guage than Goldbarth. He observes that the Quechua in Peru have a thousand words for potato—"A thousand! For the new ones/with a skin still as thin as mosquito-wing, for/troll-face ones, for those sneaky burgundy corkscrews/ like a devil's dick." Goldbarth envies the Quechua those thousand potato-words, each of which he would employ according to its precise meaning and sonorous sound.

THE LETTERS OF SAMUEL JOHNSON. Vol. I: 1731–1772; Vol. II: 1773–1776; Vol. III: 1777–1781. *Edited by Bruce Redford. Princeton. 431 pp.; 385 pp.; 399 pp. $29.95 each; full set, $90*

The 18th century took particular delight in the familiar letter, and we still read the correspondence of its great practitioners with pleasure. The greatest wit of all, however, is usually not numbered among the epistolary giants. The impression we take of Samuel Johnson from Boswell's *Life* is that of a great talker, not a letter writer—an impression that Johnson himself did much to confirm: "I love to see my friends, to talk to them, and to talk of them; but it is not without a considerable effort of resolution that I prevail upon myself to write."

If we were to read only the letters Johnson wrote until age 59 (which require only half a volume in this new five-volume edition of his letters, three of which are now published), our

impression of Johnson as an *epistolier malgré lui* would be confirmed. His earlier letters were a stopgap measure for conducting business, accepting invitations, and begging favors. But around 1770 Johnson, secure financially and turning aside from strenuous public commitments, discovered a vocation for the form of writing he had earlier dismissed. Especially when writing to his benefactress Hester Thrale, Johnson celebrated matters private and occasional, and he learned to modulate his voice with subtler nuances. Although his earlier letters, even of condolence and sympathy, were full of sententious homily, the later ones express a simplicity and directness of feeling. "The perpetual moralist is present," writes Redford, the editor of the letters, but "he no longer speaks *ex cathedra.*"

The purpose of this new edition—which contains 52 "new" letters and corrects errors in previously published ones—is, Redford says, "ultimately to provide the materials for a fresh assessment of Samuel Johnson." The common image of Johnson is that of a jowly, growly English Tory who was, in one description, "the literary embodiment of roast beef and no nonsense." This is hardly the person who wrote cheerfully to Hester Thrale, "I hope to find you gay, and easy, and kind, and I will endeavour to copy you, for what can come of discontent and dolour?" Johnson here comes across as the Christian who tirelessly examines his conscience, the good man who continually performs small kindnesses, a conservative certainly but one neither insular nor jingoistic. This new edition also allows a fresh assessment of Johnson as a practitioner of what he called "the great epistolick art." Far from being an inconsequential, dismissive production, Johnson's letters now seem, along with the *Lives of the Poets*, the great achievement of his literary career in its final phase.

Contemporary Affairs

A CONTINENT OF ISLANDS: Searching for the Caribbean Destiny. *By Mark Kurlansky. Addison Wesley. 336 pp. $22.95*

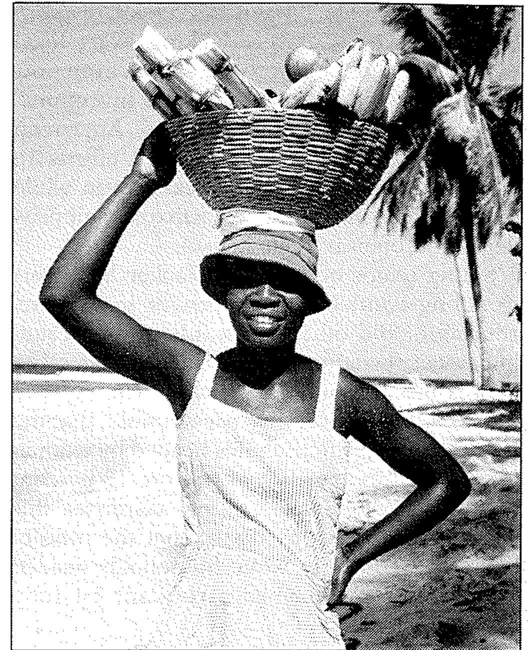
Paradise! That's often how tourists, descending in planeloads, describe a Caribbean island with

its sparkling beaches, sunny weather, and friendly natives. The governments of these islands, living off tourist dollars, wish to preserve that view. "Jamaica, no problem," announces a Kingston-sponsored TV commercial that airs frequently in the United States.

But "no problem" includes poverty, AIDS, racism, unemployment, emigration, pollution, deforestation, and economic dependence on the United States. Half of Puerto Rico's sewage-contaminated coastline has been declared unfit for swimming by the Environmental Protection Agency. Haiti is virtually a desert, where, thanks to decades-long deforestation, rain has washed almost all of the topsoil into the sea. Unable to find work, 10 percent of Jamaica's population emigrated during the 1980s; in St. Kitts and Nevis, that figure was 26.4 percent. Even the tourists, whose spending helps support the island economies, are a problem. Countries such as the Bahamas, where tourists outnumber natives 14 to one, have difficulty developing a sense of nationhood.

Kurlansky, who writes on the Caribbean for the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*, here combines travelogue, social history, and political analysis to depict a region living in three centuries at once. Not so long ago the Caribbean islands were practically the last outpost of a 19th-century colonial world. Before 1962, only three islands—Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic—had their independence. (Even today 11 islands still remain colonies.) Today, all of these islands, with a combined population of 35 million, face the challenge of becoming, simultaneously, 20th-century nations and a 21st-century postnation-state community.

Regional integration seems the obvious answer to many of the Caribbean's problems. A sharing of resources would help solve the budgetary problems of small islands such as Grenada, which spends four percent of its government revenues simply to maintain its United Nations delegation; it would also solve the problem of international investors who hop from one island to the next in search of lower wages and looser environmental regulations. Yet the idea of regional integration enjoys little popular appeal. French-language islands don't identify with English-speaking ones, nor Caribbean Spanish-speakers with the Dutch. Nevertheless, as the Caribbean moves further into the 1990s, the idea of a federation appears to be gaining ground. At a Caribbean Community meeting in 1990, 13 English-speaking nations tentatively agreed to support a common external tariff system and to merge their stock exchanges. Jamaican President Michael Manley mixed doubt and hope in his cautious observation: "I am struck by how far we have come in what we think we can do." The Jamaican Reggae star Bunny Waller perhaps said it better: "Yea, mon, the Caribbean try to make countries. It's kind of magic. Making something from nothing."



TWO NATIONS: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal. *By Andrew Hacker. Scribner's. 257 pp. $24.95*

Now largely submerged under the surface of American life, the remnants of racism often seem like those underwater plants that give sudden, rude shocks to swimmers at the seashore. To Hacker, a political scientist at Queens College, racism in America is neither so occasional nor so surprising: For him it is the barnacle-covered jetty thrusting through the waters