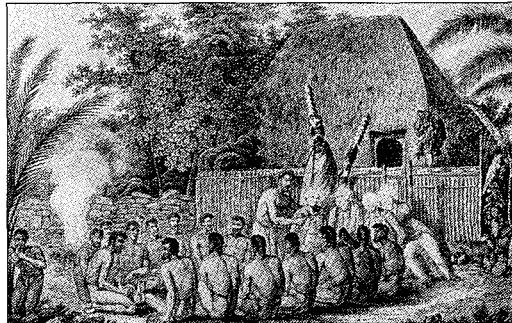

History

HOW "NATIVES" THINK: About Captain Cook, For Example. By Marshall Sahlins. Univ. of Chicago. 318 pp. \$24.95

Captain James Cook, the famed 18th-century British navigator, came ashore on the island of Hawaii in January 1779 and died there the following month at age 51. That much is indisputable. What happened between his arrival and his death, however, has become the subject of intense debate between two noted contemporary anthropologists, Marshall Sahlins of the University of Chicago and Gananath Obeyesekere of Princeton University. Their fight is not just about what occurred more than 200 years ago in Hawaii. It goes to the heart of a continuing debate about the ability of anthropologists working in the Western tradition to understand other cultures. Sahlins argues for the plausibility of modern anthropological inquiry in the face of a creeping political correctness that threatens to silence the very "natives" it ostensibly seeks to defend. He insists that there is a way to look at other cultures objectively that need not become the kind of "imperialistic" anthropology he has been accused of practicing.

Obeyesekere fired the first shot in *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (1992). He argued against the long-accepted view advanced by Sahlins and others that the Hawaiians believed Cook to be an incarnation of the god Lono. (The captain's appearance coincided with an important annual religious festival.) The idea that the Hawaiians took Cook for a god was, in Obeyesekere's view, a contrivance of imperialist ideology, a myth "fundamentally based on the Western idea of the redoubtable European who is a god to savage peoples." He offered a different interpretation: Cook was not received as Lono but was installed honorifically as a taboo chief and deified only after his untimely death at native hands.

How Natives Think is Sahlins's response, a compelling and thorough, if occasionally plodding, indictment of Obeyesekere's scholarship (shoddy) and political agenda (misguided). *Apotheosis*, Sahlins claims, is "a veritable manual of sophisticated and historiographical fallacies," and



Obeyesekere's theory, for all the critical acclaim it has received, is "undermined by reason, historical evidence, and the ethnography of Western culture." If these seem like strong charges, they are aimed at a formidable ideology. Obeyesekere wants to defend the Hawaiians against the ethnocentric forces of the West, but he does so, Sahlins maintains, by practicing a "symmetrical and inverse ethnocentrism": Hawaiians are accordingly "endowed with the highest form of Western mentality, while Western scholars slavishly repeat the irrational beliefs of their ancestors."

Sahlins is a careful prosecutor, and his sometimes trying detours into such matters as the Hawaiian lunar calendar are important to the argument. He wittily dismantles Obeyesekere's case, accusing him of taking a "scholarlier-than-thou-attitude" and of creating a "pidgin anthropology." There is a sporting thrill to this unusual (because public) bloodletting in the academy, but the fight is likely to continue well beyond Sahlins's round-two punch.

MONSIEUR D'EON IS A WOMAN: A Tale of Political Intrigue and Sexual Masquerade. By Gary Kates. Basic Books. 363 pp. \$25

Spies tend to have more complicated inner lives than the rest of us. What sort of person chooses to live an uprooted existence, change identities at great risk, and deceive friends, family, and lovers on a routine basis? As Kates demonstrates in his absorbing study of the 18th-century Chevalier d'Eon, spies in the past were every bit as complex as their modern counterparts.

Charles d'Eon de Beaumont was born in 1728