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Richard D. Brown. *The Strength of a People: The Idea of an Informed Citizenry in America, 1650-1870*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xvii + 252 pp. \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4663-6; \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2261-6.

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There has always been something adventitious about the terms “public history” and “applied history.” When they’re tested by their antonyms, “private history” and “inapplicable history,” the problem is clear. No doubt, some historical work undertaken for the public’s benefit is of no enduring intellectual significance and thus of little “public” moment. By the same token, countless examples exist of historical research whose utility, while strong and certain, extends to only a few readers and so is “applied” in only the narrowest sense. And yet there has always existed a body of academic, monographic historical scholarship that is useful, and therefore applicable, even if not ostensibly “public,” not just because it helps us understand human life, but because it is pertinent to living concepts and current debates. This book exemplifies that kind of public history.

Not that *The Strength of a People* is likely to be read by a wide public. It is too academic for that. And while the tale Brown relates has a clear story line of sorts, the idea of an informed citizenry, the subject of the work, is developed in too many complex ways to justify a simple presentation or to support a single argument. Nor will the book win readers because of the historical surprises or distinctive methods it embodies. Because changes in the concept of informed citizens appear to have been derived from social and political developments rather than to have driven them, the larger history of what Brown relates will already be known to most readers, although he reviews that history through a particular lens. Nor does Brown’s rather un-nuanced style, however authoritative his voice, draw a reader along. The going is often hard and, until the epilogue, the author’s presence is too little felt. Yet for anyone, historian or lay reader alike, who is concerned with the state of American civic culture either in the past or now, this book provides a fresh and essential foundation for understanding it.

The Strength of a People examines the changing, broadening, and always disputed meanings of the two

words of that enduring phrase, an “informed citizenry.” Who ought to be considered a citizen? And by what measure—at the attainment of what level of knowledge—should citizens be considered informed? Malleable and unstable as are so many concepts, the idea of an informed citizenry has changed to reflect the changing circumstances of the one nation which debated it—indeed, warred over it—more intensively than any other. In many respects, therefore, Brown’s book ought to be considered together with James H. Kettner’s important *Development of American Citizenship, 1608-1879* (1978), which emphasizes the political and legal dimensions of its subject, to which Brown pays too little attention, during roughly the same period.

Brown commences his work in Tudor and Stuart England, where restrictions on the expression and publication, and therefore the obtaining, of information had more to do with feared challenges to royal and ministerial authority than with subjects’ liberty to make civic decisions. The emergence of thinking about the political capacity of English “citizens” in that era was of course limited to a small elite of citizen-subjects who shared in ruling the kingdom and were the sole beneficiaries of what few privileges and responsibilities of citizenship (as distinguished from subjecthood) existed at the time.

Yet right from the start, the capacity of this elite to discharge its civic responsibilities was seen to hinge on more than mere access to information, which, in any case, was often denied publication by licensing and other acts against which writers as diverse as Milton, Harrington, Locke, Molesworth, and Mandeville inveighed. For these and other critics believed that civic capacity depended on education (that is, knowledge and informed judgment) as well on mere information. Thus, while dissident views of the needs of the kingdom’s subjects were expressions of the frustrations and hopes of elite citizen-subjects like these critics, and while their prescriptions for broader education were limited to their

gentry peers, by the end of the seventeenth century the issue of what even such a restricted proportion of citizen-subjects must know in order to govern responsibly and well—about what they should be informed—had come out into the open. Never again would the issue be stilled. (Although one should not take smug satisfaction from this fact: other peoples, once informed, have fallen prey to regimes that have effectively snuffed out public information and debate long after both had developed to a high degree of sophistication.)

In fact, within fifty years of 1700, the question of a more broadly-based informed (and white male) public was being widely debated throughout Britain and her American colonies. Brown sees as “a boundary in democratic thought” (p. 40) the “unconventional notion,” beginning to spread beyond Radical Whig circles like that of William Livingston (from an essay in whose *Independent Reflector* Brown takes his title), that the thinking of people of lesser social and political rank might figure in a community’s political life. Yet if the broadening of access to information remained a strange notion to most people, nevertheless “the movement away from the idea of a citizenry composed exclusively of gentlemen was firmly established on both sides of the Atlantic” by mid-century (p. 44). It is in this context, Brown makes clear, that we should see the encouragement of education, libraries, newspapers, books, and acquaintance with the gospel that began to make itself felt at the time.

Yet, because such thinking was “inconsequential” in its influence (p. 49), it remained on the periphery of political speculation at mid-century. What mobilized and deepened it and moved it toward the center of public debate were the imperial issues that emerged at the close of the Seven Years’ War. Brown deftly reviews the conditions that gave the concept heightened salience and mobilized a broadening proportion of males to take part in public affairs. Because by the close of the Revolution they had demonstrated their capacity to do so, the distinction between being informed and ignorant had sharpened. The concept of an informed citizenry had also become “more socially comprehensive” (p. 82) and had permeated far beyond the elite. More important, the concept had acquired a new meaning. To the old Radical Whig determination to create and protect the rights of free speech, press, petition, and assembly and to defend religious sectarianism was added a belief that the state had a positive function in nourishing an informed republican citizenry through support of schools, colleges, universities, libraries, and learned societies.

After the Revolution, however, the basic question

confronting those who gave thought to the matter remained the old one: who should know about the public’s business and how much should they know? This “heated and intractable question” (p. 86), as Brown terms it, may be said to be the question, always live, whose answers define the nature of democratic government at any particular time. At least so it has remained, never more pertinently than since 1945, long after the terminal date of Brown’s study. Yet in some respects a narrow answer to the question was doomed as soon as Americans began to construct their new nation. For—and here Brown adds richly to the histories of many American institutions—it became commonplace to justify the creation and support of “self-created societies,” such as libraries, post offices, newspapers, even a national university and churches protected by constitutional and other guarantees of religious freedom, on the grounds that they would assure citizens access to the ideas and information they needed to govern themselves knowledgeably and well.

Nevertheless, while there had come into being a widespread conviction that the state (especially the states) had a role in creating an informed citizenry, especially through education, any proposal for a national scheme of incentives or support, such as a national university, proved insurmountable due to tax resistance, sectarian rivalries, philosophical and ideological differences, and jurisdictional jealousies. Ironically in Brown’s view, part of the problem stemmed from the robust health of voluntary associations, which proved strong enough to keep alive convictions that they would suffice as bulwarks of civic enlightenment as well as of virtue. Thus through the first half-century of national life, national programs to create an informed citizenry foundered. “Broadly speaking,” writes Brown, “responsibility for shaping the characteristics of America’s informed citizenry was left to families, individuals, and the cultural marketplace” (p. 105).

Not the least important consequence of the absence of national direction to citizen information was the efflorescence of competition among messages and media as to how people should be informed and about what. In an aside that could bear amplification, Brown implies that part of the responsibility for the decline in emphasis upon the public good can be blamed on the cacophony of competing claims to precedence in this matter. A kind of promiscuity set in, in which the concept of useful knowledge had no limits and extended far beyond the civic ideals of the founders, so that the citizen and the civic concerns originally at the heart of those ideals threatened to be lost. Not only did the advance of democratic indi-

vidualism prove corrosive of the notion of civic responsibility lying at the historic heart of the original concept of an informed citizenry, but different groups of citizens interpreted the increasingly tattered ideal in their own ways. Not only that, knowledge was increasingly defined in the emerging democratic marketplace of ideas as entertainment and self-help. Not that the concept was completely dead. Lyceums and circulating libraries nourished the ideals of self-improvement and civic participation through education. But it was becoming increasingly difficult to keep the original civic ideal at the heart of the concept alive and well.

If voluntarism had triumphed, of course not everything was left to the voluntary spirit. Venerable fears about deteriorating virtue and civic ignorance helped fuel successful efforts to make school attendance compulsory. And passage of the Civil War amendments, attendant upon northern victory in 1865, made lifting the veil of individual and civic ignorance from the freed and (at least for a time) politically empowered slaves of more than passing interest. Similarly, charged debates about the role of native Americans and women in public and political life continued to involve robust argument about what, by the 1870s, had become a somewhat hackneyed, if still powerful, concept of informed citizens.

Brown closes his book with an epilogue in which he comments that to reflect on how the history he has related might apply to our current concerns requires him to breach conventional professional prohibitions against opinion and speculation. But given the very subject of his book—the applicability of citizens’ knowledge to matters of contemporary moment—it would seem that a balanced and sagacious assessment such as his by a seasoned and deeply knowledgeable historian of an issue of such contemporary urgency would be altogether appropriate and in need of no defense. In fact, the epilogue is a model of the use of history to contextualize current affairs. Brown

correctly points out that the historical record shows that Americans have always been of many minds about the need for an informed citizenry, the means to achieve it, the resources to commit to it, and the dangers that face it, as well as about the possible consequences of civic ignorance. There have always been radicals who harbored utopian hopes about an enlightened citizenry and elitists who believed that deference to more knowledgeable and experienced people is the best defense of the republic. Brown takes as grounds for much confidence the fact that Americans have cared so much about the ideal to debate it so vigorously.

Fortunately, those for whom such balanced moderation is not recommendation enough for a work of history will find other reasons to applaud the contributions of this work. Chief among them, it seems to me, is the breadth of institutions—churches as well as libraries, militias as well as schools—that Brown puts under his microscope to show how they were both historical sources of civic information and experience and the focus of debate about how to achieve a widely informed citizenry. Especially notable is Brown’s analysis of the importance that contemporaries placed upon religion and churches as sources of civic enlightenment.

What now remains to be done is to assess the links between the legal and political components of citizenship, so well presented some time ago by Kettner, and the social and cultural components assessed so cogently here by Brown. And, surely, the entire subject of citizenship after 1870, the stopping point of this and Kettner’s book, now invites—indeed, it requires—more attention by historians of the more modern era. Until we have such work, we can be content with this fine book.

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