
NEW TITLES

History

**THE RULING RACE:
A History of American
Slaveholders**
by James Oakes
Knopf, 1982
307 pp. \$16.95

American slaveholders justified their "peculiar institution" with the paternalistic belief that men were born to their stations in life—or so runs the interpretation advanced by Eugene Genovese and other scholars. But according to Oakes, a Purdue historian, the average Southern farmer, who owned fewer than five slaves, experienced considerable moral discomfort. Though he considered slaveholding an inalienable right, he championed democracy and free-market commercialism and accepted the Founding Fathers' belief that "all men are created equal." Protestant evangelicalism, with its stress that everyone—white or black—was equal in God's sight, troubled the conscience of many a small farmer. A few slaveowners were driven by guilt to release their slaves. Some were convinced of their own damnation. Others claimed that God had entrusted blacks to the care of white men. Most farmers swallowed their moral scruples for the sake of material advancement. Success in the Southern economy (whose workings Oakes thoroughly details) was virtually impossible without slaves. The absolute number of slaveholders grew to 400,000 by the Civil War, though the percentage of slaveholding white families actually declined. As abolitionist sentiment was spreading in the North, a rapidly growing white population and a declining number of slaves were already threatening the Southern economy.

**THE MUSLIM
DISCOVERY OF
EUROPE**
by Bernard Lewis
Norton, 1982
350 pp. \$19.95

Just after the turn of the 19th century, Halet Efendi, the Turkish ambassador to Paris, warned in a letter home that any Ottoman who praised Europe was a "spy," "an ass," or a Christian. Efendi was a man behind the times: By the 19th century, the Muslim world had recognized the superiority of Western



Dutch woman. By permission of W. W. Norton & Company.

warfare, science, and medicine and had even turned an ear to the social ideas of the French Revolution. But Efendi's attitude had prevailed among his countrymen since the seventh century. The Muslim scholars, travelers, and diplomats whose works are examined by Lewis, professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton, regarded Christian Europe as the enemy of Islam. Islamic scholars such as Avicenna (980–1037) and Averroes (1126–1198) drew upon the works of the pagan Greeks. But for centuries “Frankish religion, philosophy, science, literature” excited little interest. In many ways more tolerant of outsiders than Christians, Muslims were slow to develop a curiosity about other cultures. To learn a Western language was a useless, even impious, pursuit. The French Revolution shocked them into greater awareness: The new French government, printing the first newspapers (in French and, later, in Arabic) ever to appear in the Muslim world, spread Enlightenment ideas that broke through anti-Christian feelings. And Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 drove home the message of Western military superiority.

THE REVOLUTION OF 1525: The German Peasants' War From a New Perspective

by Peter Blickle
trans. by Thomas A. Brady, Jr. and H. C. Erik Midelfort
Johns Hopkins, 1982
246 pp. \$20

In 1525, German peasants took up arms against their lords in an attempt to create a just society. Long treated as a footnote to the Protestant Reformation, the German Peasants' War of 1525 was not, in fact, exclusively German, peasant, or military. It was, according to Blickle, a historian at the University of Bern, a revolution of the common man that spread to French- and Slavic-speaking regions and included town-dwellers, journeymen, and miners as well as peasants. Even the date is misleading: The War of 1525 was only the culmination of events that began with the weakening of feudalism in the mid-15th century. Landowning nobles and ecclesiastics, losing wealth and power, increased their demands on the peasantry, reimposing a kind of serfdom. At the same time, they curtailed the common man's hunting, land-use, and wood-gathering rights. The