

Books in Review

Modernity

THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN: WORLD SOCIETY 1815-1830. By PAUL JOHNSON. *HarperCollins*. 1,120 pp. \$35.00; \$16.00 (paper).

Reviewed by NORMAN GALL

FROM the terrible conflicts of this century we have learned that, in addition to the devastation they wreak, big wars can accelerate ongoing innovations in organization and material technologies that will in turn expand the scale, complexity, and logistical reach of those human communities able to recover quickly from the conflagrations. Just so, Paul Johnson boldly argues in this vast and vastly rich book, "the matrix of the modern world was largely formed" in the years between the battles of Waterloo and New Orleans in 1815 and the overthrow of the restored French monarchy in 1830. According to Johnson,

modernity was conceived in the 1780's. But the actual birth, delayed by the long, destructive gestation period formed by the Napoleonic wars, could begin in full measure only when peace came and the immense new resources in finance, management, science, and technology which were now available could be put to constructive purposes.

By then, thanks to steam power, the world's first passenger railway (Manchester-Liverpool) was running, and nine daily newspapers were being published in London. The same new technology had spawned gunboat diplomacy after the shallow-draft steamer *Diana* penetrated 500 miles up the Irrawaddy River in 1825 to chase a fierce fleet of oar-driven Burmese imperial *praus* until their thou-

sands of oarsmen were exhausted and the *praus* were sunk at leisure by the *Diana's* guns, proving to one eyewitness that "the muscles and sinews of men could not hold out against the perseverance of the boiling kettle." In politics, Andrew Jackson had led the popular party to victory in America's first modern election, heralding a new "democratic age" marked by

the growth of literacy, the huge increase in the number and circulation of newspapers, the rise in population and incomes, the spread of technology and industry, the diffusion of competing ideas—and, not least, by the actions of great men.

THE fulcrum and most brilliant chapter of *The Birth of the Modern*, "Forces, Machines, Visions," is about some of these figures, the most compelling of whom were "penniless men with powerful brains and imaginations" who "saw art and science, industry and nature as a continuum of creation. . . ." The chapter opens with a big coal-mine explosion in 1812 that killed 92 men and boys, shocking most of Britain and leading to the invention of a new safety lamp by George Stephenson (1781-1848), "the greatest engine designer and builder of the age, but almost illiterate," born in the coal fields and a descendant of poor shepherds.

Like Stephenson, Thomas Telford (1757-1834), master builder and modernizer of England's basic infrastructure, also came from a family of shepherds. He

loved to work with his hands, in iron as well as in stone, and his singular virtue was the capacity to combine superb craftsmanship, by himself and others, with a passion for the latest technology and massive powers of organization. He thus rose to build bridges, roads, canals, harbors, embankments, and other public works on a scale not seen since Roman times, to create the first Institute of Civil Engineering and lay down its superlative standards and, at the same time, to

remain an artist-craftsman, even a visionary.

The Birth of the Modern is a veritable pageant of such New Men, rising in a "free trade in ability," coming from nowhere to achieve great things.

Some of the New Men, like Beethoven and Goya, sick men driven by their own vitality, embodied artistic suffering as a new form of heroism. Like many other artists of their age, both were associated with technological innovations, Goya in aquatint and etchings, Beethoven with the Broadwood piano, both of which helped create a middle-class market for art and music. Beethoven, the son of a run-of-the-mill court musician and a chambermaid-mother who died of tuberculosis when he was sixteen, "was a key figure in the birth of the modern," writes Johnson, "because he first established and popularized the notion of the artist as universal genius, as a moral figure in his own right—indeed, as a kind of intermediary between God and Man." And Beethoven embodied the spirit of the age in another way as well, for he

was an increasingly sick man all his adult life and his maladies determined his behavior. He gave vent to the rages of the chronic sufferer from stomach pains and the frustrations of the deaf composer. By a supreme moral irony, his appalling conduct actually sanctified his status as an artistic genius and intermediary between the divine and the human. And that was a sign of the times.

To generalize from this, the incipient modern order was always achieving its (inevitably partial) victories at the edge of turmoil and disorder—or, as Johnson puts it, "The matrix of modernity was corrupt and flawed. The world," he continues, "was becoming one, the wilderness was being drawn into a single commercial system, but there was as yet no acknowledged law." At the edge of modernity's

NORMAN GALL heads the Fernand Braudel Institute of World Economics in São Paulo, Brazil. He is finishing a book, *The Death Threat*, on the implications of the present cholera epidemic in the Americas.

incipient order, settlement of new lands posed a challenge, still with us today in Latin America, Africa, and the old Russian empire. In Brazil and other Latin American republics, the open spaces bred confusion between the ideas of capital and credit, creating a floating world of chronic inflation, animated by a fantasy of infinite expansion peculiar to the frontier societies of the Western Hemisphere. The United States itself was hardly immune. In the international loan boom of the 1820's, the U.S. "was already creating for itself a reputation for massive borrowing against its limitless future," a robust cultural trait that reemerged with the unprecedented credit expansion of the 1980's.

WITH its masterful weaving of portraits and episodes into long chapters, *The Birth of the Modern* takes on some of the qualities of an epic poem. And indeed, one possible criticism of the book might be that, like an epic, it celebrates more than it explains. Johnson's sweeping narrative, based on prodigious amounts of research, would have been even more impressive had he done greater justice to the long-term forces that bred the civilizational climax of 1815-30.

The essence of modernization has escaped clear definition, not only by Johnson but by most historians and social scientists. The long view is given by the demographic historian E.A. Wrigley, who suggests that "the industrial revolution might be depicted as beginning in the early or mid-17th century rather than 150 years later." The development of the English coal industry illustrates what Wrigley has in mind. Between 1561 and 1668, three-fourths of all English patents were related to the coal industry's problems, and one-seventh to drainage problems as the pits went deeper, leading to the invention of the first stationary steam engines in the years 1698 to 1702. The replacement of wood fuel by coal, the decisive technological change in the process of modernization, led to the expansion of the iron, glass, and pottery industries and to cheaper forms of

bulk transport, first by coastal shipping, then by canals and railroads. Cheaper transport supplied London with food and fuel so efficiently that by the end of the 17th century it could become Europe's biggest city. As Johnson himself observes, "Europe was the first continent in which death rates began to fall substantially faster than birthrates," reinforcing the pressures that led to surging international migration and the concentration of people in towns and cities, another sign of modernity.

BUT to ask Johnson to have dealt fully with these long-term issues is to require too much of one who has already done an almost unbelievably great deal. One of Johnson's achievements here, as earlier in *Modern Times* and in his histories of Christianity and of the Jews, has been to extend the horizons of serious journalism at a time when we hear much agonizing about the future of the printed word, when the magazine business is in the dumps, and sales of serious books are held to be at an all-time low. That a book like this could be written, published, and sold profitably is itself a token of underlying cultural vitality and good taste. More to the point, however, is that few academics today would assume the intellectual (and financial) risks of producing a work of this kind—and few, one is compelled to add, can command the intellectual resources, the enthusiasm, or the narrative gifts displayed in this book.

Two hundred years ago, the great biographer James Boswell wrote of another Johnson (Samuel) that "he will be seen in this work more completely than any man who has ever lived. And he will be seen as he really was. . . ." In the same way, illuminating his copiously detailed story with drama and meaning, Paul Johnson has helped us understand the dynamics of modernization as they really were—even if its power and future direction remain a mystery. What is clear today is that failure to sustain the thrust of modernization imperils the survival of many complex societies and threatens a rever-

sion of their populations to more archaic forms of civilization and mortality. *The Birth of the Modern* celebrates the brilliance of modernity's first great burst in the sky; reading it should make us aware of how much courage, understanding, and cooperation will be necessary if the modern enterprise is to be sustained and to develop.

Gendrication

THE GIRLS IN THE BALCONY: WOMEN, MEN AND THE NEW YORK TIMES. By NAN ROBERTSON. Random House. 274 pp. \$22.00.

Reviewed by STEPHANIE GUTMANN

A JOURNALIST who has spent three decades of her life working at the *New York Times*, Nan Robertson was one of six women who in the mid-1970's sued the paper for "broad patterns and practices of sex discrimination," thus becoming a main character in what she calls "the single most important collective event in the history of women at the *New York Times*." She is probably right about the significance of the event. Though the paper seems to have been an anxious-to-please affirmative-action employer even before the suit, after the mau-mauing it received in *Boylan v. The New York Times* (as the suit was titled), it emerged as the thoroughly race-and-gender obsessed institution it is today.

The plot goes roughly like this: in the early 70's, several women in the New York headquarters of the paper began to chafe at what they would eventually label sex discrimination, although Robertson is a little vague about what that means, especially as the core women plaintiffs all seem to have enjoyed relatively smooth and fast ascents. At the time of the filing, for example, Robertson had recently been dispatched to Paris to take on "the most challenging assignment of [her] career." Betsy Wade Boylan was the highest-paid copy editor on

STEPHANIE GUTMANN, a new contributor, has worked at daily newspapers on both the East and West Coasts.