NEW TITLES

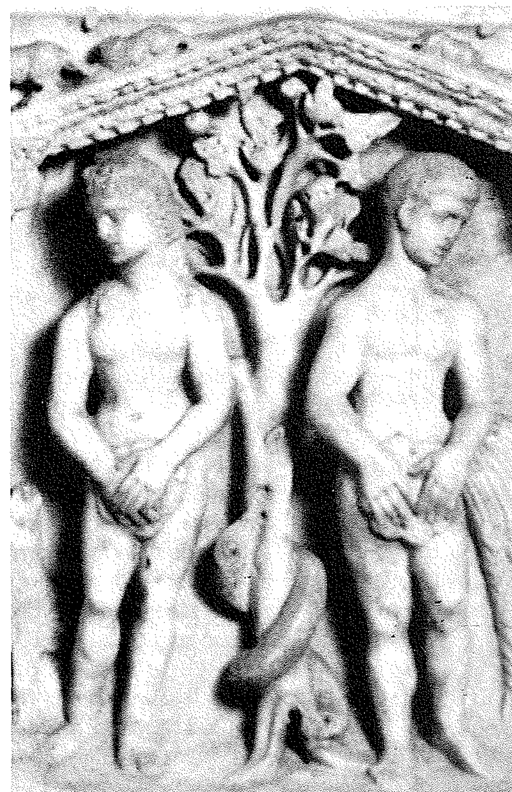
History

EDMUND BURKE: His Life and Opinions. *By Stanley Ayling. St. Martin's. 316 pp. $19.95*

Two centuries after he wrote *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Edmund Burke (1729–97) remains an intellectual force to be reckoned with, distasteful to liberals, an icon to conservatives. The liberal philosopher A. J. Ayer, for example, recently reduced Burke's philosophy to a piece of doggerel: "The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, God made them high and lowly, and ordered their estate." Conservatives, however, honor Burke because he opposed radical change in some of the most elegant rhetoric a practicing politician ever wrote; as Burkeans, conservatives rebut John Stuart Mill's depiction of them as the "stupid party." The English biographer Stanley Ayling's approach to Burke's life and thought is fresh and non-partisan. Burke was not the first, or the last, gifted Irishman to make his way in the world of English politics and literature (a journey encumbered by financial disasters and charming but dishonest relatives whose fortunes he was always trying to repair or improve). The real adventure in Burke's life was his struggle with the issues arising from the Old-Order-shattering events of the revolutionary era. Ayling's subtitle underscores the fact that Burke's pessimism, his mistrust of easy answers, and his respect for established institutions and forms were really *opinions*, not political philosophy. Ayling reveals that in the 19th century Burke—championing colonial Americans and Irish Catholics, and suspicious of the Crown's authority—was considered a liberal. Political climates change, however. During this century, conservatives have drawn from *Reflections on the Revolution in France* a political philosophy: skepticism toward the politics of ideas, caution about governmental action, and respect for elites, religion, and property. Yet many conservatives today are abandoning these opinions, and old Burke may outlast another set of champions who have tried to pigeonhole his eloquent complexity.

THE BODY AND SOCIETY: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity. *By Peter Brown. Columbia. 504 pp. $45*

A pagan Greek who observed the Christian practice of celibacy and continence wondered how this "new teaching, bizarre and disruptive of the human race," had arisen. Princeton historian Brown is similarly perplexed. The question is all the more puzzling because Jesus ad-



vocated sexual marriage, after the model of the first parents, Adam and Eve. But Jesus' ideas of the kingdom of heaven, Brown points out, were linked to the renewal of the kingdom of Israel. Once these links were broken, once the kingdom of heaven became otherworldly, then the reproductive instincts could be—and were—devalued. Brown is too skillful a historian to account for Christian sexual renunciation by any one theory. St. Paul (d. 64? A.D.) abominated sex because spirit and flesh were enemies; Tertullian (c. 155–220 A.D.) advocated chastity for the opposite reason, because body and soul were the same. The case for celibacy was made even for aesthetic reasons: It permitted a contemplative life superior to the raging of the passions. Despite its title, Brown's book is really not about sexuality. He employs the now-alien practice of sexual renunciation to rebuild the mental world of late antiquity for the modern reader. The themes of continence and the virgin life, Brown says, "have come to carry with them icy overtones." Brown's ambition, and the charm of this history, lies in how he makes "the chill shades . . . speak to us again, and perhaps more gently than we had thought they might, in the strange tongue of a long-lost Christianity."

THE PURITAN ORDEAL. *By Andrew Delbanco. Harvard. 306 pp. $30*
WORLDS OF WONDER, DAYS OF JUDGMENT: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England. *By David D. Hall. Knopf. 316 pp. $29.95*

American historians—Perry Miller notable among them—have scanned the Puritan experience for sources of our modern self. Two recent studies open a new window on what could be termed "the other Puritans." The Puritan mentality and religious practices presented by both books hardly fit the traditional image: Here is no monolithic group of gray Calvinists fleeing Old-World persecutions to become devout fanatics in a Massachusetts wilderness. In *Worlds of Wonder*, Boston University historian David Hall shows how "religion was embedded in the fabric of daily life." Cotton Mather and other clergymen might roar their fierce admonitions, but a nearly universal literacy enabled churchgoers to interpret Scripture individually. The result: Orthodoxy and heresy, high and low, canon and popular superstition got so jumbled that no one could sort out the threads. If the 17th-century Puritans attended church regularly, they also eagerly consumed plays, songs, novels, and "filthy Jests."

Hall leaves the Puritan mental world so fragmented that he raises a question which, inadvertently, *The Puritan Ordeal* helps answer. To find a unity in the Puritan experience, Andrew Delbanco, professor of literature at Columbia, concentrates on our understanding "not of ideas so much as of feelings." Migrating from England to America, the Puritans underwent a change, Delbanco argues, that was as much psychological as geographical. In England the Puritans had external enemies; sin was conceived of in *internal*, Augustinian terms. But in America, no outside oppressor existed, and the Puritans might have lost their sense of community by forfeiting "their long nurture as an outgroup." Instead, the Puritans satisfied their "appetite for enmity" by projecting sin outward. Satan took on a more prominent role in daily sermons. This shift, says Delbanco, shaped American literature (consider Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*) even as it created a new "etiology of morals" for this country. Together, these two volumes reveal afresh how New England during the 17th century was "a generative time for much that came later in our culture."

Contemporary Affairs

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE NEW DEAL ORDER, 1930–1980. *Edited by Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle. Princeton. 311 pp. $25*

The tainting of the word "liberal" in the recent U.S. presidential campaign indicates that the political era inaugurated by the New Deal has ended. Or so argue the 10 essays which Steve Fraser, an editor, and Gary Gerstle, a Princeton historian, have gathered here: Collectively, they present the period from 1930 through 1980 as one long continuum in American political life. Even as late as the mid-1960s, the New Deal seemed irreversible, as though it would "go on forever." These essays show, however, that it always rested on shaky foundations. Historians