



**Mark J. Noonan.** *Reading the Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine: American Literature and Culture, 1870-1893.* Kent: Kent State University Press, 2010. Illustrations. xix + 235 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-60635-063-8.



**Reviewed by** Kevin Sheets

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**Commissioned by** K. Stephen Prince (University of South Florida)

Mark J. Noonan's recent study is an especially well-crafted contribution to a boomlet field of periodical studies: books about magazines. Like others in the genre, Noonan's book makes bold claims about the payoff such detailed studies of single periodicals provide. (This seems not unlike the recent raft of books about individual speeches, intellectual micro-histories of a sort.) A detailed reading of the pages of one magazine, it is claimed, opens a window into the culture of the times, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between readers, the magazine, and the broader culture.

In Noonan's case, the rewards are evident. His magazine, founded in 1870 as *Scribner's Monthly: An Illustrated Magazine for the People*, was truly a popular magazine as judged by the standards of others like it. In 1885, its second editor, Richard Watson Gilder, claimed a readership approaching one million people. By contrast, *The Atlantic* reached a scant fourteen thousand, while *Harper's Monthly* did better at two hundred thousand during the Civil War. Given the reach of

*Scribner's Monthly*, which in 1881 changed its name to *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, its claims on sustained and detailed scholarly attention are merited. Surely we can learn something valuable about the Gilded Age from the pages of a magazine that reached so many households. The book's organization, defined by the successive editorship of Josiah Gilbert Holland and Gilder, argues for the centrality of key cultural arbiters in shaping the latter nineteenth century. Clearly Noonan believes Holland and Gilder, from their *Century* perch, did not merely edit a magazine. They determined the character of American genteel culture in a period of cultural flux and conflict. The magazine they edited, says Noonan, "helped guide American social thought for more than thirty years and ... defined the field of art, architecture, and fiction against which modernism would have to contend" (p. xix).

Holland edited the magazine from its founding in 1870 until his death in 1881. A man squarely of his times, he embodied and promoted Victorian virtues of self-sacrifice, hard work, Christian

faith, and moral sturdiness. Quite obviously, his posture was a reaction against the enervating corruption and coarseness of Gilded Age politics and culture. Thus, Holland's magazine aimed to elevate and instruct readers, largely a white, Protestant, middle-class group of cultural strivers, on the ways and means of thinking and behaving. It offered advice on what to read, what to buy, and how to act. Its illustrations, a number of which are reproduced in Noonan's book, similarly aimed to enrich readers with a gallery of ennobling images promoting the civic faith of moral rectitude, self-cultivation, and genteel bearing. As Noonan astutely notes, the readers of this magazine were already middle class, so the magazine served to confirm or buttress a class and cultural status that was always shifting. Middle-class readers read *The Century Illustrated* to become middle class.

Much of the cultural program begun under Holland persisted once Gilder took over in 1881. Gilder was a poet, and many of his poems were published in the magazine, but his significance rests in his work as America's "preeminent arbiter of taste." Still, the magazine did change under Gilder's hand. Gilder narrowed Holland's openness to questions of religion, for instance. Importantly, though the readership of the magazine was mostly women, female authors found themselves increasingly marginalized on Gilder's pages. He promoted, along with William Dean Howells, a frequent contributor, a style of literary realism more common among male than female writers. Though written by men, the moral message in much of this literature aimed at instructing women in the attainment of a higher morality. Gilder was also anxious to downplay social cleavages, especially in the form of class warfare or labor unrest. In a very interesting section, Noonan examines the effort of Gilder to sanitize John Hay's *The Bread-Winners*, a novel serialized from August 1883 to January 1884. In this novel, Hay brought to the surface tensions concerning class warfare in the wake of labor unrest and violence. The sexually suggestive scenes featuring Maud

Matchin, a young and beautiful girl from the working class, and the verisimilitude of labor violence unsettled Gilder's genteel sensibilities. Noonan describes his editorial standard as a "virginibus maxim (print nothing to offend a virgin)" (p. 86). Gilder worked to restrain Hay's book and the result is what Noonan describes as a "genteel fantasy text" (p. 117). Labor is described as reckless, depraved, and even "bestial" while the genteel protagonists are invariably depicted as men of "principle, honor, and courage" (p. 119). So while the serialized novel raised alarming concerns about labor and class struggle, the lesson about class hierarchy and social order was affirmed.

The same could be said with the magazine's contributions in the realm of southern literature. Under Holland, the magazine gave space to southern regional literature, including Edward King's study of the South. Here King, and by association the magazine, embraced a view of the South that extolled the virtues and energy of those Old South leaders now attempting to bring the region into a modern, forward-looking future. The romance of King's depiction of the South elided its persistent racial problems and perpetuated the racial stereotypes given scientific cover by ethnographical studies popular in the 1860s and 1870s. At the same time, there were subversive voices published by Holland that subtly challenged the stereotypes and appealed to southerners to grant freedmen the rights they won in war.

Those voices were largely eliminated from the pages of the *Century Illustrated* by the 1880s when the "plantation myth school" found welcome space in its columns. These writers romanticized the Old South, trumpeting an antebellum Elysium of mutually supportive relationships between whites and blacks, honorable masters and happy and contented slaves. Again, Gilder was steering the magazine away from the shoals of class or race conflict. As Noonan makes clear, this was an act of cultural "evasiveness" (p. xviii).

And that is the point. The magazine presented a portrait of America to its readers that only dimly reflected the reality in the streets. *The Century Illustrated* aspired to a sanitized, becalmed, and comfortable culture. It was as if Holland and Gilder aimed to will a better America into existence by promoting genteel arts and avoiding or otherwise taming the less savory aspects of contemporary life.

Noonan's book therefore offers a fascinating peek into class anxiety, cultural mediation, and genteel *mentalité* in the Gilded Age. It does, however, feel a tad claustrophobic, no doubt a result of the genre he has chosen to write within. Noonan is tethered to the pages of his subject and though we do occasionally escape the binding, one could easily feel constrained by such a detailed focus. There were plenty of times, for instance, when it would have been helpful to see not just the pages of the magazine but the behind the scenes work that produced those pages. Noonan on several occasions quotes from the papers of both Holland and Gilder, but we do not see enough of the editorial hand at work. Nor do we see enough of the exchanges between editor and author. Why, for instance, did female writers, welcomed in the 1870s, permit their marginalization in the 1880s? It would have been nice to hear from them.

Noonan's book is well written and engaging, free of jargon, and nicely organized. It tells an important story about a very important magazine that had cultural tentacles extending into the upper and middle classes and reaching a national (though predominantly eastern) audience, a key constituency of movers and shakers. It helps us know what they knew. It gives us a sense of their interests, their anxieties, and their hopes. As such it is an important contribution to our understanding of this critical period.

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