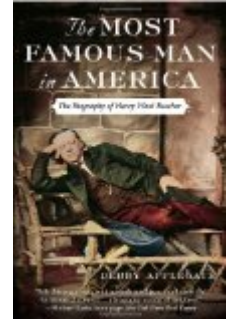


Debby Applegate. *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher.* New York: Doubleday, 2006. x + 527 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-385-51396-8.



Reviewed by Wallace Hettle

Published on H-CivWar (February, 2007)

As a Civil War historian mostly focused on the Confederacy, I accepted the chance to review this book in order to increase my own patchy knowledge about Northern society, religion, and culture in the Civil War era. Some readers will be better qualified to gauge this book's usefulness to specialists, but I suspect that I am not the only Civil War historian with minimal grounding in cultural and religious history, as this topic has been given short shrift in the Civil War literature until the 1980s.

In any case, Debby Applegate has written a highly readable story of Henry Ward Beecher. Biography is most successful in the hands of a good storyteller. Applegate knows how to spin a tale, and Beecher makes an ideal subject. His life is well documented, his world was full of eloquent contemporaries, and there is the promise of a sex scandal near the end of the book. So many books that have their origins as dissertations, as this book did, never escape the deadly dryness that too often marks a historian's first monograph. Applegate's account is anything but dull. Calling Beecher the "most famous man" in the country

may be hyperbole for the age of Robert E. Lee and Abraham Lincoln, but by the end of the book this reader became convinced that Beecher's status as a popular icon justifies the overstatement in the title.

Just as every human life is unique, every biographer takes a different approach to her subject. Applegate, who admits affection for Beecher, offers a comprehensive, chronologically organized work. My favorite biographies are those that skimp a bit on the detail in order to give a broad sense of the times. Due to space limitations, the book offers minimal documentation of the broader historiography in the footnotes. Instead, the work cites sources used for quotations, though it does provide a bibliography. Applegate (or perhaps the publisher) has chosen a strategy that will work for the general reader, as well as for scholars already familiar with the literature. For me, more information on secondary sources in the notes would have been nice.

Many people today remember Beecher as the brother of author Harriet Beecher Stowe and educator Catharine Beecher, as well as the son of Ly-

man Beecher. As Applegate shows, Henry became famous for his dramatic sermons and personal charisma, his widely read essays, and his ability to insert himself into the culture wars of his own day. The book opens with Beecher speaking at an 1865 ceremony reclaiming Fort Sumter, and his prominence on that day highlights the fame he had achieved.

A theological liberal, Henry popularized the notion of a loving God and tied that view to a broader agenda of antebellum reform. Beecher became a notable antislavery activist, even providing rifles for antislavery settlers during the fight over slavery in Kansas. Yet he was an ambivalent abolitionist, distancing himself from the John Brown raid in a politically pragmatic way that drew the scorn of radical abolitionists such as Lydia Maria Child. Even so, Beecher's Plymouth Church in Brooklyn had become a center of reform activity, with dramatic sermons on slavery, and even mock slave auctions. These auctions were designed not only to raise money for fugitives to gain freedom, but to shock the conscience of his parishioners and the public.

Applegate paints Beecher as a charismatic minister whose words helped focus the national agenda on slavery. He was also a great entertainer, capable of oratory that left audiences spellbound. Capturing Beecher's charisma is no easy task given the nature of the printed sources. Beecher's success as a pulpit performer made him rich. Even so, Beecher often found himself in debt brought on by poor money management. His chronic financial problems became acute when he found himself embroiled in scandal during the 1870s.

Specialists will find nits to pick. For example, Applegate describes America in 1835 as "a society growing ever more secular and diverse" (p. 121). Diverse, perhaps, but the explosive growth of the Methodists described a few pages later leads one to doubt that the United States became more secular (p. 149). The Presbyterian split into "Old

School" and "New School" factions in 1837 had much to do with slavery, as Applegate makes clear. But anyone looking for a detailed discussion of the theological debate involved in the split would do well to look elsewhere. Similarly, Henry's writings, which include a novel, get relatively short shrift.

Readers enjoy a good scandal, and Henry, who was unhappily married, had multiple strong attachments to women other than his wife. While it remains difficult to be certain what went on behind closed doors, Applegate engagingly chronicles the conflicts that led to a riveting trial when Beecher's associate Theodore Tilton sued Beecher. Tilton believed that Beecher had committed adultery with his wife, and demanded \$100,000 in damages for the alienation of her affections. The story of the trial, and the investigations preceding it, emerge in all their detail. The careful summation of the evidence, as well as the various controversies and confrontations, gives as much as one would ever care to know about the case.

Given my own past penchant for watching the coverage of the O. J. Simpson case, it seems hard to blame Applegate for telling too much about the scandal. She does an admirable job of bringing coherence to a story based on dozens of contradictory statements. An exasperating number of the people providing evidence on the Tilton case contradicted not only each other, but themselves, giving and retracting various written statements. In the end, one is convinced that Beecher was no angel, but the facts of his sex life matter little. More important is the impact the scandal had in a culture in retreat from the radicalism of the Civil War era. One reason the case received so much attention was the involvement of Henry's suffragist sister Isabella and the inimitable Victoria Woodhull. Tragically, Applegate believes, the popular furor dealt a setback to the women's suffrage movement.

In summary, this well-written book is a pleasure to read and deserves the wide audience it will undoubtedly earn.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Wallace Hettle. Review of Applegate, Debby. *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. February, 2007.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12868>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.