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**RESOURCES & ENVIRONMENT**


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about the future of U.S. policy on nuclear power that make raising capital difficult. They are unsure about coal as an alternate fuel because of environmental and supply problems. They may finally be forced to return to oil-fired generating plants, thereby increasing world demand for oil and driving up prices.

Skeptics abroad wonder if U.S. nonproliferation policy is not really designed to curb the global shift toward plutonium and the breeder reactor until U.S. technology has caught up with Western Europe's. Such doubts about the motives behind President Carter's maneuvers, and the fickle nature of the U.S. decision-making process, provide more incentive for the rest of the world, including the less developed countries, to set up enrichment programs and to go nuclear with or without U.S. assistance.

What should Washington do? The authors offer only partial answers: Continue development of both light water reactors and a practical breeder reactor as a long-term option. Reduce uncertainty in the U.S. electric utility industry by easing licensing procedures for nuclear power plants. Take on the entire burden of managing the world's radioactive spent fuel. Explore with other nations the costs and benefits of operating the controversial Barnwell, S.C., nuclear fuel reprocessing plant as an international facility. Intensify efforts to increase the security of the world supply of uranium. And strengthen the inspection arm of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The U.S. approach has been too self-centered and insensitive to the problems of other nations. The long-term solution to the nuclear-power problem and the larger problems of international stability, the authors contend, lies in mutually cooperative international action.

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**ARTS & LETTERS**


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### *Social Realism for the Ladies*

"A Different View of the Iron Madonna: William Dean Howells and His Magazine Readers" by Laurel T. Goldman, in the *New England Quarterly* (Dec. 1977), Hubbard Hall, Brunswick, Maine 04011.

At the end of the 19th century, William Dean Howells—intimate of Mark Twain and Henry James, mentor to aspiring young writers, and a frequent magazine contributor—was the leading figure in American letters. Then, suddenly, his reputation waned as critics charged that he pandered to the bourgeois tastes of female readers.

Howells' eclipse, says Goldman, a doctoral candidate at University College in London, stemmed from an influential 1887 article, "Why We Have No Great Novelists," in which Hjalmar Boyesen argued that writing for magazines like *Harper's* and *Century* was "permanently injuri-

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ous" because of the predominantly female readership of those publications. The writer's fate, Boyesen said, would be decided by the "Iron Madonna," who "strangles in her fond embrace the American novelist" and destroys his chances for greatness.

Later critics, like H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis, turned on Howells and labeled his new brand of social realism—evident in *The Undiscovered Country* (1879) and *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885)—not only "commonplace" and "prudish" but inimical to literary esthetics. Howells, in fact, did believe that wealthy Americans read little and that critics were book-tasters, not book-readers. Women, on the other hand, were better educated, their tastes far more cultivated. Any writer, he declared in "The Man of Letters as a Man of Business" (1893), "must resign himself to obscurity unless ladies choose to recognize him."

Howells' goal was to give America a native and popular literature. As *Lippincott Magazine* editor J. F. Kirk once wrote to him: "You have given us truth instead of fancies, pictures instead of problems, creations instead of conventions." If Howells made any compromises, Goldman concludes, it was because he "had his sights on something far more demanding"—to prove the power of literature to speak to the majority.

### Was Arthur a Steppe-Child?

"The Sarmatian Connection: New Light on the Origin of the Arthurian and Holy Grail Legends" by C. Scott Littleton and Ann C. Thomas, in *Journal of American Folklore* (Jan.-Mar. 1978), 1703 New Hampshire Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

No one seems more English than King Arthur, even if scholars have long assumed that the Arthurian tales, as first related by chroniclers Nennius (fl. c. 800) and Geoffrey of Monmouth (d. 1155) were actually rooted in a pre-Christian, Celtic tradition. But two historians at Occidental College in Los Angeles now claim that the legends, which appeared in England in the 2nd century A.D., probably evolved in the steppes of South Russia among an aggressive, nomadic people known as Sarmatians.

According to Littleton and Thomas, the prototypes for Arthur and his paladins can be found in Sarmatian tales of a band of heroes called the Narts. The Sarmatian tradition predates the Arthurian tales but the parallels are clear: Both describe the supernatural destiny of a leader (Arthur), the quest for a sacred cup (grail), and the origins of a magical sword (Excalibur). Even the names of certain characters (Sir Bedivere and Sir Kay as well as Arthur's father, Uther Pendragon) may, the authors speculate, be traced back linguistically to ancient Sarmatia.

Coincidence? If it is, say Littleton and Thomas, then coincidence must account for a great deal more. In 175 A.D., for example, the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius subdued a renegade force of Sarmatians along the borders of what is now Hungary. Some 5,500 Sarmatian