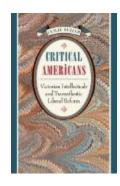
H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Leslie Butler. Critical Americans: Victorian Intellectuals and Transatlantic Liberal Reform. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. 376 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5792-2.

Reviewed by Nicole Phelps Published on H-SHGAPE (November, 2008) Commissioned by James Ivy



A Guide to Transatlantic Higher Journalism

In Critical Americans, Leslie Butler-an associate professor at Dartmouth College-traces the collective efforts of a cadre of nineteenth-century American writers to vindicate, expand, and improve American democracy through written criticism, or, as those writers put it, "higher journalism." The book focuses on four friends whose lives were fundamentally shaped by the Civil War: Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Charles Eliot Norton, George William Curtis, and James Russell Lowell. Together, these men and a broader transatlantic network of writers and reformers used the cultural authority they accumulated as literary figures "to unite criticism of art and literature with a broad commentary on the issues of the day" (p. 5). As critics, they worked to improve American democracy by pointing out American strengths and weaknesses, and encouraging a broad range of Americans to better themselves, their nation, and the world. Through her book, Butler hopes to place these American writers in a transatlantic context, to challenge the negative perception of these thinkers as pompous and elitist, and to stress the value of their discussion-based conception of the democratic process.

Critical Americans includes six chapters in addition to an introduction and epilogue. The first chapter deals with the pre-Civil War years, when Butler's intellectuals were struggling to choose career paths outside of business, the church, or the law, and to justify the usefulness of their scholarly interests to society as a whole, especially amid the growing tensions over slavery and sectionalism. The second chapter focuses on the Civil War, which all four saw as a test of the validity of the American democratic system. Higginson was the only one of the four to serve in the military, as he was the most committed to matching mental pursuits with the physical, but all four were ardent verbal supporters of the Union cause. The war also provided an opportunity for forging ties with British liberals, including John Stuart Mill, who were sympathetic to the Union and interested in using the American situation to further their own political and social agendas in Britain.

With the Union victory in the war, the Victorian intellectuals enjoyed a period of confidence and power-a period Butler describes as the "Liberal High Tide." This period is the subject of chapter 3, in which Butler explores the expansion of transatlantic liberal ties in the 1860s and 70s and efforts to create new publications in which to showcase their critical "higher journalism." In chapters 4, 5, and 6, Butler looks at the intellectuals' contributions to debates over culture, politics, and imperialism, respectively. She argues that these intellectuals sought to create a distinctly American high culture that could rival that of Europe and thus prove that democratic societies were indeed capable of producing quality high art. In terms of politics, she focuses on the 1884 election, in which these men and many other reformminded citizens abandoned the Republican Party in favor of Democrat Grover Cleveland, thus affirming to themselves that they were again on "the right side of history" (p. 231). In the 1890s and 1900s, Higginson and Nortonthose who remained alive—were critical of American imperialism and especially the Philippine-American War. The book concludes with a call for a reexamination of these intellectuals' contributions to American society—in particular, to their calls for democratic government based on informed discussion.

In writing a collective biography of four nineteenthcentury intellectuals and arguing that the Civil War was a crucial shaping event of their lives, Butler invites comparison with Louis Menand's Pulitzer Prizewinning The Metaphysical Club (2001), which does the same thing with a different quartet of thinkers, including Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., William James, Charles Peirce, and John Dewey. There are two ways in which to compare the books: first, by focusing on the argument they put forward about the Civil War's effects on American society; and second, by evaluating their attempts at collective biography. On the surface, Butler and Menand have competing and contradictory arguments. For Menand's intellectuals, the Civil War was "a failure of democracy" (Menand, p. x); Butler, in contrast, asserts that "American democracy was vindicated on a world stage" through the war (p. 4). Both arguments can be right, since Menand and Butler are talking about different intellectuals-and, most important, different generations. Butler's intellectuals were, for the most part, too old to serve in the military during the war, while Menand's were of military age. For Butler's armchair warriors, the war can look like a glorious success, and some even argued that the war needed to be as long and arduous as possible to do the nation the most good, but for Menand's generation, the destruction and futility of combat was much more real. The conclusions they drew from the experience were quite different. The two generations' conflicting views about the war could coexist after it, in large part because they did not seem to be airing themselves in the same forums of American life. Butler's intellectuals focused their efforts on journalism, in particular through such publications as The Nation and The Century, while Menand's intellectuals operated at the intersection of the academy and the state.

While the arguments put forward by Menand and Butler are not mutually exclusive, I find Menand's much more convincing because of the way he presents his argument. His book is full of detail about the context in which his intellectuals lived their lives, the ways in which they interacted with other people, and the forums in which they presented and disseminated their ideas; the book makes complex subjects accessible to a wide range of

readers and does not rely too much on the reader's prior knowledge to understand what was going on. Butler's book is much narrower in its scope, argument, and audience. From the book, we know very little about the early lives of the subjects-indeed, we are not even told in what years all four men were born. We are presented with their words and only rarely with their actions, so it is difficult to evaluate if they acted in a manner consistent with their words. The reader needs to know quite a bit about British political history, in particular, because Butler provides little background. Butler also sells herself short by placing her book in the narrow realm of the democracy/republicanism debate of intellectual history and holding it up as a rebuttal to John G. Sproat's book, "The Best Men": Liberal Reformers in the Gilded Age (1969). She invites us to take her intellectuals seriously and to recognize their impact on American society, but I do not think her argument is as convincing as it could have been.

While I am willing to concede that Butler's intellectuals are worth studying and that they contributed decisively to the shaping of particular political and cultural debates and the development of American print culture, I am not yet ready to hail them as true champions of democracy. Butler stresses that their insistence on the centrality of discussion to the democratic process makes them "current in democratic theory today" (p. 11). The key here is that reaching a consensus through informed and rational discussion-and not merely casting a ballotis what democracy is really all about. That is fine, but it raises the question of who gets to participate in the discussion. Butler's intellectuals stressed the importance of written debate and criticism, and Lowell argued that print discussions could bring everyone together to "hear" the debate (p. 126). There is no real forum for everyone to participate actively, though; the public can only read, they cannot write back. To me, that means that there are still insiders who can shape political discourse and decisions, and outsiders who must watch from the sidelines. Everyone is not participating as an equal. Butler introduces some evidence from close friends of her four intellectuals that seem more telling here: for example, Goldwin Smith argued that the press needed critics who would serve as "the creator and the voice of public opinion" (p. 188). Having read Butler's book, I remain convinced that, for these intellectuals, to be educated meant to hold the same opinions they did and that to participate meant to read what they had to say. They served to narrow public debate, rather than broaden it.

Despite these faults, the book has considerable value

as an example of sound transnational history and as a guide for understanding nineteenth-century journalism. Butler effectively places these men in a transatlantic context, both intellectually and methodologically. She points out that "national commitments were (and are) elaborated in an international framework," and thus helps make sense of why American journalists were so interested in commenting on developments abroad, especially in Britain (p. 6). The book, therefore, fits nicely alongside Daniel T. Rogers's Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age (1998) and other works that demonstrate how international connections and comparisons helped build national self-conceptions. More important, though, Butler is able to offer concrete proof of the intellectual and personal network she posits. The book is based on impressive archival research conducted in more than a dozen archives in the United States, Britain, and Ireland. She can prove that her intellectuals corresponded with British and Irish intellectuals and met with them in person on both sides of the Atlantic. These connections did not happen through formal institutions, but rather through personal correspondence and familial connections. Butler has found a site for proving transnational history.

Even if one does not agree with Butler that these intellectuals' agenda served to improve democracy, her discussion of their beliefs about the role of criticism and "higher journalism" provides a very important guide for other historians seeking to use *The Nation, The Century, Harper's*, and other nineteenth-century publications as sources. After reading Butler's work, one can more effectively fit individual articles into the broader context of this critical agenda. It is always difficult to determine what exactly newspapers and other journalistic offerings actually reflect, and Butler's work goes a long way toward helping us to understand what these particular publications can—and cannot—offer.

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