Queens, and Jacks. Crane Brinton chronicles these and other failed attempts to make over French society in **A Decade of Revolution: 1789–1799** (Harper, 1934, cloth; 1963, paper).

The Founding Fathers of the new United States of America did not go so far. But as historian Michael Kammen relates in his **A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination** (Knopf, 1978, cloth; 1980, rev. ed., paper), which traces evolving perceptions of the American

Revolution, Americans did share the Gallic distrust of anything tainted by the *ancien régime* (in this case, the British version).

Yet in America, as in France, the vacuum created by the rejection of one set of traditions was eventually filled by another. "Authority once achieved must have a stable and usable past." That is the conclusion of historian J. H. Plumb, who reflects on the use and misuse of history in **The Death of the Past** (Houghton, 1971, cloth; Penguin, 1973, paper).

Between 1870 and 1914, industrialization, expanded suffrage, and the emergence of new nation-states prompted all of the great powers to experiment with what the University of London's Eric Hobsbawm has described as "the use of ancient materials" to devise "novel traditions."

In Britain, the late 19th century saw a popular revival, abetted by church and state, of supposed "chivalric" values. As architectural historian Mark Girouard observes in **The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman** (Yale, 1981), "organizers" of every stripe combed the medieval past for rituals and credos pertinent to new groups such as the Boy Scouts. Chapter 7 of Lord Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys* was entitled "The Chivalry of the Knights" and aimed at imbuing working-class boys with "the code of the Victorian gentleman."

Across the North Sea, in a newly united Germany, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm I sought to provide a popular focus for the Second German Empire. As George L. Mosse notes in **The Nationalization of the Masses** (Fertig, 1975, cloth; New American Library, 1977, paper), a study of political symbolism

in Germany, "Festivals, gestures, and forms had to be created which, in turn, would themselves become traditional." Every year, German schoolchildren commemorated the fatherland's victory in the Franco-Prussian war (1870–71) by singing the "Wacht am Rhein" ("The Watch on the Rhine") and planting "imperial" oak trees—the oak having been revered by ancient Germanic tribes for its magical powers.

As modernization gained momentum throughout the Continent, traditional folk culture slowly vanished. In **Peasants into Frenchmen** (Stanford, 1976, cloth & paper), a portrait of rural France during the half century before World War I, historian Eugen Weber shows how dance festivals, charivaris, and other rural celebrations—decried by government authorities as sources "of moral laxity, superstition, and heathenish debauchery"—were supplanted by officially sanctioned events such as Bastille Day.

Some countries proved more adept than others at integrating old and new. In **Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture** (Princeton, 1971, cloth & paper), a collection of essays covering the Meiji era (1868–1912), historian Donald H. Shively and others describe how a "nativist reaction" halted the wave of Westernization that threatened to engulf Japanese culture. Japan's leaders labored, says Shively, to "stress the merits of Japan's past" and to resist unnecessary innovations.

Beisubaru (baseball) swept the country, but fancy dress balls never

displaced the tea ceremony, and by the end of the 19th century, the old concept of ancestor worship was successfully incorporated into the structure of a modern government, led by a figurehead emperor.

Joseph Stalin faced a problem of a different sort. In **The Rites of Rulers** (Cambridge, 1981, cloth & paper), Christel Lane notes that the new Communist regime in Moscow during the 1920s not only had to confront "the necessity of immediate radical social and political transformation" but was also committed to "achieving an ideal end-state, a secular millenium." To help rally his countrymen, Stalin contrived the "cult of personality," building one first around the person of V. I. Lenin (a cult that has persisted) and then around himself (a cult that has not).

Yet, as the experience of the Soviet Union, France, the United States, and other countries has shown, the past cannot be shed like a reptile's skin. Despite continued Soviet attempts to secularize the burial rite, the ancient religious custom of throwing dirt onto the coffin as it is lowered into the ground has been preserved in popular practice.

At its best, tradition satisfies a fundamental human yearning for continuity and stability, for a bit of ballast. "The idea of inheritance furnishes a sure principle of conservation and a sure principle of transmission," Edmund Burke stated in 1790 as he reflected on the upheavals in France. "People will never look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors."

EDITOR'S NOTE: Several of these titles were suggested by Michael Kammen, professor of history at Cornell University.