

listening to the actors.) Fanny Ardant, the countess, has been problematic for me, with greater self-confidence than self. But maturity is bringing her more color, more understanding. These qualities help her performance of a woman who, under the blandishments, is venal.

As for Depardieu, I'll cite only his last scene. He has given up the fight for his money, he has given up the money world. (Pritchett again: the colonel has decided "to return to beggary because of his contempt for the vulgar meanness of his wife.") He sits on a bench in a hospice, leans on his walking stick and remembers Eylau—which we have seen earlier and now revisit. His eyes speak for him. Balzac's story is about transition. He has no illusions about the passing chivalric age, which Eylau symbolizes: he knows its vanities and horrible cruelties. But it's the mercantile world that is swirling up around him, and it's the stench of that world that sickens him. Depardieu's Chabert comprehends all this.

Depardieu says that he wants to play the role of Balzac himself eventually.

Speed the day. Perhaps that film can be directed by Yves Angelo, who directed here. Angelo, b. 1956, first took a degree in music, then studied film and worked for a long time as an assistant cameraman. He became a cinematographer and shot *Tous les Matins du Monde*, *Un Coeur en Hiver* and *Germinal*, among others. *Colonel Chabert* is his directing debut, and he was ready.

He understands movement and space—how to exploit small and large spaces—a crowded law office, a salon, a vast wintry battlefield after the battle. Angelo's cinematographer, Bernard Lutic, had the advantage of working for a man who knows precisely what he wants and knows how the camera can get it.

Angelo's musical background also enhances *Colonel Chabert*, reticently. Only chamber music is used. The Eylau scenes, with snow and dead men and dead horses, are silent except for a Beethoven trio, musing but not melting. Later, Mozart and Scarlatti and, with apt anachronism, Schubert and Schumann, add facets to this small gem of a film. •

men's groups mostly by raw segregation), and the white male social insurance reformer network. I should note, too, that the book is not easy reading: the organizing principles within and across chapters are not clear and the narrative line is rarely sustained, so that it takes a lot of work to discern the overall story. Still, Gordon's reformer-centered perspective is an important original contribution and one that offers provocative insights into the current welfare reform debate.

Gordon argues that contemporary welfare programs for single mothers were shaped by the ideas and the decisions that went into state aid programs created between 1910 and 1920, programs that were variously called mothers' pensions, widows' pensions and mothers' aid. Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), the program for single mothers included in the Social Security Act of 1935 that grew into today's AFDC, merely added federal funds to the mothers' aid model. Unless we understand the fundamental problem in the mothers' aid model, we are condemned, as historians are fond of saying, to repeat our mistakes.

So what was the problem? Those professionals were at best ambivalent on the question of whether women, married or unmarried, should be full-time mothers or people with children who also work in the paid labor force and participate in public life outside the home. What they wrote into state legislation, and enacted in the administration of state programs, was "the dominant family norm, the family-wage system ... that prescribes earning as the sole responsibility of husbands and unpaid domestic labor as the only proper long-term occupation for women."

This vision of social structure undergirding public assistance programs was historically short-sighted, Gordon says, because it neglected the inconvenient fact that many women with children did and had to work in the paid labor force, and many more mothers would have to or would want to work for pay as the twentieth century wore on. The family wage model was held up as the ideal, even as reformers planned some kind of assistance to women who were not hitched to a male breadwinner. Thus, the reformers and the program designers didn't trouble themselves with reconciling childrearing and the rest of life—most especially, earning a living and being involved in community affairs.

Quite the contrary. Mothers' aid put mothers in a double bind. On the one hand, they were supposed to uphold standards of "good motherhood." As defined by the mostly prosperous, highly educated, white women reformers, good

Of Alms and the Woman

BY DEBORAH A. STONE

Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare by Linda Gordon

(Free Press, 433 pp., \$22.95)

When a friend of mine married in his mid-30s, a friend of his—we'll call the friend Michael—offered some unsolicited man-to-man advice. "If you are going to have children—and I think you should—there are three things you should do. First, have plenty of money. Second, don't have more than one. And third, hire a full-time nanny." Having a kid is a great experience, Michael assured him, but these rules must be heeded if you want to preserve your marriage and have a life.

Sure thing, I thought when my friend passed this advice along to me. If we could all live by Michael's rules, there might never have been a post-suffrage women's movement, unless it were a nannies' movement. In a world according to Michael, there would be no need for AFDC, either. Michael was willing to say what none of my female career-oriented friends dares think. We all joke about

needing a wife, but none of us is ready to redraw our image of the family quite as drastically as Michael. You may have only one child? You must hire someone else to take care of it for you? If you are not rich, you should not have children?

It is not too far off the mark to say that Linda Gordon's book is a history of well-off professional people's advice for having kids and a life, too. The difference is that Michael was merely advising a friend, while Gordon's subjects—social welfare reformers, advocates and politicians—were trying to codify their advice into the rules of public programs.

Gordon's book is more of a study of ideas than a programmatic history of single women and welfare. Despite its subtitle, it is not about single mothers and welfare. Its subject is, rather, how reformers thought about poor single mothers. Three of its chapters are about the views of the white women's social welfare network, the black women's social welfare network (excluded from the white wo-

mothers should be home with their children, feed them white-middle class diets, maintain white-middle class standards of housekeeping and household space (such as separate sleeping quarters for children and adults), attend church, and good single mothers should remain celibate. On the other hand, these programs often expressly calculated the grants to be less than the family's needs, so that the mother would have to make up the difference with work for pay. But only certain kinds of work were considered appropriate for mothers—usually laundry, sewing, domestic service and other jobs that were extensions of women's household work. Program rules often forbade full-time, factory employment. Mothers were supposed to be home with their children, and so the programs encouraged work at home, in which women could take in other people's domestic chores and perhaps put their kids to work, too. Needless to say, these rules for proper employment kept single mothers far away from higher-paying jobs, and from situations in which they might have unionized or collectively pushed for better wages and working conditions.

The eligibility of single mothers for public assistance was predicated on their having once married and on the failure of the family wage system through no fault of their own. Between about 1900 and 1940, Gordon tells us, the vast majority—about 77 percent—of the group that we would now call single mothers were widows. The next largest group—16 percent—was made up of women whose husbands were absent. Today we would probably call them separated; in those days they were called “deserted.” Only between 4 and 6 percent of the women heading households with children were women who had never married.

A woman's link to a man was thus crucial to her status as a legitimate recipient of aid in the first place. The breakdown of marriage, through death or abandonment, was the only thing that could make a single mother deserving, and even in that circumstance many reformers had doubts about who was to blame for desertion. Some restricted their programs to widows. Others argued for calling the programs widows' pensions rather than mothers' pensions, to emphasize the purity and the faultlessness of the recipients. Thus, though no woman could achieve economic self-sufficiency on the kinds of jobs mothers' aid programs permitted, pursuing that other route to economic security—linking up with a man—was also forbidden, as inconsistent with virtuous womanhood. If virtue was demonstrated by a woman's having once

entered into marriage and the accompanying family wage-system, then recipients of mothers' aid would be violating the norm of marriage by taking up with another man. Mothers' aid programs, like ADC and AFDC in their wake, supervised mothers' sexual and social behavior, making remarriage, socializing or economic cooperation with a man extremely difficult, and driving much of this aspect of mothers' lives underground.

When the great move to social insurance came along in the 1930s, single mothers, and most women wage-earners, were not included. White male (and some female) wage-earners got a universal entitlement program. Eligibility rested on contributions to the insurance scheme, which in turn rested on length of time in so-called covered employment, jobs for which the employer was required to make payroll deductions and pay contributions to the scheme. Single mothers got a degrading program, one with much lower benefits and much greater supervision over their lives. Aid to Dependent Children rested on a means test and a morals test, instead of a work-and-contributions test.

Mothers had to prove that they were financially needy, while recipients of other forms of social insurance (primarily old-age pensions, but also disability pensions and unemployment insurance) did not. To qualify as needy, mothers couldn't have much at all in the way of savings or assets. Mothers also had to prove that they were morally fit by letting caseworkers review how they were raising their kids, spending their money and spending their time. As in the earlier mothers' aid programs, ADC put mothers in a double bind. Their welfare grants were not enough to live on, but if they worked to supplement their grants, they were required to report the income so that the amount of their earnings could be deducted from their grants.

Much contemporary feminist history of the welfare state assumes, in Gordon's words, that “women were slotted into inferior programs because of ‘patriarchy’ and men's monopoly on state power.” But the evidence speaks otherwise. True, the designers of welfare programs for poor single women fundamentally misunderstood the nature of the problem; in fact, they built programs that were actually harmful to women. But here's the bombshell: the misguided program designers were not men, they were women, and primarily a group of white women activists who would be considered feminists by most of today's definitions. Their primary goal was to improve the status and the power of women.

Mothers' pensions, and then ADC, were

the products of an unusually powerful coalition of women and children's advocates. The coalition included men, but it was dominated by a coterie of highly educated, articulate, politically active and financially independent women. The vision of women's welfare promoted by this group rested on a set of beliefs that Gordon calls maternalism. Most important was the belief that “domestic and family responsibilities [are] essential to the vast majority of women and to the social order.” How, Gordon wonders at the outset of her book, can we explain this paradox? How can we explain that feminist reformers promoted a social policy so inimical to women's interests?

Gordon has a complex answer to these questions. The group of women who were most influential in designing ADC genuinely believed that the mothers' aid model would be better for poor women than social insurance. They actively opposed the plan of insuring workers through their employers, even though they supported the principle of universal benefits, in part because they knew it wouldn't help most poor women. The vast majority of women, who did not work outside the home, would not be covered in such a plan, and most of those who did work for pay had such low wages that they would probably be unable to afford the cost of premiums.

Instead of social insurance, the maternalist reformers wanted a program, like mothers' pensions, that recognized and rewarded the contributions of unskilled and semi-skilled women inside the home, and a program that, frankly, encouraged women to stay at home and not to enter the workforce. “Since the majority view among women reformers at this time was that mothers *ought* to stay home, they naturally opposed a welfare system that made staying home economically disadvantageous.” And since a domestic role was at the core of white reformers' vision, they eschewed political alliances with trade unions and with the more labor-oriented women's organizations. Such alliances might have produced policies far more beneficial to the reality of poor women's economic lives.

If white women reformers rejected the social insurance model for principled and pragmatic reasons, they implicitly rejected another model—the black women reformers' model—out of ignorance, and perhaps out of prejudice. Although the black women reformers shared the image of breadwinner husbands and domestic wives as the family ideal, they were much more realistic than their white counterparts in their acceptance of women's employment as a

"long-term and widespread" necessity, and many of their reform efforts centered on meeting employed mothers' needs. They emphasized education and training for women. They advocated and established daycare centers and kindergartens. They organized around women's employment issues, notably better wages and working conditions for domestics. They pushed the benevolent society model of sickness and life insurance, a model that was more inclusive of women and children because it didn't tie insurance eligibility to wage-earning. Each of these strategies, Gordon suggests, might have been a more effective way to assure the welfare of women and children, because each was based on a good understanding of the place of paid work in women's lives.

Gordon explains the paradox of how white women reformers betrayed their poorer sisters in part by suggesting that they acted on a correct assessment of the dominant alternative (social insurance), and in part by saying they were just ignorant of the alternatives offered by black reformers. For Gordon, it is merely "ironic" or "illogical" that these reformers ignored or denied the centrality of paid work in many women's lives. Yet much of the book offers a harsher criticism of the white welfare reformers as a group of women who imposed their social class and race values on women below them in the social hierarchy, and who used public welfare programs to enhance their own political and professional status, often at the expense of the women whose interests they were allegedly promoting. In the end, Gordon doesn't seem quite sure where she stands.

Her strongest claim in the harsher vein is that "welfare reformers' feminism was characterized by a class double standard." The women in the white welfare network were much less likely to be married and/or to have children than women as a whole. Only 34 percent had ever been married, and most of those were divorced, separated or widowed. Only 28 percent had children. They lived, and deliberately chose, lives that were very different from the lives they advocated for poor women. (One of Gordon's most important themes is that white women reformers differed significantly from other women with respect to marriage and fertility, but she doesn't give exactly comparable figures for the three different groups of reformers, nor does she give rates of marriage and fertility for women as a whole, or women in the same age group as her reformers. And though her argument rests on an approach she calls "collective biography," she describes it cursorily in a footnote,

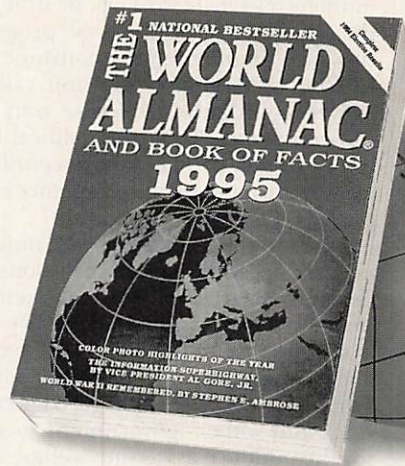
without divulging how she selected and bounded her "samples." Readers have to take her analyses pretty much on faith.)

At least a quarter of the white women reformers were in relationships with other women that "might have been called 'Boston marriages' a few decades before," Gordon writes. They all worked outside the home, many in salaried positions, the rest as volunteers. They were actively engaged in public affairs, and little engaged, it seems, in raising children. They talked quite explicitly about their "rejection of marriage in favor of the community." And some of them, some of the time, seemed to discriminate against mothers for the same reasons

male-dominated businesses always have and still do: "they won't be free to travel," as Grace Abbot, one-time head of the Children's Bureau, said about a mother of young children who had been recommended to her for a job. When the day was over, they thought that *other* women belonged in the home; and they built a social welfare program for poor women that made sure careers in business and public life would not be open to them.

These largely Anglo-Saxon and northern European women were troubled by the social mores of newer immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, and in large measure they conceived of welfare programs as schools for moral and

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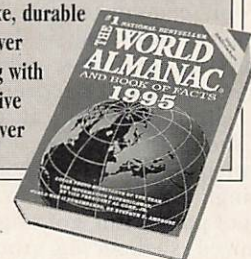
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spiritual education of newcomers, as well as training in the proper American standards of housekeeping and childrearing. Some of the most interesting material in Gordon's book concerns the way this civilizing mission was translated into the profession of social casework, and how that profession in turn was the major vehicle for transporting white upper-class and middle-class women from the genteel domain of the domestic parlor to the public sphere of professional employment and public office.

Though the reformers sincerely believed that poor women needed their services, Gordon also sees strong elements of professional and class self-interest at work. All but the oldest women in the network had "personally experienced the transformation of social work from a volunteer to professional activity, beginning their careers as volunteers for charity or reform groups, ending as salaried workers for the same or similar groups..." "Moreover," she notes several pages later, "those who identified as social workers were continually anxious about their status as professionals." Their careers were directly tied to their charity and their activism.

A good deal of the white women reformers' rejection of social insurance, it seems, was motivated by their realization that a rights-based entitlement program had no place for social workers on its payroll. A system of contributory insurance didn't need professionally trained caseworkers to investigate eligibility of claimants, assess a variety of needs and provide education and services to help people. It needed data clerks and check writers.

Poor women got a means-tested and morals-tested welfare program, Gordon says, because the social insurance advocates wouldn't tolerate such features in a program that they conceived as entitlement-based, generous and respectful of individual autonomy. The women's reform advocates insisted on a program whose core was moral supervision of its clients. The purpose of old-age pensions, wrote one of these women, should be "not merely the comfort... of the individual... but the influence on the moral fibre of the community."

Gordon seems uncomfortable with the parts of her own analysis that fault the white women reformers, and so she does some fancy footwork to redeem them. ADC was a significant historical accomplishment, she insists, because it established the principle of public responsibility for poor single women, sought to remove the stigma of pauperism, got single mothers recognized as a deserving group, and ultimately enhanced the power of all women

because "it helped create the possibility of women's independence." Still, most of the book testifies to failures on each of these counts, or at best ambiguous results. Since Gordon's research is about reformers' ideas and activities, not about the operation and the accomplishments of welfare programs, her conclusions about the impact of the programs are largely in the realm of unsupported assertions anyway, but this eleventh-hour attempt to resurrect the heroism of the white reformers detracts mightily from the coherence of the book.

Gordon thinks that the history of welfare programs for women offers "particularly sharp" lessons for contemporary policy debates about welfare, and here she relies mostly on her harsh version of history. Like many recent writers on the left, Gordon thinks that would-be welfare reformers must attend not only to the fiscal and social consequences of welfare programs, but also to their political consequences. The biggest mistake of the white women reformers in the 1930s was to create entirely different programs for poor mothers and male workers: by stratifying the constituencies of social programs, they also fragmented the constituencies for the welfare state. Gordon calls for universal programs, because only they will command the broad political backing necessary to maintain decent financial support and social acceptance of single mothers.

Beyond the advantages of universal entitlements, the concrete lessons that Gordon draws from history are sketchy at best. Politicians should take every occasion to highlight and label all Social Security programs, mortgage deductions, schools, parks, municipal garbage collection and other government benefits for the middle class as the "welfare benefits" that they are, so as to empty the term "welfare" of the stigma it now carries. And most important, welfare reformers should repudiate maternalism once and for all. Welfare for single mothers must support women in both work and childrearing, with a combination of decent wages, additional income supports, more family-friendly workplaces and policies that encourage men to do more of the domestic labor.

Between the lines, in that harsher assessment of earlier reformers that Gordon wants to downplay, one senses still another lesson: we should be wary of welfare reforms that are more likely to create good jobs for middle-class professionals than good jobs for poor women. As Gordon notes early in her book, "the vision of mothers' aid that predominated in the United States ultimately created a

more extensive charitable sector rather than a welfare state." One has to wonder whether the put-'em-to-work vision of welfare reform that has predominated since the mid-1970s is doing the same thing, this time creating a more extensive not-for-profit and for-profit service sector comprised of job training firms and programs, job counselors, consultants and program evaluators. This is a lesson that conservative critics of big government and big bureaucracy will be only too happy to draw.

In drawing lessons, Gordon doesn't mention the most striking similarity between the climate of welfare reform in the early part of the century and now, namely, the anxiety of a white and nativist "us" about a non-white and immigrant "them." In both periods, that nativist anxiety has been not only about table manners, clothing and diets, but about racial and ethnic mixing, "pollution" of the white race, and eventual numerical predominance of new immigrants in politics, in part because of higher birth rates among non-whites than among whites. Today's welfare discussion is intensified by the perception that a substantial portion of mothers lack the beneficial influences not only of white middle-class neighbors and norms, but also of men of any description.

If we heed Gordon's strong version of history, we should see that this is precisely the anxiety that leads to a welfare policy designed more to provide moral uplift than economic security, more to discourage high rates of fertility among the poor than to provide high standards of living for poor children. Thus, we have proposals to educate teens in sexual abstinence, to discourage out-of-wedlock births by eliminating additional payments for illegitimate children conceived while their mother is on AFDC, and to put such children under more beneficial influences by placing them in adoptive families, supervised group homes or orphanages. The big difference is that now it is conservatives pushing this agenda of moral uplift and population control, rather than liberal social reform advocates (though the Democrats are themselves doing some fancy footwork to preserve their liberal principles and still capture some of the popular support for the conservative program). And it is no coincidence that some versions of the conservative welfare reform agenda would finance these initiatives largely by removing all funding from social service programs for *legal* immigrants.

Another lesson that one might draw from Gordon's history is that when moral uplift and improving the nation's population "stock" replace fighting pov-

erty as the goal of welfare policy, programs based on moral supervision are the likely result. For all the Republican wailing against the wasteful bureaucracy of the Democratic welfare state, the Republican welfare reform proposals would create bureaucracies of their own. Having eliminated abortion as a possibility for poor women, conservatives are left with advocating highly labor-intensive programs to discourage pregnancy. Imagine the amount of abstinence education it might take to affect fertility rates in the absence of birth control and abortion. You could have a pretty big jobs program for moral supervisors. In fact, the conservative welfare reform platform pretends that a little bit of cheap jaw-boning ("just say no") will do the trick, so as not to have to fund (and to advocate) much sex education. Then, as if to acknowledge that "just say no" won't work, conservatives put the real resources into providing supervision for the unintended or intended kids that poor, young, unmarried women do have.

Just as the social reformers of the early part of the century were unwilling to face the inadequacy of the family wage model for the social structure of their time, contemporary welfare reformers are by and large unwilling to face up to the inade-

quacy of the American economy. A substantial portion of jobs simply don't pay enough on which to live, much less on which to support children. The corporate safety net, in which private employers provided long-term job stability, pension and medical benefits, and coverage of dependent family members, is quickly eroding. The painful truth is that the welfare state is itself now the most important source of new jobs in the American economy, whether through direct public employment in local, state and federal governments, or indirect employment in private and non-profit contractors to the welfare state. The welfare state is no longer just a small remedial add-on to a productive economy that employs and feeds most of the population. Linda Gordon's welfare reformers made room for themselves politically and economically by building welfare programs that employed them. The dilemma facing welfare reformers now is how to make room for a new set of politically and economically disenfranchised people when we can no longer count on a robust private economy to support its own workers and to foot the bill for the welfare state.

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The unexpected voyages of Patrick O'Brian.

Napoleonic Complex

By JAMES HAMILTON-PATERSON

Here we have that not unfamiliar figure: the first-rate writer who has worked consistently and prolifically for almost the past half-century, whose books have been greatly praised by famous people while remaining unknown to a wide audience, but whose time—at last—has come. No one whose time has not come is treated to his own bibliography fleshed out with admiring essays. And when the essayists are people as varied and distinguished as a British ex-minister for science, a Fellow of the National Maritime Museum, a professor of psychiatry at UCLA, an ex-professor of English literature at Oxford and Charlton Heston, you know you're dealing with someone special.

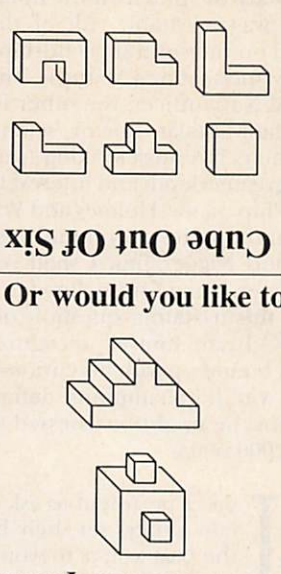
But what kind of writer merits this ambiguous kind of attention? Among the answers would be: a private and retiring

soul who lives on the borders of Catalonia and has little truck with literary society; someone whose erudition is so deep and wide that he can be written off as "just a scholar"; a writer whose great achievement is a seventeen-volume masterpiece of fiction who can yet be dismissed as "just a historical novelist." Concerning the latter category, Patrick O'Brian himself has this to say:

The historical novel, as I learnt with some concern after I had written two or three, belongs to a despised genre. But the tale or narrative set in the past may have its particular, time-free value; and the candid reader will not misunderstand me, will not suppose that I intend any preposterous comparison, when I observe that Homer was farther removed in time from Troy than I am from the Napoleonic wars; yet he spoke to the Greeks for two thousand years and more.

This large but proper claim, modestly

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made, concerns what he calls his "naval tales." These are the seventeen novels set between, roughly, 1802 and 1812: from the Treaty of Amiens until Bonaparte's defeat was inevitable. All of them are hinged on the central friendship of Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin. The one is a Royal Navy officer, the other is a half-Irish, half-Catalan doctor, scientist and spy. Theirs is a most striking friendship, of far greater depth and interest than the friendship of, say, Holmes and Watson or (as Charlton Heston reminds us) Huck Finn and Nigger Jim. I shall return to them later, being first inclined to wonder about this irritating question of genre, since O'Brian himself recognizes it as closely bound up with his curious literary status, with his champions' defiance and with how he might be assessed over the next 2,000 years.

It is as pertinent to ask why certain writers set their books in the past as it is to wonder why others choose the future. Superficially, the historical novel has much in common with science fiction. Both genres undeniably attract indifferent writers who tend to concentrate on special effects and temporally local color. The setting, whether far in a no-future or in a bodice-ripping no-past, can function for lazy or inept writers as a way of dispensing with the difficult business of plausibility: the tedious diurnal realism, authenticities of character, internal consistency and other components of likelihood itself. The hardest thing of all is to convey difference of thought, which is why most historical and science fiction novels are stocked with contemporary dummies in fancy dress.

Despite exceptions that prove the rule—*War and Peace*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Jack Vance's anthropologically observed worlds of the Oikumene and the Rigel Concourse—serious literary opinion is that these are lightweight genres. (Indeed, the category of genre implies that only literary fiction is not one.) For reasons of cultural fashion and the economics of book-buying, genres have proliferated to the point where fiction's endless subdivision has come to seem like a publisher's and bookseller's gimmick, dealing in shorthands that might be hoped to appeal to an unconfident but politicized reading public conscious of its alliances and special interests. ("In the classic tradition of *Watership Down* . . .") But what is Gay Fiction? Women's Fiction? Historical Fiction? Are they more than publishers' fictions? Literary Fiction is itself subdivided (the Campus Novel, the Road Novel, even the Great American Novel), and it certainly has no monopoly on imagination or seriousness. In the end, readers—and reviewers—can

do little but take their stand with Oscar Wilde: "Books are well written or badly written. That is all."

But it isn't quite all. Connoisseurs of well-written books have certain sophisticated expectations about things such as plot and character, inherited from a long tradition of what might constitute a complete and satisfying aesthetic experience. Plenty of novels are perfectly well written but remain in some essential degree null. Nor is this merely a matter of the reader's not being sufficiently engaged. Many thrillers are more or less gripping for as long as they last, but they lack all ability to echo in the mind after the final page has been turned. They blur into each other as indistinguishable inhabitants of the genre. And what of the "special interest" novel that caters, or panders, to a particular readership whose critical faculties are thought to be disarmed simply because

The Rendezvous and Other Stories

by Patrick O'Brian

(W.W. Norton, 250 pp., \$22)

The Commodore

by Patrick O'Brian

(HarperCollins, 281 pp., £14.99)

Patrick O'Brian:

Critical Essays and a Bibliography

edited by A.E. Cunningham
(W.W. Norton, 175 pp., \$23.95)

the story is all about homosexuals or horses or set in a hospital? What are we to say about John Le Carré, who writes about spies, but whose collected works could be viewed as an extended meditation on the entirely literary topic of loyalty and betrayal?

Patrick O'Brian's *chef d'oeuvre* obliges us to consider such things. It falls into the genre of historical fiction, the navy-at-war subdivision: precisely the milieu that C.S. Forester's Hornblower novels so successfully made their own. Great claims are now being made on O'Brian's behalf for literary qualities that nobody ever tried seriously to attribute to Forester. O'Brian's saga is said to be more gripping because it is more sophisticated, more historically accurate in the broadly cultural sense, more worthy of being thought to escape the "adventure" classification and to spill safely over into the great central category of serious literature.

To return to the author's central dyad, Captain Jack Aubrey and Dr. Stephen Maturin: in all fairness I must admit to having read only two of the books in the series—the third, *HMS Surprise* which appeared in 1973, and the latest (*The Commodore*), but can confirm that Aubrey and Maturin are both vastly more interesting

fellows than poor old Hornblower. On the evidence of O'Brian's own (and only) biographical sketch in *Critical Essays*—a masterpiece of distance and restraint—their creator grew up in Ireland and England, periodically sickly and urged by doctors to take fresh air when he could. He took up crewing and sailing; the sea was his "compensation," as he calls it.

Captain Jack Aubrey is a sailor before he is a man of action. Time and again we feel his love of the sea, and especially his love of his ships, as being enabling and restorative. It is the details that are unmistakable: not so much those of rigging, which any fool might learn, but the ravishment of being afloat, of sitting in the crosstrees 100 feet above deck describing huge trajectories through the air with the ship's rolls and plunges. Aubrey is constantly aware of the feel of his ship underfoot, her handling dependent on dozens of variables: the rake of her masts, the disposition of shot and stores below, the amount of weed on the hull after three months in tropical waters. He pays the raptest attention to her sounds and her smells. In this context, Jack Aubrey is a man in love. Only secondarily is he an eighteenth-century man of action, bluff, gallant, humane.

His friend Stephen Maturin is no sailor, and even after years of voyaging still falls over things and refers to the "floor." His love of the sea comes from a different angle than that of a mariner. He is a naturalist and a scientist of the post-Linnaean era, intent on collecting and classifying rocks, creatures and plants whenever he can get ashore. Aboard, he acts as ship's surgeon. He is a speculative man, a scholar with a flair for languages. (His Irish and Catalan background is perhaps not unlike his author's, and we remember that O'Brian has also worked for years as a translator, converting Simone de Beauvoir into English, as well as Henri Charrière's *Papillon*.)

Maturin is far more secretive than his friend Aubrey, who is capable of subterfuge as part of the tactics of battle but who is not essentially a devious man. Maturin, a Catholic, has a real cross-cultural complexity and diverse loyalties. His family connections in Spain and the southern Mediterranean, as well as his languages, are exploited by the British government, whose network of agents supplies the intelligence necessary for Nelson's navy to keep a step ahead of Bonaparte. (In his sketch in the *Critical Essays*, O'Brian hints delicately at his own wartime activities in, presumably, the French Resistance.)

These two unusual friends play Corelli and Boccherini duets together for relaxation in the captain's cabin. Yet theirs is