
 NEW TITLES

History

RICHARD MILHOUSE NIXON: The Rise of an American Politician. By Roger Morris. Holt. 1005 pp. \$29.95

RICHARD NIXON AND HIS AMERICA. By Herbert S. Parmet. Little, Brown. 755 pp. \$24.95
NIXON: Vol. II, The Triumph of a Politician, 1962–1972. By Steven E. Ambrose. Simon & Schuster. 736 pp. \$24.95

Of American presidents, Richard Milhouse Nixon is among the most private and least known—or *was*. The bookshelf devoted to works about him has now lengthened by almost 2,500 pages. Taken together, these three books help explain the rise and fall—and rise and fall—of the politician Adlai Stevenson called the “man of many masks.”

Morris, a journalist and historian, has chosen the most unusual approach, tracing the ascent of *Politico californienses* in American politics. Nixon usually avoided discussing his California childhood—rather as, when a child, he would lower the kitchen shades so no one could see him washing dishes. Morris begins his story with the turn-of-the-century battles for water and electric power that transformed southern California from a barren desert into the blooming metaphor of the American dream—a dream the Nixons of Whittier remained on the outskirts of. Describing “the politics of resentment in a place where resentments came quickly and ran deep,” Morris makes more understandable those shady

episodes in Nixon’s early career which earned him the nickname that still rankles him most, “Tricky Dick.” His slur campaign against the wealthy, glamorous Helen Douglas and his relentless pursuit of the Harvard-educated suspected spy Alger Hiss were labeled dirty politics, but they could be viewed (at least by Nixon) as examples of David slaying the privileged Goliaths.

Like Morris, Parmet sees Nixon as a Representative Man: Only here Nixon represents not the American-as-Californian but the postwar middle class in general. Parmet, the author of books on Eisenhower and Kennedy, is the most sympathetic to Nixon. While not overlooking

Nixon’s flaws (which he sees as exaggerated by a hostile press), he explores the symbiotic relationship between Nixon and his so-called “silent majority.” Using popular rhetoric about anti-communism and hard-working, God-fearing patriotism, Nixon became, Parmet argues, the first effective post-New Deal powerbroker, shifting influence from the old conservatives like Robert Taft to what would become the new business elites and right-



wing populism of the Reagan era.

Unlike Parmet and Morris, Ambrose offers no overarching thesis—no *Homo californienses*, no Nixon-as-quintessential-American. Instead, Ambrose, author of a two-volume study of Eisenhower, provides here a straightforward, month-by-month chronicle of a decade in the life of Nixon. It is in some ways the most satisfying of the three books. Although sharply critical of the 37th president, Ambrose pays tribute to

his foreign policy, calling Nixon "the ultimate cynic" in domestic affairs but "the ultimate realist" in foreign affairs. Thus, at the very time Nixon was advancing world order through détente with Moscow and opening relations with China, he was sinking deeper into the mire of Watergate—like a Greek tragic figure, doomed by his own flaws. Read Ambrose's chronicle and weep—for what almost happened to democracy during those years.

HEALTH AND THE RISE OF CIVILIZATION. *By Mark Nathan Cohen. Yale. 285 pp. \$29.95*

POISONS OF THE PAST. *By Mary Kilbourne Matossian. Yale. 190 pp. \$22.50*

Is civilization good for your health? What about rye bread? Two new books study the ways food, disease, and history all interrelate.

One of the triumphs of civilization, of course, has been its steady improvement of human health. Don't bet on it, says Cohen, an anthropologist at the State University of New York, Plattsburgh. Cohen evaluates the subsistence strategies of hunters, nomads, farmers, and urban-dwellers over the long centuries. Employing both ethnography and archaeological evidence—the diet of modern hunter-gatherers as well as diseases in ancient skeletons—he discovers a primitive life that refutes Hobbes's "poor, nasty, brutish, and short" characterization. Primitive people suffered low rates of degenerative disease, and they usually enjoyed healthier, protein-rich diets. For their menus, Cohen would barely award advanced—or, worse, semi-industrial—societies a one-star rating: "At best, we see what might be called a partitioning of stress . . . in which the well-to-do are progressively freed from nutritional stress . . . but under which the poor and urban populations . . . are subjected to levels of biological stress that are rarely matched in the most primitive of human societies." Today, in the Third World, the majority of people have less caloric intake than hunter-gatherers had at any time in history.

Matossian's focus is more restricted than Cohen's, though certainly as controversial. A historian at the University of Maryland, she argues that food poisoning resulted in the religious

Great Awakening in New England in 1741, the Great Fear of 1789 in France, and witch persecution on both sides of the Atlantic. The culprits in these (and other) outbreaks were poisonous fungi, particularly ergot, which infect food crops. Ergot—with its fondness for rye, for centuries a staple grain of northern Europe's lower classes—can cause tremors, delusions, and hallucinations, which then were interpreted as demonic possession, religious fervor, or divine inspiration.

While the "rye factor" is fairly well known, Matossian makes original use of "plant health, and climatic indicators of plant health" to account for population and fertility trends which have previously defied explanation. Between 1750 and 1850, the population of Western Europe roughly doubled. During those years, Matossian shows, large numbers in England, France, the Netherlands, and Germany switched from rye bread to a diet of wheat bread and potatoes—foodstuffs which better resist poisonous infections and provide better nutrition. Counting calories and checking what's cooking lack the sweep of magisterial theory; yet Matossian establishes a factual correlation to explain Europe's earlier population boom. Indeed, it is only recently that scholars like Matossian and Cohen have stooped to consider the popular saying, "You are what you eat."

AWASH IN A SEA OF FAITH: Christianizing the American People. *By Jon Butler. Harvard. 360 pp. \$29.50*

America is thought of as a country founded in religious covenants—the creation of New England Calvinists, Quakers, and other Christian sects. But then how explain the fact that, in 1680, four Connecticut towns—New Haven, New London, Stonington, and Woodbury—reported adult male church membership at 15 percent? Or that, between 1630 and 1670, church construction in Virginia was virtually ignored? Such statistics support the surprising hypothesis contained in Butler's subtitle: that, by and large, the American populace did not start off Christian but had to be made so.

Butler, a professor of American studies at Yale, reconstructs "a more complex religious past . . . far removed from a traditional 'Puritan'