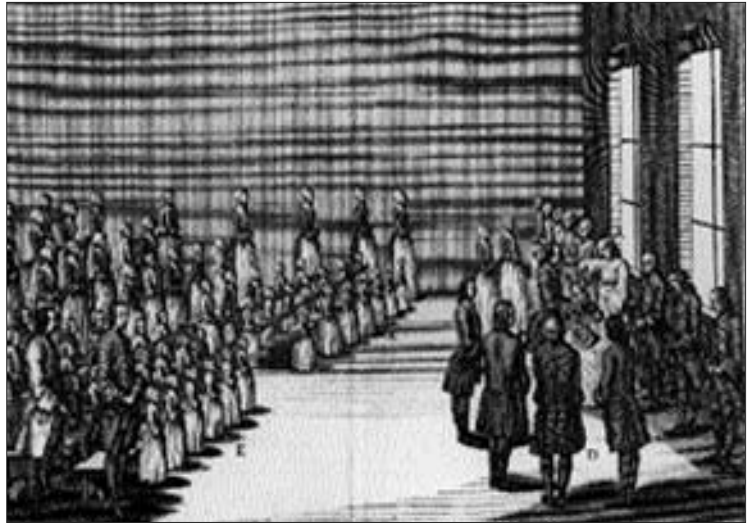


The Puritans claimed a pre-eminent place in historians' thinking in part because colonial New England left an unmatched abundance of literary materials. But revisionist historians—proponents of the new social history, written from the “bottom up”—are not content with such “elitist” testimony. Borrowing techniques from the behavioral sci-



Among the sects active outside New England in the mid-18th century were the Moravians (here, at a baptism), concentrated in Pennsylvania and North Carolina.

ences, they have used data from sources such as court depositions and inventories to paint a picture of the unlettered multitudes.

Challenging Puritanism's significance, the revisionists portray the middle or southern colonies “as somehow more typical of subsequent American social and institutional evolution,” Cohen writes. They even question the Puritans' influence in New England, suggesting that the region's “social arrangements derived more from inherited patterns of English agriculture, law, or custom than from religious or ecclesiastical practice.” And they point out that there were other religious forces at work in colonial America: Anglicans, Lutheran pietists, Jesuit missionaries, and a variety of sectarians.

Summarizing what he calls the “post-Puritan paradigm,” Cohen says there is agreement that a turning point in American life came around 1680, after a period

of declining piety. But then “the most enduring American religious patterns coalesced, not in the pious sobriety of Puritan New England . . . but in the earnest if stolid fabrication of ecclesiastical institutions throughout Anglo-America” between 1680 and 1820. The two leading revisionist historians—Jon Butler, author of *Awash in a Sea of Faith* (1990), and Patricia U. Bonomi, author of *Under the Cope of Heaven* (1986)—differ on the pace of America's “Christianization.” Bonomi contends that churches and churchgoing grew steadily during the 18th century, Cohen says. Butler sees 18th- and 19th-century Americans as less pious—and more open to occult practices.

Though the revisionists have shown that the Puritans of New England were far from being the whole story, Cohen concludes, they go too far in minimizing their importance. A coherent, comprehensive portrayal of early American religious life has yet to emerge.

## *The Lord's Judgment*

“Lord Acton's Ordeal: The Historian and Moral Judgment” by Perez Zagorin, in *The Virginia Quarterly Review* (Winter 1998), One West Range, Charlottesville, Va. 22903.

The English historian Lord Acton (1834–1902) is today best remembered for his dictum, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Behind those famous words, though, argues Zagorin, an emeritus professor of history at the University of Rochester, was a conception of

the historian's duty so stern, and a moral code so absolute, that few historians have been able to go along with him.

John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton was both a lifelong Roman Catholic and a lifelong liberal (in the 19th-century sense of the term), who feared the state as the chief threat

to liberty. Though his projected magnum opus on the history of liberty never saw the light of day, the ideas he expressed in his many essays, reviews, and lectures, as well as his notes and letters, continue to fascinate students of politics and history.

Acton's archival research and enormous historical reading forced him to conclude "that Catholics had committed many great evils for the sake of what they considered the higher interests of the church," notes Zagorin—evils that included the religious murders of the Inquisition and other authorized agencies of persecution. "Catholic historians and controversialists, moreover, had repeatedly distorted, concealed, and falsified the truth for pious reasons."

History persuaded Acton to strongly oppose the doctrine of papal infallibility entertained by the Vatican in the mid-19th century. "A man is not honest who accepts all Papal decisions in questions of morality, for they have often been distinctly immoral," he stated. The Vatican Council of 1870 nevertheless adopted the dogma. To avoid excommunication, Acton made some equivocal statements about the doctrine. But he came away convinced that Catholic churchmen and apologists of his day "were all too often

willing to disregard morality and to falsify or ignore the truth," Zagorin says, and this only fortified Acton's conviction that a historian must render moral judgments.

In the past, historians had to be sympathetic and impartial, Acton believed. Each age, he wrote, was "worthy of study [and] to be understood for its own sake, for the way in which it has met its problems, and its share in the suffering of mankind—not as a stepping stone to the present." At the same time, however, Zagorin says, Acton held that moral principles, based on the permanent, generally acknowledged standard of the sanctity of life, were everywhere and always the same. Murder, as the worst crime, provided what Acton called "our basis for measurement." Thus, after subjecting historical evidence and testimony to rigorous cross-examination, Zagorin says, "the conscientious historian" had the duty to make a moral judgment, one that "belongs to the domain of objective facts and becomes a part of historical science."

Most historians, in contrast, have not deemed it "proper as a rule" to make moral judgments, Zagorin says. Unlike Lord Acton, they believe "that they possess neither the power nor authority to speak as the voice of History and pronounce its verdict for all time."

## SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

### *30,000 Tons beneath the Sea*

"Burial of Radioactive Waste under the Seabed" by Charles D. Hollister and Steven Nadis, in *Scientific American* (Jan. 1998), 415 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017-1111.

When it comes to the disposal of nuclear waste, many Americans seem to prefer to bury their heads in the sand. A repository has been under development at Yucca Mountain, Nevada, for more than a decade, at least in theory, but no construction has begun and state officials and residents remain adamantly opposed to the facility. It may never open for use. Yet more than 30,000 metric tons of high-level radioactive waste now lie in temporary storage at U.S. nuclear power plants, and every year brings another 2,000 metric tons. Add to that at least 50 metric tons of excess plutonium, and hundreds of tons of highly



To gather data on conditions deep below the sea floor, European researchers have used devices such as these torpedo-shaped "free fall penetrators," laden with instruments.