

art systems such as the theatre, the art gallery, and the concert hall, to examine the organization of art, and to explain how internal signal systems are expressed through art forms and conventions that, however, are part of social relationships allowing for "conditions of practice." We can only infer that changes in signals will lead to changed practices.

Williams's revolutionary sociology, though full of historic insights, seems like an old story, while the MacCanells' semiotic revolution is an old patch quilt of theories. Both are intellectual "emperors" in need of new clothes. [WV]

### AMERICA AND THE PATTERNS OF CHIVALRY

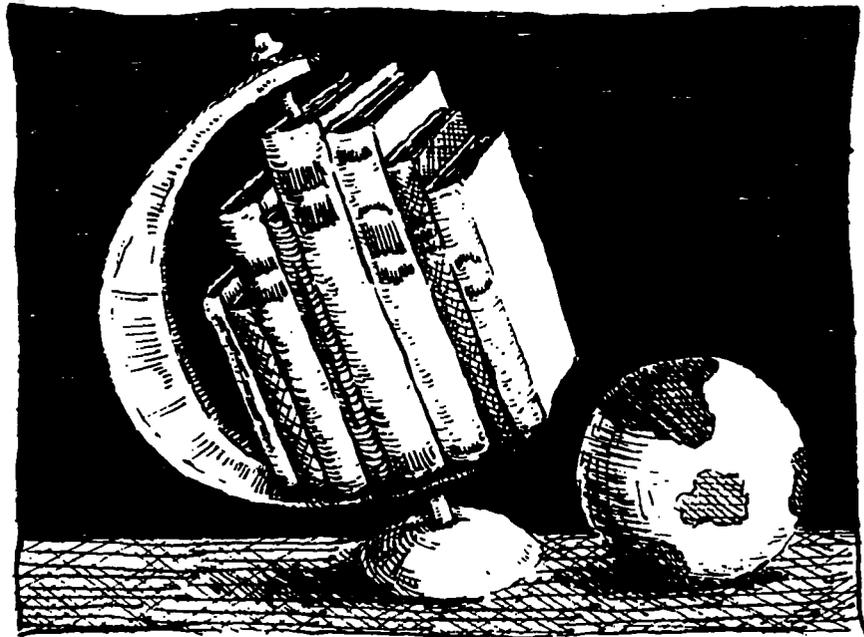
by John Fraser

(Cambridge University Press; x+301 pp.; \$19.95)

*Edward J. Curtin, Jr.*

The history of boredom as a motivating force in human affairs has yet to be written, and probably never will. Certain truths must be concealed under lofty labels. Like the fear of death, however, and its concomitant thirst for immortality, boredom, so staid and stolid in itself, has had an enormous impact on history. Though quite difficult to document, it is hard to escape the fact that it has led many a man, especially among the affluent, to throw himself against his life as if it were his enemy and to inject into a sluggish social milieu doses of danger and play, romance and violence. Especially in the last two hundred years, as industrialization and scientific reason have narrowed the range of human possibilities, has the need for a more romantic approach to life intensified, if only to be acted out in the imagination.

One such nostalgic banner under which many men have marched—and it usually has been men—is the banner of chivalry. Once knights and fair ladies, castles and kings ceased to be living realities and were replaced by factories and constitutions, the cult of chivalry was revived to inspire a dispirited elite. In England the writings of Sir Walter Scott and Tennyson, among others, restored the code of chivalry to a place of honor and emulation. Then, surprisingly, the sentiment invaded the



Janice Elsworth

United States, a country ostensibly rational, republican, and egalitarian and therefore assumed to be immune to this romantic nostalgia.

Ostensibly, but not actually so, says John Fraser in this interesting study of the paradoxical and persistent influence of chivalry on American life. "But if the signposts of reason all pointed in one direction, where people actually went in their cultural preferences was another matter," he writes. For despite Mark Twain's attack on what he called the "absurd chivalry business," the chivalric mythos gained a strong foothold in the United States, especially on Southern plantations and in the ranching West, where it found fertile soil in socioeconomic structures similar to those of upper-class England.

It was precisely its artificial theatricality that made chivalry appealing, resistant to ironic debunking and able to spread its influence into the North as well. For "the chivalric was the magical kingdom of castles and greensward, and twisting cobbled streets at midnight, and sunbaked islands and jostling wharves, and graceful Southern plantations, and velvet tropical skies, and the majestic spaces of the Western landscape, an enchanted composite realm of the imagination in which picturesquely garbed figures coped with the ever-changing configuration of warfare, or cattle drive, or the intricate rituals and plottings of aristocratic society."

Fraser documents this chivalric influence in great detail, first as it per-

meated the agricultural South in the mid-1800s, culminating in the Civil War ("America, rationalistic America, progressive America, had given the world the greatest of all chivalrous wars."), then as chivalry's seemingly fanciful and anachronistic patterns were made relevant to an increasingly urban, industrial, and competitive society. Prep schools and Ivy League colleges served a mediating function between a business society and chivalric ideals by romanticizing the idea of success and competition. A new power elite was trained, with the assistance of football and its military associations, to accept "the agonistic as natural, pleasurable, and desirable." In this way the gap between business and gentility was bridged; henceforth, the chivalric-martial ideology, hidden behind fine clothes, advanced degrees, and good manners, would play an increasingly violent role in American history.

Teddy Roosevelt, however, was the great transformer. "It was through Roosevelt," Fraser maintains, "that certain chivalric patterns reentered American politics with lasting consequences." His pugnaciousness, high energy, flamboyant role-playing, and chivalric moral outlook appealed to both business and the young. Reformism took on a chivalric tone; heretofore a feminine activity, it was now manly, macho in fact. Furthermore, under this Rough Rider, whose administration was more Camelot-like than Kennedy's, "the idea of imperial expansion became intertwined ideologically with

ideas of masculine self-worth."

Radicals like John Reed, Max Eastman, Bill Haywood, and Floyd Dell, Fraser argues, were also greatly influenced by the chivalric mythos. Ironically, these militant radicals, with their agonistic views of justice and rights, war and peace, were far less violent than the seemingly rational and benevolent progressives who used professionalism and the social sciences rather than chivalric ideals to buttress their power. The rationalistic, anti-chivalric, and nonagonistic view of peace of progressives like Woodrow Wilson led to violence, while radical thinking worked against violence. "It was imperative for the employing class to see itself as having wholly clean hands when it comes to violence"; only violent men committed violence—irrational types, workers, criminals, immigrants. Thus it was reasonable to smash unions, break strikes, and make war to keep peace.

This is the paradox that Fraser emphasizes, and he is right to do so. The connections he makes between

literature and politics and labor history and foreign wars and movies and detective stories and children's books are very impressive. There is much to be said for his argument (supported by 971 footnotes) when it is clear; the problem is that his convoluted style seems to mirror a confusion of thought. I at least, after several readings, could only conclude that he is of two minds in regard to chivalry's impact on American life. On one hand he seems to see it as beneficent; on the other malign. It is hard to reconcile Fraser's view that "Kennedy had demonstrated that exciting possibilities could still be realized, including the possibility of acting upon the promise of American ideals" with other statements he makes about Kennedy's British-influenced imperialistic romanticism.

The problem is with chivalry itself. At heart it is a macho, overly romanticized myth of the solitary man of honor, the lover/warrior, the scholar/athlete out to prove he is a real man. Fraser tries to reconcile the irreconcilable. In trying to say too much, he confuses his argument.

Yet in this age of Star Wars and Spider Man, a time when bored children avidly play war on home computers, he is surely right in saying that "ideologically, the atomic bombs that devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki belonged with the havoc-wreaking magic swords of Galahad and Ariosto's Amazonian heroines, and the robotic Talus who served as enforcer for Spenser's Artagall in his merciless justice dealing, and the heavenly technology with which the loyal angels smashed the rebel ones in *Paradise Lost*.

Yes, ideals, especially those that appeal to bored and unimaginative sensibilities, do have consequences, often murderous. Chivalry is one of them.

## Correspondence

### THE BRITISH IN NORTHERN IRELAND

To the Editors: Alfred McCreary's review of Jack Holland's *The Prisoner's Wife* (Books, June) has some keen and thoughtful insights, just as Holland's own nonfiction work on Northern Ireland has had. On key points, however, McCreary sounds less than objective.

Quick to inveigh against IRA atrocities, he is silent on the Loyalist gangs. Neither does he acknowledge that maybe, just maybe, there is something fundamentally pernicious about the Six Counties with its history of discrimination and about a British patriotism which is little more than a mask for maintaining relative, and unjust, privilege. The struggle is not simply one over national identity and allegiance; it also has its roots in an unjust state and social order. Life may be not so bad for Belfast's middle classes, and Protestant and Catholic slumdweller may endure through a combination of courage, stubbornness, and self-delusion, but the fact remains that life for many in Northern Ireland is grim. That it is grimest for portions of the Catholic population is a judgment on British policy and Orange intent. Mr. McCreary ought to acknowledge that before he complains that the British and Orange cases are misunderstood.

As to Britain's commitment to "the decent thing," what decency was there in Mrs. Thatcher's handling of last year's hunger strike? Her inflexibility made martyrs of the strikers and stirred divisive passions in both communities, thus making accommodation that much more difficult. And how responsible is it for Britain to assure the Orangemen that she will never leave without their consent, at once legitimizing their bigotry and removing any incentive to negotiate? Giving the Falkland Islanders an absolute guarantee of self-determination was merely absurd. Extending such a veto over political change to Northern Ireland's Loyalists is both foolish and unjust, but that is what Britain has done, to the detriment of her own democratic principles. There is also this, perhaps more debatable point: Rightly or wrongly, British troops in Catholic areas are at worst a provocation, at best a device for holding a fundamentally unsatisfactory line. They should go, but they will not go until British, and Irish, politicians overcome the pride, arrogance, obtuseness, and avoidance of responsibility that have caused them to fail to institute a more just political and social order. The people of Ulster have contributed to their own entrapment, but the politicians have much to answer for as well. Could we not expect more of the "Mother of Parliaments"?

Ed McCarthy

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