

the squirearchy of 1880—those gentlemen who owned from 1,000 to 10,000 acres and who propped up the whole system—only 16 percent have descendants who possess land today.

The aristocrats' social decline paralleled their slide from economic affluence. Tocqueville had predicted that democracy would undermine aristocracy everywhere, and in England electoral reform loosened the great landlords' hold on national power. Today, a few hereditary nobles are still immensely wealthy; the Duke of Westminster's worth is estimated at anywhere from 400 million to one billion pounds. Most aristocrats, however, long ago found themselves unable to keep up their great houses, let alone imitate the influence of their ancestors.

Along this melancholy trail, Cannadine dwells on the multifarious individuals' reactions to their decline. On one side are renegades such as Jessica Mitford and Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, who renounced the values of their class for various socialistic creeds, although often with aristocratic disdain for the plutocrats who were emerging as the new power brokers. On the other side is an amazing panorama of diehards and doomed grandees, patricians who fought a long and hopeless battle against the 20th century. In between are all the diplomats and lord-lieutenants, governors of colonies, chancellors of universities, mayors and local worthies who, with all the dignity they could muster, settled into the positions of ornamental figureheads. Today some of them claim the role of custodians of the national heritage and open their houses to the paying public. Reduced, in effect, to living as tenants in their own ancestral properties, "the lions of yesteryear" (in Cannadine's words) "have become the unicorns of today."

Arts & Letters

MYTH AND METAPHOR: Selected Essays, 1974–1988. By Northrop Frye. Edited by Robert D. Denham. Univ. of Va. 386 pp. \$35

WORDS WITH POWER: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature. By Northrop Frye. Harcourt, Brace. 342 pp. \$24.95

On January 24, the most famous literary critic

in North America died.

For nearly 60 years, in 23 books and 850 articles, Northrop Frye had consistently argued that reading was not merely an intellectual activity but also an act of moral self-definition. This is hardly a popular attitude in the current academic establishment, where "deconstruction" and the "new historicism" foster a criticism in love with its own theoretical intricacies. While Frye is aware of the post-modernist style wars—a quarter of the essays in *Myth and Metaphor* allude to deconstructionist kingpin Jacques Derrida—he calmly insists on what we can learn from the basic, enduring myths.

"Myth" is the term that has been most closely associated with Frye ever since his revolutionary overview of literary theory, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). To Frye, any work of literature is a variation or incarnation of mythic thinking. By "myth," Frye does not mean mere fantasy or even folktales—and certainly not the overvaluation of the primitive associated with Joseph Campbell. He means *mythos*, a story or narrative which relates basic human needs to things their hearers need to know about their religion or their society. The primary question about a myth, Frye writes, "is not Is it true? . . . The primary question is something more like Do we need to know this?"

In *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982), Frye—above all else, a teacher (at the University of Toronto) and an ordained preacher—admitted that this was the book he had been trying to write all along: a discourse on the Book of Books as a lesson in reading mythic narratives. Now, in *Words With Power*, the sequel to *The Great Code*, Frye concludes his argument about how the Bible can teach us how to read all books. "The organizing structure of the Bible and the corresponding structures of 'secular' literature," he says, "reflect each other." The Bible contains a finite number of myths (creation, fall, exodus, destruction, and redemption) and also a limited number of metaphors (e.g., garden, mountain, cave, and furnace), and these are the principal myths and metaphors of secular literature, too. The myths deal primarily with events in time, the metaphors arrange them in space—which is why learning to decode both is so valuable a skill. "I come up against the fact that our ordi-

nary experience rests on unreal and fuzzy experiences of time and space," Frye writes, "and that myth and metaphor are among other things techniques of mediation, designed to focus our minds on a more real view of both."

ALBRECHT DÜRER: A Biography. By Jane Campbell Hutchinson. Princeton. 247 pp. \$25

Early in the 16th century, the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian paid a visit to Albrecht Dürer. Dürer was straining to draw on a high wall, so the Emperor ordered a courtier to let the painter stand on his back. When the nobleman protested, Maximilian snorted that he could easily turn any peasant into a nobleman, but no nobleman could be remade into a Dürer. This legend (possibly apocryphal) suggests how Dürer raised painting in Germany from a manual, often anonymous craft into an intellectual and noble pursuit.



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Hutchinson, an art historian at the University of Wisconsin, narrates Dürer's progress from a goldsmith's son to an artist whose international renown was equaled only by that of Raphael, Michelangelo, and Titian. In 1494, at age 23, Dürer set off for Italy, becoming the first northerner to make the trip that would soon become an indispensable part of an artistic education. Dürer was determined, he said, "to learn the secrets of the [Italian] art of perspective." In Italy he also observed the respect that was accorded to artists there: "Here I am a gentleman," he wrote, "at home only a parasite."

When he returned to Nuremberg a year later, Dürer integrated the modern Renaissance technique—the rationalization of space through mathematical perspective—into the descriptive naturalism of his northern heritage. Immediately he was in great demand for his psychologically penetrating portraits. But the portraits that interested him most were those of himself. In an age of heightened individuality, he forged his artistic identity by painting and drawing more self-portraits than anyone before Rembrandt. As a young man, he drew himself as a

brooding melancholic; after Italy, as a learned, cosmopolitan gentleman in elegant attire; and in his famous self-portrait of 1500, as Christ himself, thus uniting his religious and artistic longings.

Dürer's most important contribution to the history of art is, arguably, not his paintings but his prints and woodcuts. Masterful at religious propaganda, Dürer understood perfectly how to exploit the newly invented printing press to reach a broad audience on the eve of the Reformation. He ardently supported Martin Luther, whose portrait he desired to engrave "for a lasting remembrance of this Christian man who has helped me out of great distress."

Dürer presents a complex, contradictory figure, pointing at once forward and backward: Rationalistic *and* religious, he believed in both Renaissance humanism and old superstitions. These contradictions underscored the argument of Erwin Panofsky's *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (1943). Panofsky showed a melancholic Dürer suffering from an "interior tension" that could not reconcile the medieval (Gothic Germany, his religious mysticism, his essential naturalism) and the Renaissance (the rationalism and classicism he found in Italy). Panofsky's commanding study has long discouraged other scholars from approaching Dürer, and it must be admitted that Panofsky's Dürer remains a more convincing figure than the good-natured, gregarious painter whom Hutchinson limns. Hutchinson, however, has documented Dürer's life more fully than ever before, and her biography provides the material for the first reevaluation of Dürer in almost half a century.

Contemporary Affairs

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF CHILDREN. By Robert Coles. Houghton Mifflin. 358 pp. \$22.95

The nature of children's "spirituality" is frequently speculated upon but rarely investigated. Do their ideas about God and religion reflect a genuine impulse, or are children merely parroting their parents?

Coles, a Harvard professor of psychiatry, explores these and other matters in this culmination of 30 years of writing about children. Prac-