

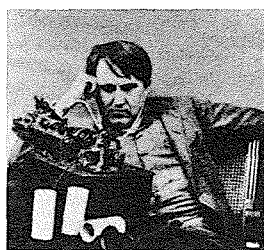
**LITERARY DEMOCRACY:  
The Declaration of Cultural  
Independence in America**  
By Larzer Ziff  
Viking, 1981  
333 pp. \$20

In 1837, a serious economic crisis sent tremors of self-doubt through American society. That same year, Ralph Waldo Emerson offered a Harvard audience his profoundly simple solution to the country's ills: Believe in the primacy of "inborn values"; do not submit to material pressures; be better men, and a better world will follow. A nation whose genius, according to Tocqueville, lay in commerce rather than in art or ideas paid unusual attention to the widely published words of the Concord idealist. What *could* the American character be? Answers were not long in coming. Discovering that "America meant more than a new setting for time-honored forms," Emerson's literary contemporaries, Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, Whitman, and others turned away from the sentimental portraits by earlier writers such as Cooper and aimed for radical and imaginative reconstructions of what America truly was. Poe's dark tales, private to the point of solipsism, marked an extreme of the new quest, but others also sensed that truth could be found only through imaginative "isolationism." Indeed, argues Ziff, professor of English at Johns Hopkins, the terms of American writers' lives—their estrangement from the rest of society—provided them with vital clues to the American character and predicament. Celebrating the Self (Whitman), exploring the connections between man and nature (Thoreau), or unraveling the mystery of human communities (Hawthorne and Melville), these writers produced interior landscapes vast enough to match the sprawling terrain of their young and growing nation.

### *Science & Technology*

**THOMAS ALVA EDISON:  
An American Myth**  
by Wyn Wachhorst  
MIT, 1981  
328 pp. \$15

During his lifetime, Thomas Edison (1845–1931) obtained 1,093 patents. But Wachhorst, a historian at the University of California, is interested less in the man and his machines than in the changing Edison legend. As the Western frontier shrank during the late 19th century, Americans looked on Edison as a



Edison National Historic Site.

new Adam in yet another New World Eden—technology. Dubbed the “Wizard of Menlo Park” by newsmen, Edison became in the public’s eyes a near superhuman figure who—with his perfection of the incandescent lamp in 1879—brought light to the masses. After World War I, Edison’s image reversed. Caught up in technology’s swirl and noise—partly fostered by Edison’s invention of the phonograph, the carbon telephone transmitter, and the motion-picture projector—many Americans began to yearn for the old days of innocence and rugged individualism. Edison filled that bill too. He was the enterprising All-American Boy (at age 12, he sold newspapers on Michigan’s Grand Trunk Railroad), the Horatio Alger Hero (learning telegraphy from a station master whose son he had plucked from the path of an errant boxcar), the Self-Made Man working through the night in his lab. Wachhorst’s study of Edison biographies, press accounts, testimonials, and even movies offers a lively panorama of past American hopes and self-perceptions.

**GENES, MIND, AND CULTURE**

by Charles J. Lumsden and Edward O. Wilson  
Harvard, 1981  
428 pp. \$20

There is no doubt among scientists that genes play a role in behavior—even in collective behavior, which we call culture. Controversy arises, however, over the extent of that role. Here Wilson, a biologist, and Lumsden, a physicist, postulate a process by which genes and culture directly interact in evolution. Furthermore, they attribute to genes the dominant role in shaping the kinds of behavior individuals will display within a given culture. This genetic imperative is mediated through primary and secondary “epigenetic” rules—mental patterns that govern sensory screening and the handling of information through memory and emotional response. These rules affect our choices among various cultural options: to shave or not to shave, preference for sweet or sour. Over time, certain forms of behavior are selected as more conducive to survival; the genetic patterns underlying these forms are accordingly selected. The more traditional view, held by