
PAPERBOUNDS

AKENFIELD: Portrait of an English Village. By Ronald Blythe. Pantheon reprint, 1980. 318 pp. \$3.95

"Freedom," muses a 21-year-old Akenfield pig-farmer, "is getting up at 6:30 every morning, having a wash and breakfast and being outside by seven to start feeding." In this 1969 history of a rural Suffolk village just 90 miles from London, British novelist Blythe, an East Anglian himself, airs the pleasures and limitations of life in a private, much romanticized society. Blythe talked with 49 of the 298 villagers—farmers, craftsmen, shopkeepers, a vicar, and even a poet and a painter. Their frank exchanges reveal inextricable friendships and the satisfactions of working with the soil, but also a suspicion of books and new ideas, pettiness, and an unwillingness to meet the outside world. The village is hardly the bucolic England of legend. Farm earnings are low, most residents are poor, and many young people flee to the city. Once, life in Akenfield was "all obedience." Now "the village is so quiet . . . nobody walks about."

COMEDY. Edited by Wylie Sypher. Johns Hopkins reprint, 1980. 260 pp. \$4.95

Comedy is serious business to English novelist George Meredith, French philosopher Henri Bergson, and U.S. critic Sypher. Meredith (1828–1909), in this volume's first long essay, argues that comedy—especially the witty and sophisticated comedy of manners—saves us from complacency. When characters on a stage are caught "drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly," he writes, we laugh—and recognize our own follies. Bergson (1859–1941) believes that the comic spirit picks away at the "rigidity in society" that prevents us from thor-

oughly appreciating individuality. We chuckle when a parson sneezes during a sermon, because our attention is drawn from the soul to the body. Unlike Meredith, who states that only those who care about people can appreciate comedy, Bergson theorizes that humor demands a "momentary anesthesia of the heart." Sypher, however, claims that both Europeans oversimplify the subject. To him, life today is irrational; its essential absurdity is inherently (and bitterly) funny. Sypher's view of humor as "a sign of desperation," of "man's revolt, boredom, and aspiration," chills the reader who, guided by Bergson and Meredith, has come to see comedy as a measure of society's mental health.

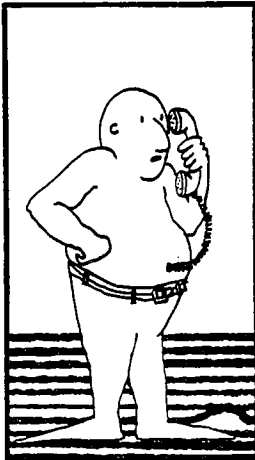
WOMEN AND MEN ON THE OVERLAND TRAIL. By John Mack Faragher. Yale reprint, 1980. 281 pp. \$6.50

"On three farms out of four," an 1862 Department of Agriculture report concluded, "the wife works harder, endures more." Woman's lot was no better on the wagon trails that led from Missouri to California in the 19th century. Faragher's study of diaries and travel narratives written by men and women on treks westward won the 1980 Frederick Jackson Turner Award for history. Men, he finds, had one principal task—"getting the wagons and the family safely through to the coast." Typically, their accounts were terse statements of fact: "Fri 10 made this day 14 and encamped at the Willow Springs good water but little grass 3 Bufaloes killed. . . ." While the men hunted or talked politics around the campfire, women concerned themselves with cooking, mending, washing clothes, and child-rearing. Lamented one: "Some women have very little help about the camp, being obliged to get the wood and water

(as far as possible), make camp fires, unpack at night and pack up in the morning." Historians, including Page Smith in *Daughters of the Promised Land* (1970), have asserted that pioneer women's responsibilities enhanced their status and independence. Not so, says Faragher. During the arduous journey, marriage remained a practical alliance for survival. This partnership "in production, processing, and consumption," he writes, required that men and women continue, not change, their traditional roles.

BIOFEEDBACK: Potential and Limits. By Robert M. Stern and William J. Ray, Univ. of Nebr. reprint, 1980. 197 pp. \$3.95

Caesar, Freud, Kant, Saint Paul—all suffered from migraine headaches. Biofeedback training, maintain Stern and Ray, Penn State psychologists, could have



Courtesy of Dow Jones-Irwin.

taught them to constrict a particular artery in their heads, producing relief similar to that induced by drugs. During biofeedback training, electrodes are placed on a part of the body—the skin, the brain, an artery—and the level of electrochemical activity is monitored on a TV

screen. The patient tries, by relaxing, for example, to alter the "picture" until a level of energy is reached that produces the desired results. The process by which a patient learns to control involuntary parts of the body is little understood; but it seems to require a different sort of concentration from that used to train voluntary muscles, and involves learning to recognize and induce certain "mental states." In their survey of the research conducted since 1965, the authors suggest that biofeedback may be particularly useful in reducing stress-related ailments (ulcers, high blood pressure). But it remains, they emphasize, one therapy alternative among many—and no substitute for conventional treatment.

THE NEOCONSERVATIVES: The Men Who Are Changing America's Politics. By Peter Steinfels. Touchstone reprint, 1980. 336 pp. \$5.95

"Neo-conservatism," writes Steinfels, the liberal editor of *Commonweal*, "is the serious and intelligent conservatism America has lacked." The new intellectual movement's leading lights include ex-liberals and even ex-socialists: Irving Kristol, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Nathan Glazer, Aaron Wildavsky, James Q. Wilson. These critics have emerged as an influential counterforce to the academic-political Left's excesses of the 1960s. They examine the unintended effects of Big Government policies, e.g., busing, affirmative action, "prophylactic" regulation. They ask basic questions, such as: Is equality desirable? Above all, they raise issues that the Left avoids, notably about individual responsibility and the nation's moral culture. Yet, Steinfels contends, the neoconservatives have their own vices, notably a "negative" narrow focus that ignores such matters as business influence and "corporate power."