

suffering, even a ritual humiliation or ordeal that is a necessary introduction to the reality of nature, so that an approach may be made through the human to the supernatural.

Yes, the inspector has a lot to learn. A toy poodle named Darlene is not, after all, protection in the wilderness, and water would have been useful, even welcome, in the desert. But what the inspector learns transcends physical survival, and as he experiences a transformation from death to life, the reader, compelled to follow, is rewarded for the journey. Following the protagonist, the reader is conducted through a series of reversals that constitute a triumph of formal mastery and symbolic extension as the customs inspector is last seen as a smuggler himself, as is necessary.

So I think the point here is not so much Louis L'Amour as it is *The Waste Land* and the larger resonances of medieval romance and mythology. A fortune-teller and the desert do strike some Eliotic overtones as this narrative reaches out of its mode of crisis and adventure to mount a spiritual vision and frame a moral fable. The sense at the end is that such a vision has been earned in the only possible way, and it has been powerfully imparted. So I have come away from Chilton Williamson's book with a sense of the Western mode not only as medieval and Mexican, but also as Wagnerian or even Spenglerian. The *Dimming of the Gods* and the *Undergoing of the Evening Lands* is written into the face of nature and implies not an end but an unfolding that we see geologically and astronomically as well, if only we can see what we behold—or inspect.

Having the impudence to believe that writers want what readers want, and that what readers want is to have their lapels grabbed by the genteel mugging of narrative command, then I have to say that the three readers of *Mexico Way* whom I know have all testified to gratifyingly mussed lapels. Those three readers were not, as it happens, Joseph Conrad, Stephen Crane, and Ernest Hemingway, but they might as well have been. And

such a consideration leads me to certain predictions. One is that *Mexico Way* is going to continue to give readers what they can't get in any other way. Such readers talk, and the word will spread. Second prediction: As a model of composition, of subtle simplicity, and of the control of diction and point of view, *Mexico Way* will be the object of study in creative-writing classes. And third: As the basis of a screenplay, *Mexico Way* is going to be a remarkable film, though noticing its cinematic possibilities is in no sense any neglect of its inherent achievement. As it is, this Western novel, Western in more than one sense, is the best fiction I have read in years.

Contributing editor James O. Tate is a professor of English literature at Dowling College on Long Island.

The Burden of History

by Thomas Fleming

The Hellenistic Age:
A Short History

by Peter Green
New York: Modern Library;
199 pp., \$21.95



Peter Green is one of the rarest birds in the academic chicken coop, a popular historian who combines careful scholarship and original opinions into a coherent account that respects its sources and yet attempts to go beyond them. In a long career he has achieved considerable renown for such varied books as a translation of Juvenal's *Satires*, historical novels, and several important studies of what he calls *The Greco-Persian Wars*. His *Alexander to Actium* (1993) bucked the current tide of historical research, which refuses to regard the postclassical Greek world as a decline from the "Golden Age" of the fifth and early fourth centuries. *The Hellenistic Age*, a

work aimed at common readers rather than at specialists, represents only a minor revision of the earlier work, though he was able to take advantage of a large body of scholarship that has been ground out in the 17 years that have intervened.

The Hellenistic Age is hard to grapple with. The term itself is modern: J.G. Droysen coined it (in the late 19th century) to identify a period that, as Green describes it, begins with "the shattering impact of Alexander's conquest of the Persian Achaemenid empire," continues through "the power struggle engendered among Alexander's marshals by his premature death, and then of the several dynasties founded by the victors (the so-called Diadochoi, or Successors) in that struggle, most notably Ptolemy in Egypt and Seleucus in Asia," and concludes with "Octavian's victory over Antony and Cleopatra at Actium in 31 BCE." (Note the anti-Christian method of dating now *de rigueur* in the free-thinking academy.)

Historians of the Archaic and Classical Ages have created the comfortable illusion that one can know Greece of the sixth and fifth centuries by studying the histories of Sparta and Athens or, more commonly, of Athens alone, though until the Persian Wars Athens was something of a jerkwater town in the sticks compared with either the great Ionian cities of Asia Minor and the islands or with wealthy Corinth. Unfortunately, no such simplification is possible in a Hellenistic Greece that covers the entire eastern Mediterranean and whose influence extends as far as Persia and India. It is not a simple story to tell, but Green has done as good a job as anyone can expect, short of a series of separate volumes on Macedonia, Asia, and Egypt. The common reader without much previous experience in the period will not find it difficult to follow the twists and turns of the narrative, though his recollection will be buttressed by a second reading.

Hellenistic Greece begins with Alexander the Great, but historians still debate the extent of Alexander's personal influence. Green throws a large bucket of cold water on schol-

ars who have represented Alexander as a conscious apostle of Hellenism out to avenge the subjugation of Ionia and two invasions of Greece or a visionary conqueror with a plan for a New World Order. Alexander was no Augustus or even Napoleon, but only a brilliant thug who would have never run out of places to loot if death had not mercifully intervened. The world that surfaced in the wake of his rampage was not even anticipated by a king who did not bother to arrange an orderly succession. Asked on his deathbed to whom his empire would pass, he could only reply (quite accurately), "to the strongest." Oddly for the Macedonians (and for Green), the most enduring legacy of Alexander's adventures was the spread of Hellenism throughout western Asia, a cultural transformation that facilitated the rapid diffusion of Christianity.

Though far from being an apologist for "the glory that was Greece" in the fifth century, Green pays attention to the judgments of Hellenistic writers, who almost to a man believed they were living in the shadow of greater men. As Arnold Toynbee, in one of his later books, was able to show, Greeks of every age have tended to look back to the greatness of earlier times, whether to the Homeric Age, the classical period, or the Byzantine Empire.

The classical period was violent, and the violence reached a crescendo during the Peloponnesian Wars, but even Greeks accustomed to interstate and intertribal violence must have viewed with horror the wars undertaken by the Successors for no nobler motives than loot, particularly the loot of the human capital sold in the great slave markets. The brutish aggression of Hellenistic rulers might well have encouraged many Greeks, as Green suggests, to accept Roman rule as the lesser of two evils, though all too many Roman commanders imitated the example of their Hellenistic predecessors by killing and enslaving vast numbers and looting the helpless cities of their art treasures. Green cannot avoid the comparison with Goering. Hardly an admirer of

the Roman order, Green justly pays tribute to Octavian, whose

victory brought an end not only to Greco-Macedonian independence, but also to the interne-cine struggles of the Roman civil wars. His imposition of the pax Augusta led grateful survivors to regard him, in true Hellenistic style, as a god. He curbed private extortions, regularized relations between cities and proconsular authorities, and built on the huge expansion of horizons, the internationalizing of trade and culture that Alexander, all unintentionally, had created.

The Hellenistic Age, in many respects, represents a fairly abrupt transition from the earlier system of independent *poleis* to a cosmopolitan world of great cities in which Greeks of every stripe rubbed shoulders with Egyptians, Syrians, and Jews, Italians, Celts, and Carthaginians. But one cannot ignore the countervailing reactionary tendency that retained local pieties and rejected democracy in favor of aristocratic stability. Green does justice to both tendencies.

All in all, Green's little book is a splendid accomplishment, though one occasionally marred by a fondness for antiquated slang and academic jargon that is a telltale sign of a writer who in his day was always "with it." Evidence too often comes in "tantalizing" bits; a royal wedding is "much-publicized" (did the Macedonians, I wonder, hire p.r. agents?); a report on Alexander is "stage-managed" by Demosthenes. His occasional indulgence in slang and clichés is at first only irritating, but some of them suggest a tendency toward reducing ancient culture to the comfortable dimensions of the world we live in. The Persian Empire's habit of hoarding precious metals is more than once compared with Fort Knox, apparently as a slap against American capitalism. The spread of Alexander's coins as a uniform currency becomes a monetary union, when in fact it reflected nothing extraordinary: From the invention of coinage, rulers

who put their faces on coins have insisted on making their coins the common currency of their realm. Christians know this from Christ's famous admonition to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's.

Green pushes economic determinism perhaps further than it can be made to go with the sources available, and his well-worn argument that Greeks did not make advances in economic theory because of their contempt for commerce is an unjustifiable speculation based on the assumption that ancient men acted out of the same economically rational motives as we moderns do. But this is the very point of view that the great Marxian historian, Sir Moses Finley, combated effectively in his Sather Lectures on the ancient economy.

One may agree to disagree on economic theory, but Green is relentlessly ethnocentric (the *ethnos* being modern post-Christian man). Macedonians and Greeks are not only "racists" but "unabashed racists." Is this only a stylistic reflex of a weary writer on an off day or an indication of something deeper? Human tribes have almost always preferred their own kind to others, and many Greeks (though not Herodotus) were quite as bigoted as the ancient Jews, but racism as an ideology is a 19th-century development that can only be applied by analogy to the ancient world. To describe their natural prejudices as "racism" would be like describing infant exposure as "pro-choice" or homosexuality as an expression of "gay rights."

More troubling than the noun *racism* is the accompanying adjective *unabashed*. Is it really the historian's job to tut-tut the point of view of his subjects or expect ancient pagans, affected neither by Christianity nor by post-Christian sentimentalism, to feel ashamed of what they felt? Green's bad habit of seeking easy parallels can be seen in the answer to an interviewer's question, "Are there issues today that a knowledge of the classics would help us solve?"

Almost anything to do with politics! So much else changes, but

the psychology of power, never. You want to understand OPEC? Look at the Sicilian Expedition. The Colonels? Peisistratos wrote the blueprint. Orwellian doublespeak? Try civil war on Corcyra. This is why (if you discount the topical jokes) Aristophanes is so astonishingly modern-sounding.

Peter Green is no more a prisoner of his age than other historians are; in fact, he is more free of cant than most ancient historians who continue to celebrate Cleisthenes and Pericles as selfless liberals rather than as power-seeking promoters of their family and clan interests—not a mistake Green has made. Among his great strengths are his courage in taking unfashionable positions and his candor in expressing them. The very openness of Green in venting his opinions gives readers the opportunity to demur. In an academic profession divided between meticulous drudges and flashy con artists with new paradigms to hawk, Green—bias and all—is a treasure.

Thomas Fleming is the editor of Chronicles and the author of Socialism.

Get Big and Get Out!

by Clark Stooksbury

The End of Food
by Paul Roberts
Boston: Houghton Mifflin;
390 pp., \$26.00



Many news stories from the first half of 2008 read like a page out of the Book of Revelation. Rising grain prices were already leading to food riots in developing countries when a one-two punch, in the form of Cyclone Nargis and a series of tornadoes and floods, devastated the rice

crop in Burma and corn production in the Midwest. When food wasn't too expensive, it frequently made people ill, such as in the salmonella outbreak that sickened customers and caused restaurants and grocers to dispose of several varieties of tomatoes in more than a dozen states, although the cause of the outbreak has yet to be determined.

Paul Roberts, with *The End of Food*, is here to tell the eating public that the problem isn't as bad as the media make it seem—it is, in reality, much worse. The book is a searing indictment not only of the dominant methods of food production, but, implicitly, of the political and media culture, which does a great job of reporting on flag pins and flip-flops but drops the ball when it comes to serious issues.

American agriculture has for decades been geared toward producing large quantities of commodities at low prices. Roberts quotes the two secretaries of agriculture who most explicitly articulated the guiding philosophy of American agricultural policy in the post-World War II era—Ezra Taft Benson (“get big or get out”) and Earl Butz (plant corn from “fence row to fence row”). Prices in the grocery store have been kept low by government subsidies and by the ability of powerful agribusiness interests to avoid paying for the externalities that they create.

In recent decades, animal husbandry evolved from the bucolic image of a farm with a henhouse and cows in a pasture to what is called a CAFO, or Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation. Cramming a large number of livestock into a CAFO results in increased economies of scale, and thus lower costs. But Roberts describes numerous negative side effects, including the “protein-starved chickens [who] turned cannibalistic, eating one another’s feathers . . . until farmers began supplementing grain with protein-rich soybeans and amino acids.” In addition to promoting cannibalism, raising animals in close quarters makes the spread of disease a serious problem, which CAFO farms address by drugging animals with antibiot-

ics. Agriculture consumes half of the antibiotics that the world produces. These are used for controlling disease and promoting growth among livestock. An unintended consequence of drugging animals on this scale is that “livestock and poultry producers must constantly upgrade to different antibiotics—a demand curve that even some pharmaceutical companies aren’t sure how long they can meet.” If they fail to do so, humans as well as animals will pay a price in deaths by infections.

The most obvious externality of the CAFO comes in the form of animal waste. Roberts uses the quaint euphemism “poop lagoon” to describe this side effect of high-density feedlots. In more traditional forms of agriculture, manure was an asset, not a waste product. (I remember my grandmother having a large pile of it in her yard for her rose bushes.) But since industrial animal production commonly takes place at a distance from the industrial farm, this is no longer the case. These “poop lagoons” threaten air and water quality, and their concentrated nitrogen content disrupts ecosystems even when they remain intact—and they don’t always remain intact. A North Carolina lagoon collapse in 1995 did great damage to nearby crops and killed aquatic life in a 17-mile stretch of the New River.

The flipside of the waste problem may be seen in the chemical fertilizers that fueled the explosion of agricultural productivity in the years after World War II. After decades of enormous growth produced by the use of chemical fertilizers, yields are no longer advancing at the rate of a few years ago, nor even keeping pace with rising demand. This is occurring in part because “plant breeders . . . are running into the law of diminishing returns, in the plants themselves.” Also, soil becomes degraded and eroded by the intensive methods accompanying chemical fertilizer use. And since it is a product of natural gas, the cost of chemical fertilizer is affected by tightening energy supplies.

The thirty-three thousand cubic feet of natural gas needed