

CULTURAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION

For some years the Cultural History Group of Aberdeen University has held an annual cultural history conference in June, which brings together students and researchers from various countries around topics as widespread as the Scottish Enlightenment, the culture of revolution and the methods and import of cultural history itself. The atmosphere of the events has reflected the spirit of cultural history as an approach, as well as the enthusiasm of the group running them. People interested in each others' varying disciplinary approaches work together to fathom the mystery of a wide variety of human situations: from the strange 17th-century set of rules for dining in the refectory laid down *in verse* by the college proctor; to the role of modernism in post-revolutionary soviet culture; to the political balance between catholicism and protestantism in post-war Holland.

The participants at these annual events reflect the confidence (expounded at this year's conference by the noted Leibnitz scholar, Olga Pembo) that cultural history has something special to offer to the meeting of minds across cultural, historical and discipline boundaries. Aware both of this growing confidence and an increasing European dimension to the issues, this year's conference members agreed to try to set up a European Cultural History Association. The project intended to link cultural historians in different countries is likely to get under way early this year. More details from Joan Pittock at the Faculty of Arts, Taylor Building, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen AB9 2TW.

Noel Parker

SELF-DETERMINATION AND POWER

The Pearce Institute in Govan attracted a wide variety of participants to the 'Self-Determination and Power' event it hosted in January. Writers, academics, and political activists congregated for what promised to be a rare chance to debate contemporary social, cultural, and political issues. Shunning the guru role inevitably forced upon him, Noam Chomsky took the audience on a whistlestop tour of his libertarian philosophical and political views, and George Davie made some interesting connections between the Scottish common-sense tradition and Chomsky's own approach. But many were disappointed at the atmosphere of complacency which prevailed. Although a host of competing interests were represented – nationalists, liberals, anarchists, and socialists – the differences between them were rarely explored. There was broad agreement that self-determination and power are good things which people don't have, but little discussion about what they mean, why they are wanted, and how they can be gained.

'Self-Determination and Power' is to be praised for providing a platform which exceeds the usual political agenda; the proceedings were recorded and a book is planned. But it also revealed the necessity to reassess political and social goals and motivations. *Scottish Child*, which organised

the event together with the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Glasgow Free University*, offered the romantic image of future generations as a reason for present struggle, but it seems that a more coherent and immediate paradigm is urgently required if the winds of change presently causing structural damage in Europe are not merely to dislodge a few tiles at home.

Sadie Plant

REALISM AND THE HUMAN SCIENCES CONFERENCE 8–11 September 1989

This year's conference, capably organised by Maureen Ramsay and Colin Divall at Manchester Polytechnic, had the overall theme 'What does it mean to be a realist?' The question was answered, most often indirectly, in contributions from the usual wide range of fields. After an informal warm-up by Roy Bhaskar and William Outhwaite, covering issues of realism and politics, there were plenary contributions by Bob Jessop, on the realist character of regulation theory in political economy, and by John Lovering, on the relationship between the British state and the defence industry. John Shotter, from the Dutch diaspora, offered a provocative social constructionist critique of realism, and Andrew Collier opened up the previously uncharted issue of the relationship between realism and Heidegger's philosophy. Ted Benton and Lynda Birke discussed the biology/society interface, and Alex Callinicos that between realism and postmodernism. Workshop sessions included John Allen and Barbara Reid on landlordism, M. Ferrero and Tim Marshall on quantum theory, Tony Woodiwiss on law, Derek Layder on the macro-micro issue in sociology and Andy Pratt on policy evaluation. Participants seemed to share your reporter's impression that the conference provided both individual contributions of considerable interest and a valuable arena for interdisciplinary discussion.

William Outhwaite

