

8-2008

Review of: Critical Americans: Victorian Intellectuals and Transatlantic Liberal Reform

Johann N. Neem

Western Washington University, johann.neem@wwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://cedar.wwu.edu/history_facpubs



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Neem, Johann N., "Review of: Critical Americans: Victorian Intellectuals and Transatlantic Liberal Reform" (2008). *History*. 1.
https://cedar.wwu.edu/history_facpubs/1

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Humanities at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in History by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

around the mid-1970s Kazin, feeling that he was in the process of being edged out, started to rage against trends among younger literature professors. Yet Cook does not go much beyond quoting Kazin's own rants against the disastrous consequences of literary theory and Kazin's belief that literary quality was being subordinated to politically correct conformist attitudes. These polemics brought remunerative honoraria and publication fees from journals such as *Esquire*. Yet they were hardly enlightening nor much distinguishable from the "party line" being promoted by Hilton Kramer and others with whom Kazin had broken ranks politically.

With his skill at biographical reconstruction and a keen historical sensibility, Kazin could have been an ally and inspiration to scholars engaged in reinterpreting American literary history by salvaging the many outstanding (as well as middle-range) women, working-class, minority, and "white ethnic" authors who were unfairly excluded by the intellectual apparatus created to legitimate the post-war era's anti-radical crusade. Yet Kazin's disparaging of literary theory left him blind to one of its chief virtues: its systematic questioning of the apparatus's mystique of aesthetic quality. Capable of bestowing the accolade "great" three times on a single page without the need for amplification, Kazin's literary values were, in truth, both conventional and highly personal, thus limiting his horizons to the point where he could not even acknowledge the Harlem Renaissance. No doubt there are many excesses in the emergent literary criticism that has toppled the Age of Kazin, and one can still hope for a generosity that will allow Kazin's readmittance as a critic of genuine stature. But at least now the door is finally open to broader, more humane, and more historically sound understandings of the cultural practice of the past two centuries.

Alan Wald is the H. Chandler Davis Professor of English Literature and American Culture at the University of Michigan and, most recently, author of *TRINITY OF PASSION: THE LITERARY LEFT AND THE ANTI-FASCIST CRUSADE* (2007).

Critical Americans: Victorian Intellectuals and Transatlantic Liberal Reform. By Leslie Butler. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. Pp. xv, 381. \$65.00 cloth; \$24.95 paper.)

With *Critical Americans*, Leslie Butler has written a remarkable work that recovers a lost generation of American intellectuals. Tracing

the intellectual friendship among George William Curtis, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, James Russell Lowell, and Charles Eliot Norton from the 1840s through the beginning of the twentieth century, Butler makes a compelling case that we need to rethink the tradition of genteel liberalism. Too often, historians have dismissed the Mugwumps as backward-looking elites hostile to democracy. Butler recasts them not only as forward looking but also as committed to upholding the highest ideals of American democracy—critical engagement, an educated citizenry, cosmopolitan patriotism, and anti-imperialism.

Butler is part of a small but growing group of American intellectual historians who are challenging recent critiques depicting liberalism as just another form of, in Michel Foucault's words, "power-knowledge." Foucault-inspired historians have looked at marginalized groups—prisoners, orphans, the insane, homosexuals, etc.—to gain a sense of how liberal ideals "discipline and punish" those who do not fit in. In this framework, the margins are windows into the mainstream—all of us have been disciplined and punished. Other scholars, influenced by various postcolonial perspectives, see liberalism as a front for not only the domination of our selves but also of other selves. In both cases, liberal freedom has been recast as just another mode of power.

In contrast to this fundamentally ahistorical depiction of liberalism, Daniel Walker Howe's *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (1997) contends that in the decades following independence American intellectuals sought to democratize access to new forms of self-making. Continuing this story into the latter half of the nineteenth century, Butler argues that ideas of cultivation and "self-culture"—epitomized in William Ellery Channing's 1838 lecture of that name—were liberating. Before democracy, self-realization was constrained by inherited social roles; now, with the advent of a democratic society, citizens could make themselves. Yet this was an awesome responsibility. To negotiate careers, lives, and even identities of their own, Americans would need certain moral and intellectual resources—resources that Butler's Victorian intellectuals aimed to provide. Making education the heart of their project, these thinkers devoted themselves to instructing the masses through formal institutions and, in the public sphere, through journalism.

Complementing the focus on self-cultivation, Butler also studies the relationship between Victorian intellectuals' liberal democratic values and nationalism. Seeking to move beyond the much-too-easy tendency to dismiss nineteenth-century nationalism as a reactionary ideology, she characterizes her subjects as nationalists, but nationalists who were also cosmopolitans. American thinkers corresponded with

their British counterparts, read and wrote about British politics, and were thoughtful observers of global events. They loved their country but deplored its actions in the Philippines. As they examined both British and American imperial ambitions, they looked back to the events that forged their antislavery consciousness, and saw disturbing parallels. For Butler, the love of country found in late-nineteenth-century intellectuals made possible the kind of critical citizenship that ought to inform and sustain democratic societies today.

The strength and weakness of *Critical Americans* lies in Butler's admiration for her subjects. Her appreciation of their writings and ideas allows her to understand them on their own terms, and Butler does a nice job of bringing out their virtues. The problem is, for all their outspokenness, these elite Victorians said precious little about the most important problem facing America during the Gilded Age, the conflict between capital and labor.

This is not to say that these intellectuals did not think about the market and its problems. Indeed, Butler's subjects well anticipated the critique laid forth a century later in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), in which Daniel Bell claimed that Americans—caught between a desire to be unique individuals and consumer culture's emphasis on conformity—were suffering an erosion of their liberal selves' moral and intellectual autonomy. Although Butler's critical Americans could never have imagined the size and extent of post-1945 America's consumer society, they realized nonetheless that the right to cultivate one's self had to be extended to all people. Whether opposing slavery, corrupt partisan politics, or American imperialism, they remained true to the core American promise to liberate all persons from unjustified domination. Butler asks us to reassess what Victorian liberalism meant in a time before Freud, Nietzsche, and especially Foucault convinced us to reject it.

Johann N. Neem, *Assistant Professor of History at Western Washington University*, is author of *CREATING A NATION OF JOINERS: DEMOCRACY AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN EARLY NATIONAL MASSACHUSETTS*, to be published this year by Harvard University Press.

Charles Eliot Norton: The Art of Reform in Nineteenth-Century America. By Linda Dowling. (Durham, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2007. Pp. xxi, 221. \$39.95.)

The last few years have been good to Charles Eliot Norton. Four decades ago scholars typically emphasized his role in foreclosing