
NEW TITLES

History

**THE NIGHT BATTLES:
Witchcraft and Agrarian
Cults in the 16th
and 17th Centuries**
by Carlo Ginzburg
translated by John and
Anne Tedeschi
Johns Hopkins, 1984
209 pp. \$18.50

In the Friuli region of northern Italy during the Middle Ages, people who happened to be born in the caul—the intact amniotic membrane—were thought to have benign magical powers. Called *benandanti*, or “good walkers,” they engaged in nocturnal battles at four different times of the year against evil spirits threatening the fertility of crops and livestock. During the 16th and 17th centuries, these valued folk came under the hostile scrutiny of representatives of the Holy Inquisition. As in his study of a 16th-century Italian miller, *The Cheese and the Worms*, Ginzburg’s concern is with the clash between the popular mind, with its memories of ancient rituals, and the educated minds of churchmen, cut off from folk practices and rigidly bound by dogma. Drawing on Inquisition records, Ginzburg, a University of Bologna historian, shows how, at the end of a century-long struggle, the *benandanti* submitted to the church’s judgment: They confessed to being not only diabolical witches but the very sort of witches whose rituals conformed to the patterns described in Inquisition reference books. The fate of the “good walkers” was not unique. Throughout Europe, and even in America, a narrow and intolerant religiosity was perhaps more effective than science in eradicating the older world of superstition.

**THE LIFE AND TIMES OF
COTTON MATHER**
by Kenneth Silverman
Harper, 1984
479 pp. \$29.95

As revered during his lifetime as he was reviled after it, the arch-Puritan Cotton Mather (1663–1728) emerges as a complex figure in this sympathetic biography. Descended from several generations of clerics (his father, Increase, was the famed pastor of Boston’s North Church), young Cotton had no doubts about his calling. He entered Harvard at the age of 11 and began preaching at 16, quickly gaining renown for his eloquence. Recognition as a prodigious writer and scholar was to follow. The Mather output eventually com-



prised some 388 titles, including a seven-volume history of New England and a scientific account of America's natural "curiosities." For the latter, he was admitted to England's Royal Society. Silverman, a New York University historian, does more than tally his subject's accomplishments: He shows how Mather's commitment to preserving "Christian Israel," God's Puritan "chosen people," contributed to his posthumous image as religious fanatic. Declining church membership during the 1680s spurred Mather's fear of Puritan vulnerability; but, as Silverman explains, Mather's paranoia also reflected his fellow New Englanders' "mentality of invasion." Menaced during the 1670s by the Dutch and French foes of England, their settlements repeatedly ravaged by fires and epidemics, unable to fend off the encroachments of "popish" English governors, Mather's generation of colonial Puritans had grown fearful, suspicious, and inflexible. Near the end of his life, however, Mather began to be seen by a younger generation as a half-crazed, self-promoting pedant. Forgetting the circumstances of Mather's time, later critics were even less kind to the man who wanted only to "Do Good."

**THE CONQUEST
OF AMERICA**

by Tzvetan Todorov
translated by Richard
Howard
Harper, 1984
274 pp. \$17.95

The discovery and conquest of the New World by the Europeans is usually seen as part of the inevitable "geopolitical" march of history. Todorov, a Bulgarian-born philosopher who now teaches in France, treats the Spanish triumph in America during the 16th century as an illuminating chapter in Western intellectual and moral history. Examining diaries and chronicles of explorers, conquistadors, and historian-priests, he shows how the Spanish slowly fashioned an ideology to justify their subjugation of the natives. From Christopher Columbus onward, Todorov explains, the Spaniards were reluctant to view Indians as human, even as they marveled at the "natural" goodness of the Caribbean islanders or the civilization of the Aztecs. The