
NEW TITLES

History

THE EMBARRASSMENT OF RICHES:

An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age

by Simon Schama
Knopf, 1987
698 pp. \$39.95



“To be Dutch,” writes Harvard historian Schama, “still means coming to terms with the moral ambiguities of materialism . . .” At no time, however, did the Dutch wrestle harder with their consciences than during their “Golden Century” (1570–1670). In a splendidly detailed history that ranges from Holland’s tulip mania to the grain trade, from marriage manuals and sermons to paintings by masters, Schama documents this spiritual struggle.

Thanks largely to their mercantile savvy, the Dutch of the 16th century grew fat and rich while most other Europeans scraped by. But as good Calvinists, Holland’s wealthy citizens feared that prosperity compromised their souls. Alongside scenes of comfortable burgher life, painters created allegories of gluttony, cupidity, drunkenness, disorder, and lust to condemn the effects of excess, or *overloed*.

And not even prosperity was certain. What God gave He could also take away—including the land. The invention of wind-driven pumps enabled the Dutch to reclaim 200,000 acres from the sea between 1590 and 1640, but devastating floods always threatened.

In a corrupting and insecure world, notes Schama, the home remained a bastion of order and decency. The spic-and-span stoops, which foreign visitors invariably noted, stood as literal barriers between the filth of the world and the immaculate purity of the family dwelling. Marriage, too, was a haven, but evil could wend its way even into wedlock. The moralist Johan de Brune warned that excessive carnal appetites might endanger spiritual health: “The marriage bed is no gutter for vile lusts, but those who use it well, may stay a maid.”

THE KEY TO FAILURE:

Laos and the Vietnam War

by Norman B. Hannah
Madison, 1987
335 pp. \$19.95

Why did the Communists win in South Vietnam? Hannah, a retired U.S. Foreign Service officer, points to early U.S. ambivalence and self-delusion. His prime example is the ill-fated, oft-forgotten 1962 Geneva Accords on Laos, negotiated by Averell Harriman under the Kennedy administration. The Soviet-American deal provided for a “neutral” Laos, free of all foreign troops. Instead, what U.S. diplomat Roger Hilsman called a “tacit

agreement" quickly evolved: North Vietnam did not overrun remote northern Laos; the Americans did not block the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the south. The trail was vital to the Communists' hidden, unending "slow invasion" of South Vietnam; used for replacements and re-supply, it would enable them to wage war there forever, on their own terms. But Washington always feared a wider conflict. In 1964, before Lyndon Johnson sent U.S. troops to Vietnam, Hannah writes, "there were two [logical] choices—either to block [Hanoi's] invasion through Laos or avoid commitment in South Vietnam. The United States chose neither."

**THE FALL OF THE
HOUSE OF LABOR:
The Workplace, the State,
and American Labor
Activism, 1865-1925**
by David Montgomery
Cambridge, 1987
494 pp. \$27.95

On the evening of June 27, 1874, Lodge No. 11 of the Rollers, Roughers, Catchers, and Hookers Union of Columbus, Ohio, gathered to discuss the terms of their new agreement with the Columbus Rolling Mill Company. The mill had offered these skilled iron workers \$1.13 per ton to produce iron rails for the nation's railroads; it was up to them to decide how to fix work schedules, divide the labor, and parcel out the pay.

"The very men who appear here," writes Montgomery, a Yale historian, "managing collectively the productive operations of the rolling mill, regulating relations among themselves, and arranging their own social affairs were also pioneers of the late 19th-century labor movement."

For more than a decade, scholars have pondered the fate of such men. Why, they ask, did the "native American radicalism" of the working class fail to win "economic democracy"? Montgomery pulls together these studies in a sweeping, sometimes numbingly encyclopedic account of organized labor's rise and ebb between the end of the Civil War and the onset of the Great Depression. His is a tale, though seldom couched in such explicit terms, of "cruel and invincible" capitalism, government repression, and the workers' betrayal by union bosses, notably Samuel Gompers of the American Federation of Labor.

The dream of economic democracy finally faded during the early 1920s, when an economic depression stripped the unions of up to a third of their members. The labor movement came back to life during the 1930s and '40s, but its energies focused on more limited concerns, namely wages