
PAPERBOUNDS

A HISTORY OF THE WORLD. By Hugh Thomas. Harper, 1981. 720 pp. \$10.50

Histories of the world are frequently burdened with elaborate theoretical structures—ideas about the meaning of history that too often leave little room for the details or textures of times past. The great projects of Arnold Toynbee and Oswald Spengler both suffered from this flaw. Here, though, Thomas, the versatile English historian (whose two previous books dealt with Cuba and with the Spanish Civil War), takes on the task in an admirably understated manner, showing at least as much concern for the smaller matters of human experience—"the history of brandy, of the thermometer, of the radish"—as for large events and forces. Like French historian Fernand Braudel, Thomas relishes the minute but telling particular: the differences between the two types of plague (bubonic and pulmonary); the role of the stirrup in the evolution of warfare; forms of currency (paper in ancient China, until abandoned for causing inflation). He moves easily between such considerations and broader trends, demonstrating, for example, how Renaissance "marriage patterns" affected the growth of modern capitalism. Organizing his study around subjects such as invention, disease, and housing, Thomas concludes with a calm, balanced endorsement of the West's liberal values and material progress.

A CHOICE OF DAYS. By H. L. Mencken. Vintage, 1981. 337 pp. \$4.95

Selections from the original *Happy Days*, *Newspaper Days*, and *Heathen Days*, these autobiographical essays show Mencken (1880–1956) bustling through childhood, school days, and the beginning of a career, cub reporting on the fringes of Baltimore. ("You are supposed to keep on out

the road," his editor ordered, "until you meet the Philadelphia reporters coming in.") Mencken loved the journalist's trade, for it kept him close to the uproar of daily life. A *Herald* man when young, he pitied the *Sun* reporters, who were "hobbled by their paper's craze for mathematical accuracy." Yet it was from a *Sun* man that he learned to "synthesize" the news, a talent that later served him well when he and another *Herald* editor concocted, with very few facts, the story of the Russo-Japanese naval battles of 1905 (and were later pleasantly surprised to find their version "corroborated" in a book written by an eyewitness). These sprightly essays capture the time and the city, the trade and the man.

ITALIAN FOLKTALES. Selected and retold by Italo Calvino. Pantheon, 1981. 763 pp. \$9.95

Whether their plots derive from classical myths, oriental traditions, or medieval romances—whether they greet the reader as childhood friends rediscovered or mysterious strangers—these 200 tales are infused with wonder and charm. Peopled by princes, hunchbacks, and saints, they show people at their best and worst, avoid moralizing, and often have jarringly unhappy conclusions. Calvino, a novelist, narrates as well as edits, grafting literary manners over folkloric material. His willingness to combine variations of a story in order to gain rhythm, color, balance, or logic may disturb the purist. But, to paraphrase a Tuscan proverb, a tale becomes beautiful only when the narrator adds to it, embellishing with what is in his heart and experience. Though ours is a literary age, and Calvino a literary man, the magic of the oral tradition survives in this collection.