

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'



interpretation of America's religious origins." He begins by portraying the fragile adherence of the laity to Christian beliefs in early modern Europe. The English "astrological physician" William Lilly, for example, saw 4,000 clients a year during the 1640s and cast horoscopes to plan battle strategies for the leaders of Parliament during the Civil War. Anglican clergy used magical amulets. The infamous "village atheist" was still alive and well in 16th- and 17th-century England. All these figures—atheists, heretics, Rosicrucians, alchemists—migrated to this side of the Atlantic, diluting orthodox Christian doctrine with beliefs in supernatural possession, prophetic dreams, and apparitions.

The Puritan zealot Cotton Mather (1663–1728) warned that Christianity was in danger of declining amid the American experiment. Modern historians like Perry Miller and Martin Marty have tended to validate Mather's prophecy, finding in the early Republic both a decline of state religion and the subsequent rise of a romantic, individualistic ethic. Butler, however, claims that in 18th-century America religion turned "establishmentarian rather than dissenting, coercive rather than voluntary, and institutional rather than individualistic."

As the states lost their power to dictate or "coerce" religion, Butler argues, the loss was more than compensated for by the rise of denominational authority: Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists—all proved more effective proselytizers for Christianity than state religion ever had been. And as slavery eradicated the African religions, new Christian sects like the African-Methodist Church sprang up. While in 1780 there had been only 2,500 Christian congregations in America, by 1860 there were 52,000! And these congregations continued to exist side by side with, and be influenced by, Spiritual-

ism, Mormonism, Swedenborgianism, Mesmerism, and Freemasonry. Ours was what Butler calls a "unique spiritual hothouse."

During the 1980s, American religious life could seem at times a little odd: a conservative president planning his daily schedule by horoscope; TV evangelists declaring God had spoken to them (and recommended funding); "New Age" religions touting channeling and rebirthing. Butler makes such phenomena seem not faddish but as American as apple pie. Furthermore, Butler shows, this popular religious ferment has proved particularly vital: While less than 10 percent of all West Europeans are church-goers, about 60 percent of all Americans attend public worship regularly.

#### *Contemporary Affairs*

**THE IRON LADY:** A Biography of Margaret Thatcher. By Hugo Young. Farrar. 570 pp. \$25

In 1975 Margaret Thatcher seized the leadership of the Conservative Party before anyone noticed there was anything special about her. Now at least four books and countless newspaper columns have tried to explain the "Iron Lady," "La Passionaria of privilege," and the architect of the "Thatcher Revolution." Yet only Manchester *Guardian* columnist Hugo Young's new biography—fair, superbly written, and analytical—rises above transitory journalism.

Born in 1925, the daughter of a successful greengrocer in Grantham, Margaret Roberts studied chemistry at Oxford. She subsequently held two positions in the world of business she so strongly admires—research chemist for a plastics firm and quality tester for an ice cream and cake-filling manufacturer. Her marriage in 1951 to a wealthy businessman, Dennis Thatcher, allowed her the leisure to read for the Bar and then, in 1959, to stand as a successful Conservative candidate for Parliament.

In the era of "pink Toryism" during the 1960s and early '70s, she blended in rather well. Her "shopkeeper's prejudices" against workers, the Oxbridge elite, and the old fossils in her party went unnoticed as she acquiesced in supporting the welfare state and trade unions. Her parliamentary career, including her years as minister of education (1970–74),