

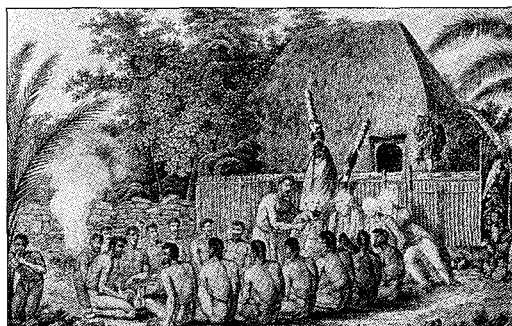
History

HOW "NATIVES" THINK: About Captain Cook, For Example. By Marshall Sahlins. Univ. of Chicago. 318 pp. \$24.95

Captain James Cook, the famed 18th-century British navigator, came ashore on the island of Hawaii in January 1779 and died there the following month at age 51. That much is indisputable. What happened between his arrival and his death, however, has become the subject of intense debate between two noted contemporary anthropologists, Marshall Sahlins of the University of Chicago and Gananath Obeyesekere of Princeton University. Their fight is not just about what occurred more than 200 years ago in Hawaii. It goes to the heart of a continuing debate about the ability of anthropologists working in the Western tradition to understand other cultures. Sahlins argues for the plausibility of modern anthropological inquiry in the face of a creeping political correctness that threatens to silence the very "natives" it ostensibly seeks to defend. He insists that there is a way to look at other cultures objectively that need not become the kind of "imperialistic" anthropology he has been accused of practicing.

Obeyesekere fired the first shot in *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (1992). He argued against the long-accepted view advanced by Sahlins and others that the Hawaiians believed Cook to be an incarnation of the god Lono. (The captain's appearance coincided with an important annual religious festival.) The idea that the Hawaiians took Cook for a god was, in Obeyesekere's view, a contrivance of imperialist ideology, a myth "fundamentally based on the Western idea of the redoubtable European who is a god to savage peoples." He offered a different interpretation: Cook was not received as Lono but was installed honorifically as a taboo chief and deified only after his untimely death at native hands.

How Natives Think is Sahlins's response, a compelling and thorough, if occasionally plodding, indictment of Obeyesekere's scholarship (shoddy) and political agenda (misguided). *Apotheosis*, Sahlins claims, is "a veritable manual of sophisticated and historiographical fallacies," and



Obeyesekere's theory, for all the critical acclaim it has received, is "undermined by reason, historical evidence, and the ethnography of Western culture." If these seem like strong charges, they are aimed at a formidable ideology. Obeyesekere wants to defend the Hawaiians against the ethnocentric forces of the West, but he does so, Sahlins maintains, by practicing a "symmetrical and inverse ethnocentrism": Hawaiians are accordingly "endowed with the highest form of Western mentality, while Western scholars slavishly repeat the irrational beliefs of their ancestors."

Sahlins is a careful prosecutor, and his sometimes trying detours into such matters as the Hawaiian lunar calendar are important to the argument. He wittily dismantles Obeyesekere's case, accusing him of taking a "scholarlier-than-thou-attitude" and of creating a "pidgin anthropology." There is a sporting thrill to this unusual (because public) bloodletting in the academy, but the fight is likely to continue well beyond Sahlins's round-two punch.

MONSIEUR D'EON IS A WOMAN: A Tale of Political Intrigue and Sexual Masquerade. By Gary Kates. Basic Books. 363 pp. \$25

Spies tend to have more complicated inner lives than the rest of us. What sort of person chooses to live an uprooted existence, change identities at great risk, and deceive friends, family, and lovers on a routine basis? As Kates demonstrates in his absorbing study of the 18th-century Chevalier d'Eon, spies in the past were every bit as complex as their modern counterparts.

Charles d'Eon de Beaumont was born in 1728

to a family of lesser Burgundian nobility. By his mid-thirties, this workaholic bachelor was a captain of the elite corps of Dragoons and had received from Louis XV the coveted Cross of Saint-Louis for distinguished diplomatic service in Russia and England. But while pursuing the French crown's official policies abroad, d'Eon also worked as a spy furthering a clandestine agenda to put a Frenchman on the Polish throne and to undermine English domestic politics. When financial tensions escalated between the chevalier and his "handlers" in the 1760s, this model civil servant's career began to come apart. D'Eon threatened to blackmail the French government, and to show he was serious, he published a collection of highly confidential documents. Ordered to return to France, he refused.

But none of this accounts for d'Eon's lasting notoriety. In 1770 a rumor circulated in London that d'Eon was actually a woman; soon the wild speculation led to heavy betting. In 1772 d'Eon and a French official confirmed the startling "truth" that the chevalier was really a chevalière. Mademoiselle d'Eon lived for another four decades in England and France, only to stun the world once more upon her death in 1810: examination of the corpse indisputably proved that she was a man after all.

D'Eon was one of the most talked-about characters in 18th-century Europe, and his story has been told before. But at a time when gender-bending tales such as *M. Butterfly* and *The Crying Game* have enjoyed great success, this reopening of the d'Eon dossier was inevitable. Kates, a history professor at Trinity University in Texas, tackles the central question head-on: why would an 18th-century man choose to jeopardize his status by passing for half his life as a member of the "lesser" sex?

Kates's answer is likely to be controversial: d'Eon, he insists, was neither a transvestite nor a transsexual. None of his abundant autobiographical writings suggest that d'Eon made a fetish of women's clothes or was ill at ease with his male body. Kates uses these works and d'Eon's library (he owned at least 60 books relating to the nature and status of women) to argue that d'Eon's decision to live as a woman was an intellectual one, an early form of feminism later bolstered by his revived religious faith.

Women, d'Eon believed, were spiritually superior to men.

Kates will not convince every reader that Chevalier d'Eon was the man of (feminist) principle he depicts. Intent on removing d'Eon's story from the realm of pathology, Kates makes his transformation seem implausibly rational. But this does not detract from his lively, novelistic account of an extraordinary life—or from a wonderful tour of the politics and culture of 18th-century Europe.

THE END OF REFORM: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War. By *Alan Brinkley*. Knopf. 371 pp. \$27.50

Between its beginnings in the early 1930s and the end of World War II, New Deal liberalism underwent a fundamental change. Its principal architects, including Franklin D. Roosevelt himself, gradually backed away from trying to deal with difficult issues of wealth, class, and economic power, with consequences for American liberalism that persist to the present day.

Brinkley, a historian at Columbia University, tells how powerful external forces—the recession of 1937–38, the growth of organized labor, World War II—deflected the New Dealers from their original plans to restructure American society and its troubled economy. By the end of World War II, he writes, "New Dealers so transformed their vision of political economy that it no longer bore any direct relation to the progressive traditions that had originally informed their efforts."

Although few New Dealers were ever actually hostile to capitalism, they all believed that something was wrong with it and that government should find a way to set it right. But the consensus of the early Depression yielded, says Brinkley, to "a set of liberal ideas essentially reconciled to the existing structure of the economy and committed to using the state to compensate for capitalism's inevitable flaws." New Dealers replaced their zeal for a fundamental overhaul of the economy with a much less forceful "regulatory impulse." The Justice Department's Antitrust Division under Thurman Arnold did not attempt to eradicate busi-