ing off in all directions at once.

The son of a master cutler in Langres, Diderot was destined for the Church or the law. Both fates he eluded by escaping into the literary bohemia of Paris, where until his early thirties he barely managed to support his disorderly existence. (Though an atheist, he wrote sermons for missionaries for 50 *écus* each; a pornographic novel dashed off in two weeks earned him temporary lodgings in prison.) In 1746, a publisher commissioned him to oversee the translation of Ephraim Chamber's *Cyclopaedia*. The simple work of translation be-

came a labor of 15 years and eventually resulted in 60,000 articles either written or commissioned by Diderot on an unprecedented variety of subjects. As Voltaire observed, they passed "from the heights of metaphysics to the weaver's loom, and from thence to the theatre." Of Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, Thomas Carlyle said that "only the Siege of Troy may offer some faint parallel."

Furbank makes rather short work of Diderot's fascinating life—including his comic quarrel with his royal patron, Catherine of Russia—condensing it all into a few chapters. Furbank also makes the *Encyclopédie* seem almost a waste of his hero's time. What interests Furbank is "not so much what he [Diderot] 'represented' as what he achieved," that is, "the works he will live by, *has* lived by." After all, few readers today seek out the *Encyclopédie*. Furbank concentrates on those works by Diderot that were little-known or unpublished while he was alive: novels such as *Rameau's Nephew*, philosophical speculations such as *D'Alembert's Dream*, plays, paradoxical dialogues, polemical tracts, and scientific research. In such works, Diderot seems at times to have anticipated nearly the entire future world—Darwin's theory of evolution, the *nouveau roman* of the 20th century, the Braille system of writing, and the cinematic montage of Sergei Eisenstein. He was the first art critic, the first modern thinker to suggest the molecular structure of matter, and his theory of dreams would later influence Freud. In his *Supplement to Bougainville's "Voyage,"* Diderot registered an early protest against colonialism, on the then-odd grounds that civilization should not be imposed on those who are free of repression. His last words were, supposedly, "The first step toward philosophy is incredulity." For all the originality that Furbank reveals in them, however, Diderot's works still seem united by the common Enlightenment faith that, if men could be made to think more clearly, they might then live more peaceably.

THE SUBVERSIVE FAMILY: An Alternative History of Love and Marriage. *By Ferdinand Mount. Free Press. 282 pp. $24.95*

Ferdinand Mount's alternative history of the family may not quite live up to the publisher's claim that it is one of "the most influential works of social history in recent times." But since its publication in England (1982), it has seriously challenged the progressive view that the nuclear family is a distinctively modern development. Mount, the editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, provides not so much a history as a set of essays elaborating a central proposition: A conspiracy of "family-haters"—among them he numbers Jesus, Plato, Marx, Hitler, and radical feminists—has attempted to replace the family's key role in society with various ideologically motivated organizations. But

the family, with its selfish internal loyalties, Mount asserts, "is the enduring permanent enemy of all hierarchies, churches, and ideologies."

Mount is not a professional historian, but he has joined one of the most hotly contested battles of contemporary historiography. According to the now-conventional wisdom, spouses in the premodern world were chosen for economic rather than emotional reasons, and children were relatively unloved. Mount ransacks the letters of previous centuries as well as diaries, court papers, bawdy tales, and urn inscriptions to refute this view. Along the way he discards as myths such notions that arranged marriages were the norm until this century, that child care is a modern invention, and that romantic love never existed before the troubadour poets glorified adultery. He marshals persuasive evidence that, despite readily available divorce, the family stays together longer now than in earlier periods—when death efficiently did the work of divorce.

Mount brings to his controversial subject all the virtues and vices of the old-style *literateur*'s impressionistic approach. And in the end, his interpretation is elusive: Mount is plainly a partisan of "family values," yet not a conventional conservative. His tone is resolutely skeptical of all social engineering. He attacks the Christian churches and Edmund Burke as fiercely as he does encounter-group therapy. And he is apparently happy with spiralling divorce rates, as long as the family is left alone, while it lasts. The contemporary "*fallible* marriage, in which equality, privacy and independence are sought, with . . . little or no attention to social expectation," he writes, "derives from that most modern, most protestant of reasons, the dignity of the individual." If there is such a thing as a romantic realist, Mount seems to be one.

FRONTIERS: The Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People.
By Noël Mostert. Knopf. 1,355 pp. $35

As a country suffering from far too much history, South Africa has not been served particularly well by its chroniclers. The exhaustive but plodding analyses of historians do not attract a broad public, while journalists who convey the sheer drama of the country's politics lack historical feel and method. Into the exclusive club of books that transcend these limitations—such as C. W. de Kiewiet's *History of South Africa: Social and Economic* (1941) and Rian Malan's, *My Traitor's Heart* (1990)—now comes Noël Mostert's *Frontiers.* A South African emigré and author of *Supership* (1974), Mostert breaks free of parochialism to study the Eastern Cape's history from the perspective of those larger forces that have shaped the African hemisphere and, indeed, the modern world.

Unlike the American frontiersmen, the European colonists expanding eastward from the tip of the African continent wanted the labor of indigenous peoples as well as their land. The Xhosa were, like the Zulu, one of Africa's most numerous and sophisticated black nations. Living in densely populated fixed settlements, they possessed far greater capacity to resist encroachment than did the native Americans. Between the 1770s and 1870s, nine frontier wars flared, as first Dutch colonists and then the British army struggled to subjugate the Xhosa people. The cataclysmic event in this Hundred Years' War took place during the 1850s when Xhosa prophets urged their own people to destroy all their cattle and foodstocks. They believed the Xhosa's remorseless dispossession would be overturned by supernatural agency: Everything lost would be returned many-fold and the white man expelled from the lands he had stolen. The prophecies proved false. Thousands of Xhosas starved, and many survivors had no choice but to work as menial laborers.

By 1880 Xhosa resistance was completely broken. Their society and culture largely destroyed, they became the first major Bantu-speaking people to be drawn into serving in the diamond and gold mines and on white farms. In the cities the Xhosa were among the earliest to become fully "proletarianized"; in their rump homeland in the Eastern Cape, missionaries and teachers made rapid headway in spreading Western values and consumer needs. As South Africa's first black nation to become "modernized," the Xhosa have formed the mainspring of African nationalist movements from the 1880s to the present African National Congress. According to some, the word *Xhosa* means "angry men"—which seems an apt name for the people whose militancy and resil-