

**PAST, PRESENT, AND
PERSONAL: The Family
and the Life Course in
American History**

by John Demos
Oxford, 1986
215 pp. \$17.95

educator Charles Willie: "By idolizing those whom we honor, we fail to realize that we could go and do likewise."

In eight crisp essays, Demos, a Yale historian, looks back at difficulties that continue to beset the American family. This perspective allows him to dismiss a number of popular notions. One is that child abuse is an enduring problem in our society. In truth, he finds, it was rare in Colonial New England; when it occurred (as, for instance, in the brutal treatment of servant children), the local populace reacted with alacrity. Ways existed to locate and discover abuse.

Similarly, in the study of adolescence, which Demos says is just entering "its own adolescence," academic specialists naively assume that turmoil is a universal feature of passage into adulthood. Adolescence may not be as stressful, or important, a stage of development now as it was only decades ago. Indeed, many young Americans today seem to have "skipped adolescence entirely." Stages of life, Demos reminds us, are largely human inventions.

As for fatherhood, Demos demonstrates that "men's experience of domestic life has changed more deeply than that of all the other players combined." Pigeonholing the roles (pedagogue, caretaker, companion) that fathers have variously played since the 17th century, he concludes that paternal involvement in raising children has steadily risen.

Can knowledge of the past serve family policy today? Demos's concluding essay suggests, modestly, that it can.

**THE FOUL AND
THE FRAGRANT:
Odor and the French
Social Imagination**

by Alain Corbin
Harvard, 1986
307 pp. \$25

Like other historians of the French Annales school, Corbin explores what might seem to be a negligible matter in order to uncover the *mentalités* of an age. Odors, and people's attitudes toward them in 18th- and 19th-century France, lead Corbin through realms as diverse as scientific thought, social theory, medical practice, bedroom mores, and civic reform.

Smell, he relates, was central to 18th-century notions of disease. Doctors busily collected and