



**THE RETURN OF
MARTIN GUERRE**
by Natalie Zemon Davis
Harvard, 1983
162 pp. \$15

supplements his vivid chronicle of the battle and the maneuvers leading up to it with excerpts from regimental diaries and recently discovered letters from survivors of the engagement. Southern audacity and Northern ineptitude enabled the shoeless, underfed Confederates to punish a larger, better-equipped Federal force. McClellan, "Little Mac" to his troops, "Tardy George" to his critics, failed to exploit his two-to-one advantage in troop strength, even when presented with a captured copy of the Southern order of battle. "His deep concern for his men," writes Sears, "his fixation with avoiding casualties, revealed a sensitivity of nature admirable in most of life's pursuits but crippling when making war." Lee's battered army, still intact, slipped south across the Potomac. But the battle's political effects helped to seal the fate of the Confederacy. For the Union, avoiding total defeat was in itself a victory, and, thus encouraged, Lincoln's fractious cabinet members papered over their disputes. England and France, starved of cotton and sympathetic to the South, were waiting for another Northern defeat as the occasion to recognize the secessionist government. Lee's narrow escape from disaster at Antietam persuaded them to remain aloof.

In the 1983 film *The Return of Martin Guerre*, set in rural 16th-century France, Bertrande, a beautiful peasant woman, welcomes home her husband, Martin, after a mysterious eight-year absence. Four years later, Martin's uncle and other relatives accuse him of being an impostor. Near the end of the ensuing trial at the Criminal Chamber of Toulouse, a man claiming to be the real Martin enters dramatically. The court finds against the "husband" of four years, sentencing him to be hanged. Improbable as it may seem, the plot is based squarely on fact. Princeton historian Natalie Davis, the film's consultant, was nevertheless troubled by certain departures from the surviving record, and she resolved to "give this arresting tale its first full-scale historical treatment." Among the questions she hoped



to answer: How was the impostor able to dupe an entire village? Was Bertrande among those he fooled? Davis attempts to broaden her chronicle (evidence for which comes largely from two 1561 accounts of the trial) with excursions into such topics as Protestantism and marriage, rural life, the criminal courts, family roles, and "the significance of identity in the 16th century." But her treatment of such issues is too sketchy to bear comparison with such recent social histories as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error* (1975). For all its interest as a complement to the film, the book promises more than it delivers.

Contemporary Affairs

THE ECONOMICS AND POLITICS OF RACE:

An International Perspective

by Thomas Sowell
Morrow, 1983
324 pp. \$15.95

The provocative gospel according to Thomas Sowell now enjoys a certain notoriety. Elaborated in *Ethnic America* (1982) and other books, it proclaims that disparities in economic performance among America's ethnic groups result less from discrimination than from the cultural values of those groups. For example, discipline, frugality, and persistence are culturally-fostered traits that have enabled the Chinese to prosper in America (and elsewhere) despite often severe discrimination. Projecting his argument upon the international scene, Sowell, a Hoover Institution Fellow, finds that "culture" also explains disparities between the wealthier and poorer nations. While Sowell is particularly dubious that race is a handicap, he is also suspicious of the traditional explanation that environment is the key to some nations' economic difficulties. India's poverty cannot be attributed to overcrowding or lack of resources, he argues, since far more prosperous Hong Kong is at a significant disadvantage in both respects. Human capital, the gamut of organizational skills of a national population, is decisive. (And colonialism, he avers, has often enhanced this resource, the sometimes brutal behavior of colonialists notwithstanding-