

BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE ELDERLY IN AMERICA

The first recorded epic may be a chronicle traced on clay tablets some 2,500 years ago in Babylonia. It concerns Gilgamesh, a warrior-king whose quest for the secret of immortality led him to dive to the sea bottom in search of a plant said to have strong powers of rejuvenation.

He got his prize and started home in triumph. But, alas, a snake snatched away the magic plant, and all that Gilgamesh gained for his pains was some advice from the goddess Siduri. She told him to forget immortality and live life to the fullest: "Make every day a day of rejoicing. / Day and night do thou dance and play."

Gilgamesh, notes David P. Barash in a lively survey, **Aging: An Exploration** (Univ. of Wash., 1983), followed Siduri's prescription to the letter. In so doing, he acted in accord with later Old Testament exhortations. "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do," the author of Ecclesiastes writes, "do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave, whither thou goest."

As Barash observes, "the promise of longevity, even immortality, is offered by many of the world's great religions." The Old Testament authors rewarded men of virtue with long lives. The New Testament promises followers of Christ a hereafter: "He that believeth on me," said the Lord, according to Saint John, "hath everlasting life."

In the Eastern philosophy-religions, the path to eternal life may be rather less exalted. Chinese Taoists, for instance, aim to reach *hsien* (immortality) through an austere diet, various unusual sexual prac-

tices and even breath-holding—all thought to be a means of retarding the aging process.

Much early writing reflects a dread of old age. Aristotle despised the elderly. In *Art of Rhetoric* (circa 330 B.C.), he advised those who address them to note that old folks are "cynical" and given to "subtle but feeble fits of anger."

Cicero also thought old age "intolerable." Yet, at 62, he was sufficiently upset by the Roman preoccupation with youth to champion the elderly in his famous essay **De Senectute** (circa 45–44 B.C.). Nations, he said, "have always been ruined by young men, saved and restored by old."

By the Middle Ages, alchemists in Europe were searching for a "fifth essence"—after air, earth, fire, and water—that would retard senescence. During that unhappy era, Simone de Beauvoir notes in her gloomy but richly detailed chronicle, **The Coming of Age** (Putnam's, 1972), "old men were almost entirely shut out of public life; it was the young who ruled the world."

They had to: So rife was disease in those days that very few reached a vigorous old age. Cesare Borgia, for example, died in his thirties. The Roman Church turned to youthful leaders: John XII began his pontificate at 18; Gregory V, at 24. Even Erasmus, the Dutch theologian whose melding of Christianity with Greek and Roman humanism helped reinvigorate the Roman Church's intellectual life and popular appeal during the Renaissance and Reformation, had trouble with age: In one of his *Colloquies* (circa 1518), he declares that the "exemplary" older person has no white hair, wrinkles, or spectacles.

In the New World, as Carole Haber details in **Beyond Sixty-Five: The Dilemma of Old Age in America's Past** (Cambridge, 1983), the elderly had property and position and, therefore, commanded respect. During the early 1700s, Increase Mather, the Boston Puritan minister and longtime Harvard president, could declare without challenge that "if a man is favored with long life, it is God that has lengthened his days." But even then, Haber notes, there were indigent old folks who were "passed from town to town, were boarded out with neighbors, or spent their final years as almshouse residents."

By the early 20th century, scholars were focusing on the old age "problem." Isaac Max Rubinow's **The Quest for Security** (Holt, 1934; Arno, 1976) was influential in the debate over what became the 1935 Social Security Act; it remains compelling as a portrait both of depression-ridden America and of public agonizing over the social welfare idea that, as Rubinow says, "great minds had been teaching in Europe for 100 years."

In **The Gray Lobby** (Univ. of Chicago, 1977, cloth; 1980, paper), Henry J. Pratt shows how the dramatic gains of the elderly during the 1960s and 1970s—especially after the linkage of Social Security payments to cost-of-living increases—paralleled the "remarkable growth of national senior citizens organizations."

Gerontologist Robert N. Butler's Pulitzer Prize-winning **Why Survive? Being Old in America** (Harper, 1975, cloth & paper) calls for an even stronger government commitment to aid for the elderly. Butler argues that America has "shaped a society that is extremely harsh to live in when one is old" and believes that "the potentials for satisfaction" in late life "are real and vastly underexplored." He also

warns that what prosperity older citizens now enjoy will fade as the typical retirement period lengthens to perhaps 25 years by the year 2000. Says Butler: "The plight of the elderly will worsen for those now middle aged."

Others focus on the plight of the taxpayers who must support programs for the aged. In **Growing Old in America** (Oxford, 1977, cloth; 1978, paper), David Hackett Fischer argues that the young, having been "exploited" by the old in the 19th century, could now be victimized "in a new way, with heavy Social Security welfare taxes oppressing them in the early years of adulthood—a time of life in America today when the economic margin is often thin." In **Age or Need?** (Sage, 1982, cloth & paper), Bernice L. Neugarten makes a case for reducing that tax burden by reserving old-age assistance for the indigent or infirm who cannot provide for themselves.

Further debate on how—and how much—to support the elderly may be found in Milton and Rose Friedman's **Tyranny of the Status Quo** (Harcourt, 1983); Louis Rukeyser's **What's Ahead for the Economy** (Simon & Schuster, 1983); and Theodore H. White's **America in Search of Itself** (Harper, 1982, cloth; Warner, 1983, paper). White analyzes how new subsidies for the elderly have contributed to the unexpected growth characteristic of most post-World War II federal "entitlement" programs.

Example: When Congress added disability insurance to Social Security in 1956, estimates were that the added annual cost would rise to \$860 million by 1980. The actual 1980 bill was \$15 billion.

In the mirror of modern literature, the elderly have often appeared as victims. Since Aldous Huxley's **Brave New World** (1932), where the

removal of older citizens from society and memory was so complete that it was as if they had never lived, the perils of planned human obsolescence have often been a theme in utopian fiction.

In the Oceania (ex-Britain) of George Orwell's **1984** (1949), Winston Smith is told that eventually he will be turned into a gas and that there will be no record of him: "Nothing will remain of you. . . . You will never have existed." In Marya Mannes's **They** (1968), America's young, having used the pretext of an imminent war with China to seize all power in a coup of some kind, wreak vengeance on the elders who had stumbled into an Asian conflict (Vietnam). "They" force people to retire and enter isolated communities at 50; at 65, seniors face either "self-disposal or compulsory liquidation."

Grim portrayals of contemporary old age include Eudora Welty's story **A Visit of Charity** (in *A Curtain of Green, and Other Stories*, 1941), about an old woman in a nursing home, and Edward Albee's **The Sandbox** (1959), a short savage play about uncaring children who wait for their 86-year-old mother to die.

Still, modern fiction has its share of elderly heroes—the amiable New Jersey eccentrics in John Updike's **The Poorhouse Fair** (1959); the tenacious Gulf fisherman in Ernest Hemingway's **The Old Man and the Sea** (1952); and the tough, Polish-born scholar and Holocaust survivor in Saul Bellow's **Mr. Sammler's Planet** (1970).

At 70, Artur Sammler, born to comfort in Cracow but reduced in New York to the elderly's world of

"the buses, or the grinding subway, lunch at the automat," darns his own socks and scours his own sink. He comes to find these routines "part of his youthfulness—youthfulness sustained with certain tremors. Sammler knew these tremors. It was amusing—Sammler noted in old women wearing textured tights, in old sexual men, this quiver of vivacity with which they obeyed the sovereign youth-style. . . . no one knew when to quit. No one made sober decent terms with death."

Books by those who know old age firsthand reflect a strong desire for purposeful living. In **The Measure of My Days** (Knopf, 1968, cloth; Penguin, 1979, paper), a record of her 83rd year, British author Florida Scott-Maxwell observes that "age puzzles me. I thought it was a quiet time . . . but my eighties are passionate. I grow more intense with age."

In his engaging memoir **The View from 80** (Viking, 1980), Malcolm Cowley argues that "in general terms, old people would like to have a clearly defined place in American life; it is something they now lack."

The need for definition, he believes, is at least part of the reason that the aged spend so much time assembling faded snapshots and letters, or conjuring up memories of their childhood and ("hardest to remember") middle years.

These, Cowley suggests, "help us to possess our own identities as an artist possesses his work. At least we can say to the world of the future, or to ourselves if nobody will listen, 'I really *was*'—or even, with greater self-confidence, 'I was and am *this*.'"

