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In a Gilded Cage

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In a Gilded Cage

Abstract

The Oxford history of the United States may be the most prestigious series of American history survey volumes in print. Originally launched under the aegis of C. Vann Woodward and Richard Hofstadter, it embraces at least three Pulitzer Prize-winners—James M. McPherson’s *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (1988), David M. Kennedy’s *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (1999), and Daniel Walker Howe’s *What Hath God Wrought? The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (2007)—plus two other Pulitzer nominations and a Bancroft Prize in 1997 for James Patterson’s *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945–1974*.

There have been some misfires. Charles Grier Sellers’ *Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (1991) was so unabashed in its Marxist blatherskite that it was withdrawn from the series and published as a separate volume. H.W. Brands’s account of the Gilded Age, *Leviathan: America Comes of Age, 1865–1900* (2007), was yanked at the last minute, too, without comment from Oxford—but not without suggestions that Brands was too complimentary to industrial capitalism. (Oxford published it anyway, as a stand-alone.) Benjamin Schwarz, then the *Atlantic*’s literary and national editor, gave the series the back of his hand in 2006, dismissing all but the volumes by Robert Middlekauff (on the Revolution) and McPherson as “bloated and intellectually flabby,” lacking “intellectual refinement, analytical sharpness, and stylistic verve.” [excerpt]

Keywords

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American Politics | History | United States History

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Review of Richard White’s *The Republic For Which It Stands*.

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By: [Allen C. Guelzo](#)

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The Oxford history of the United States may be the most prestigious series of American history survey volumes in print. Originally launched under the aegis of C. Vann Woodward and Richard Hofstadter, it embraces at least three Pulitzer Prize-winners—James M. McPherson’s *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (1988), David M. Kennedy’s *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (1999), and Daniel Walker Howe’s *What Hath God Wrought? The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (2007)—plus two other Pulitzer nominations and a Bancroft Prize in 1997 for James Patterson’s *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945–1974*.

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Schwarz’s estimate of the series will not be improved by its latest offering, Richard White’s *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age*,

1865–1896. Despite Dr. Johnson’s offhand dictum that no one but a blockhead ever wrote but for money, it is still surpassingly rare that an author begins by announcing—as White does—that he wrote his book because “I needed the money.” But his larger motivation clearly lies in his conviction that the current Age of Trump is simply a replay of the Gilded Age, and that Gilded Ages are “easier to describe and analyze as an historian than indulge or endure as a citizen.”

The Gilded Age America he describes was conceived under a delusion, and dedicated to a proposition mixing equal parts racism, sexism, capitalism, individualism, elitism, deception, fraud, and degradation. The era’s delusion was fostered by no less than Abraham Lincoln. “Americans had, unknowingly, conceived twins in 1865,” White writes on the introduction’s first page. “The first twin embodied the world they anticipated emerging from the Civil War, and it died before ever being born. The second, unexpected, twin lived, forever haunted by its sibling.”

White’s first “twin” is free labor—the idea that in an open and democratic society, citizens enter marketplaces without let or hindrance and sell their labor to whoever will buy. It was an idea born of John Locke, matured in the English-speaking world by John Stuart Mill and the Manchester School, and articulated in its clearest fashion by Lincoln:

The prudent, penniless beginner in the world, labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land, for himself; then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him. This, say its advocates, is free labor—the just and generous, and prosperous system, which opens the way for all—gives hope to all, and energy, and progress, and improvement of condition to all.

But it was all for nothing, declares White. At its inception free labor was a fraud. It never drew an honest breath after 1865, if it ever drew one. Prudent, penniless beginners are invariably the prey of their predecessors, and can succeed in no other way than by forcibly expanding into other people’s domains and subjugating them. Each expansion is cloaked in fraud and lies, and since the freedom to contract for one’s own labor is nothing more than a different kind of slavery, the likely result is prosperity for the deceitful, manipulating few who corruptly obtain control of the outcomes.

What kept free labor such an attractive bait, says White, was its near-kin ideology of the “home”—the promised reward for those serving the free-labor Moloch. But the home itself teemed with oppression and abuse. It “embodied all the gendered and racialized assumptions of American republicanism and the American economy,” and its defense was the excuse for inflicting “horrendous violence and repression” on “Chinese, blacks, Indians, and to a lesser degree some European immigrants.” It is not clear from White’s telling whether the home inflicted greater degrees of slavery on men or women, or why he is reluctant to admit that, in 1870, one in five Americans owned their own home, and immigrants purchased and owned homes at greater rates than the native-born—but he’s confident that the home’s ultimate product was Lizzie Borden and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union.

Oddly in White’s narrative, free labor, which is supposed to have been dead-on-arrival at the close of the Civil War, has a Monty-Python-like capacity for getting up and insisting it’s happy. Free labor, White declaims, was dead in 1865; it is, nevertheless, alive in the mid-1870s to provide “a fraying bridge over a widening class divide.” It is not yet dead when Thomas Edison opens his laboratory in Menlo Park, nor in 1889, when Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* transports the industrious Hank Morgan to medieval England to upset the Round Table. But whenever its shelf-life finally expires—whether in the hands of Richard Ely’s *The Past and the Present of Political Economy* (1884) or the members of the Farmers’ Alliance—it is accompanied by the realization that “individualism, contract freedom, and laissez-faire” are “a set of anachronisms utterly out of step with modern conditions” which must be replaced by distributive government’s controlling hand.

Corruption is the malevolent “twin” that survived free labor to become the evil genius guiding the Gilded Age’s economy and governance. “The Gilded Age was corrupt, and corruption in government and business mattered.” Not that White believes anything could have prevented this: corruption sprang naturally from democracy’s soil, as unfettered voters persistently elected politicians (like Ben Butler) whom their betters (like Charles Eliot Norton and Richard Henry Dana) knew to be unfit. A controlling, distributive government might, at least on some counts, be understood as a synonym for *corruption*, but not here.

White's indictment of corrupt Gilded Age Solons is a long one. But none draws his venom more than Ulysses S. Grant. The two administrations of the victor of Appomattox and suppressor of the Ku Klux Klan have quite a donkey's tail of scandals pinned to them—Jay Gould, the Whiskey Ring, Credit Mobilier, the Belknap bribery. None of them actually *involved* Grant. No matter: White's hatred of Grant is maniacally relentless. Grant's "financial and economic policies...all contributed to a rich stew of disappointment and alienation" while he "accepted the favors of rich men bestowed in the name of a grateful nation" and was "always susceptible to the flattery of the wealthy." And in his lowest of low blows, White does not hesitate to snarl that, after the dying Grant raced his last clock to complete the *Memoirs* which rescued his family from penury, we should be grateful that he "ran out of time to write about his presidency."

* * *

There is misery to be recounted in the Gilded Age, as no doubt there is in the age that preceded it, and no doubt in this one. But the misery of White's Gilded Age has a manufactured air. We are told that immigrant farmers were impoverished by the American landscape—and that it was the productivity of that landscape which forced them to leave their Austro-Hungarian hovels and journey to the American free-labor Gehenna. White's account is also narrow, in terms of geography (his America frequently vanishes to little more than Chicago and New York City), the economy (western railroads), and people (urban immigrants). We never actually learn much about manufacturing output, imports and exports, or the complexities of the tariffs (the 1885 *Tribune Almanac* needed 19 pages to describe the scope of the 1883 tariff legislation but in White it gets none). The U.S. Navy's rebirth in the 1880s, from its post-Civil War erasure, gets no mention; neither do diplomatic affairs (including the purchase of Alaska), the Fall River Line, women's colleges, public lecturers, the great bicycle craze, nor the dime novel. State governments only bob into view when a strike needs suppressing—this, despite the fact that the Gilded Age was the paramount era of state government activism. The telephone is the subject of exactly three paragraphs (largely to note how Alexander Graham Bell converted it into "a monopoly and profit"), and Joseph Glidden, who invented barbed wire in 1873, doesn't even get a sentence—thus telescoping the two Gilded Age inventions which most transformed American spaces into almost nothing.

* * *

The intellectual history of the Gilded Age is even more invisible: William James gets two pages, John Dewey one, Josiah Royce and Charles Sanders Peirce none. Baseball, that great Gilded Age cultural confection, earns just one reference, on how racist its professional membership became and the reserve clause's resemblance to slavery. Booker T. Washington barely merits a glance. Winslow Homer, Charles W. Chestnutt, John Singer Sargent, Sarah Orne Jewett, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Ida Tarbell, John Philip Sousa, Washington Roebling, Amy Beach, Nat Love, George Whitefield Chadwick, Louisa May Alcott, and Theodore Thomas have no existence worth White's notice.

You do not have to love the Gilded Age to sense something terribly awry in White's grinding recitation of its nastiness, or his single-minded focus on economic immiseration. One can feel nothing but shame for the nation he describes—and it is hard not to believe that the infliction of shame is White's principal purpose, more than even money or politics, in writing the book. This is also an America that my Irish great-grandfather, James P. Kerrigan, would have stared at incredulously. A man of the Gilded Age, and a railroad-worker, he died of gangrene from stepping on a rusted rail; but it never occurred to him to curse the United States from his deathbed for his bad lot in life. It is White's complete failure to connect people like James Kerrigan with the hopeless story he lays out in *The Republic for Which It Stands* which puzzles me, and would have infuriated my great-grandfather.

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