

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 *litterateur'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-

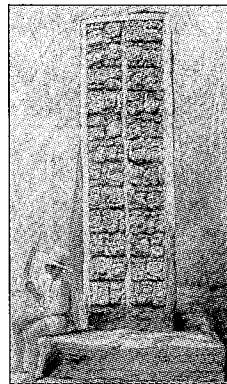
ience is perhaps unparalleled on the entire African continent. And without their angry history, one of the world's most admired men, Nelson Mandela, might be an unknown Xhosa shepherd tending his flocks today.

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE. By Michael D. Coe. Thames and Hudson. 304 pp. \$24.95

The story begins in 1519 with Hernan Cortéz looting treasures from the New World. Among the least prized items he sent back to Spain were codices with Mayan hieroglyphics, which simply lay for centuries in dusty vaults and libraries, unreadable and meaningless. In 1859, however, in Madrid, a lost 16th-century manuscript was uncovered in which a Jesuit priest had done the seemingly inconceivable, deciphering the hieroglyphs into an alphabet. Now comes the oddest part of the story: Nobody, for another century, used this "Rosetta stone" to decode the Mayas' ancient language

The reason for the long delay lies with the nascent "science" of anthropology, which, already by 1860 and for long after, was dominated by Darwinist assumptions. Expressing a nearly universal bias, Ignace Gelb wrote in *A Study of Writing* (1952) that the Maya were "suspended from the lowest branches of the evolutionary tree." New World peoples were considered too culturally underdeveloped to have created a writing system based on phonetics. The premier Maya scholar, Eric Thompson—Sir Eric, after being knighted by Queen Elizabeth—used the power of his position at the Carnegie Institution in Washington and the force of his personality to discredit anyone who dared suggest that Mayan hieroglyphics represented phonetic speech and not universal ideas and calendrical signs.

Yet during the 1950s a young Russian scholar who had never seen a Mayan ruin challenged the accepted view. Cut off from Thompson's influence by the enforced insular-



ity of Soviet society, Yuri Knorosov treated the hieroglyphs as an alphabet and began to decipher the language. (The glyphs, Knorosov showed, actually correspond more to syllables than to alphabetical letters.) It was not until Thompson's death in 1975, however, that Knorosov's work became generally accepted. Then the deciphering and translations began in earnest, and newspapers trumpeted the breakthrough. Today, we know the Mayas had a rich written history. Indeed, the same Jesuit priest in Mexico who originally deciphered the Mayan alphabet also staged an *auto da fé* in 1562, burning as native idolatry an entire library of Mayan books. We now know the names of Mayan cities and their kings. (Before 1960, the figures on Mayan stelae were assumed to be gods, not people.) We also know that theirs was far from the peaceful society that every Maya scholar (inferring from a lack of visible military structures) had once assumed.

Coe, a Yale anthropologist, personally knew most of the recent players in the saga of the code, both the old mandarins and the young turks. His recounting of an extremely technical story is both accessible and dramatic—an accomplishment almost as impressive as the breaking of the code itself.

Arts & Letters

OFF WITH THEIR HEADS! Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood. By Maria Tatar. Princeton. 295 pp. \$24.95

FORBIDDEN JOURNEYS: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers. Ed. by Nina Auerbach and U. C. Knoepfelmacher. Univ. of Chicago. 373 pp. \$27.50

Why do we tell fairy tales to our children? Once upon a time, that question had a simple answer: to lull the little dears to sweet sleep and innocent dreams. But for the past 16 years, since Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), fairy tales have seemed a darker, more ambiguous literature.

Bettelheim would take a traditional favorite, say "Hansel and Gretel," and reveal that it was quite *uninnocent*—that, in this case, it was a frightening tale of child abandonment. Bettelheim skipped over the misdeeds of Han-