

JAMES H. McINTOSH

A NEW LIFE OF HAWTHORNE

Nathaniel Hawthorne in His Time. By James R. Mellow. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980. Pp. 684. \$19.95.

James R. Mellow's new life of Hawthorne has more breadth than depth. Mellow's design is to unroll a full record and let it speak for itself, without capsule judgments at any point. The effect of his method is that Hawthorne gets lost in a mass of detail. The book has the numbing effect of a newsreel. Hawthorne's enlivening characteristics—his sprightliness, his uncomfortable earnestness, his love of dreamwork and enchantment—hardly emerge in focused form. He comes alive perhaps best in his twilight years, when his Puritanical courage in facing moral isolation and death is depicted affectingly.

Mellow's attempts to connect Hawthorne's writing with his life are successful only at times, but at best they shed light on details that we ordinarily slight for want of background when we read the fiction. For example, one feels a greater intimacy with Hepzibah Pyncheon to learn that her groans and creakings when she makes herself respectable in the morning are probably echoes of what Hawthorne heard day after day in his mother's house in Salem during his bachelor years. And Coverdale's praise of the pleasures of drinking in taverns has a hidden level of self-reflexive irony in that Hawthorne wrote it while boarding at the house of his wife's brother-in-law Horace Mann, an inflexible teetotaler. When he treats those two underrated works of genius, *The Blithedale Romance* and *The House of the Seven Gables*, Mellow's use of historical detail and his critical observations are consistently illuminating. His comments on the short stories, on the other hand, are crude and impertinent, perhaps because these works do not lend themselves so easily to a biographer's speculations.

The best feature of the book is its account of Hawthorne's "times." Some of Hawthorne's friends and relations are presented here better than in any other book about him, especially his blue-stocking sister-in-law Elizabeth Peabody—and indeed all the Peabodys—his political friend