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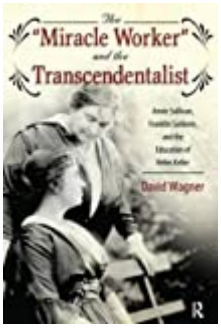
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Wagner. *The "Miracle Worker" and the Transcendentalist: Annie Sullivan, Franklin Sanborn, and the Education of Helen Keller.* Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2012. viii + 171 pp. $140.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59451-936-9; $33.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-59451-937-6.



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Published on H-Disability (February, 2014)

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A Strong Radical Woman and the Philanthropic Men Who Knew Her

Can two people, at least one of whom does not fit neatly into any mold, be used to exemplify contrasting social forces? In this delightful book, David Wagner proposes to do just that with Franklin Benjamin Sanborn and Annie Sullivan Macy, even as he points out the pitfalls of such an approach. The theme of the book is social status and the worldviews that go with it. Disability–Sullivanâs visual impairment and Helen Kellerâs deaf-blindness–is responsible for the contacts between Sanborn and Sullivan, but their differences (and commonalities) derive from other sources.

Sanborn (1831-1917)–considerably better known in his own time than today–was a younger contemporary of the New England transcendentalists. An admirer of Samuel Gridley Howe (1801-76), Sanborn deeply respected Howeâs work as the first director of the Perkins School for the Blind. Sanborn joined Howe as a member of the âSecret Sixâ funders of John Brown and, after Brownâs failed 1859 raid at Harperâs Ferry, the two men together avoided arrest by fleeing to Canada. In 1891, fifteen years after Howeâs death, Sanborn published an adulatory biography of his mentor, *Dr. S. G. Howe, The Philanthropist.*

Sanborn was the founder of the American Social Science Association and the Concord School of Philosophy. Social reformer and outspoken anti-imperialist, he abandoned his lifelong attachment to the Republican Party only at the age of eighty-one, when he voted for Woodrow Wilson. Throughout his long life, Sanborn believed that the privileged were duty-bound to do right by their less fortunate fellows, and only age (and discouragement following his oldest sonâs suicide) kept him from being a major voice of the Progressive Era.

While Wagner can claim that Sanborn is representative of nineteenth-century enlightened New England liberalism, he cannot say that Sullivan was typical of any school of thought or social movement. A brilliant woman, headstrong and disabled, Sullivanâs position as Kellerâs teacher and companion put her in a category of one. And Keller was likewise unique, for much the same reasons: intellectual brilliance, strong will, disability, and

her close relationship with Sullivan.

There were evident differences between the two women, beyond the fact that Keller was the more severely disabled and, for most of their time together, the more dependent. Sullivan was the discarded child of dirt-poor Irish Catholic immigrants to Massachusetts, consigned at a young age to the Tewksbury poorhouse, while Keller came from a middle-class southern Protestant family, the daughter of a Confederate officer who sustained his family by his profession of newspaper editor. Given their closeness, the coincidence of Sullivanâs and Kellerâs views on many topics is not at all surprising; but for the sake of the cultural clashes that Wagner sets out to explicate, it was important that Sullivan be the major protagonist.

In 1880, when Sanborn visited Tewksbury as an official of the Massachusetts Department of Charities, Sullivan ran up to him, insisting that he get her out of the poorhouse and into a place where she could learn to read and write. Visually impaired and evidently quite bright, Sullivan was a good candidate for the Perkins School, and Sanborn arranged her transfer. Sullivan had disliked the poorhouse and did not hesitate to criticize its management, but she did feel at home among its inmates, who shared her class background and often her ethnicity.

She was not much happier at Perkins–where she stood out as an Irish American charity student–but Perkins did serve her well. She finally became literate, and her vision greatly improved after surgery for trachoma. Equally significant, Sullivan had the opportunity to learn the manual alphabet that Howe had developed for his deaf-blind student, Laura Bridgman (1829-89). Sullivan graduated from Perkins in 1886 and contacted Sanborn to thank him for his help, but Sanborn never responded to her letter. And, despite being class valedictorian, Sullivan did not yet know how she would make use of her education.

Soon, though, Kellerâs parents contacted Michael Anagnos (1837-1906), Howeâs successor as Perkinsâ director. Desperate to find a teacher for their seemingly uncontrollable daughter–and aware of Howeâs work with Bridgman–they looked to the Perkins School for help. Anagnos decided that the impoverished and jobless Sullivan might well fill the bill and so Sullivan left for Alabama in March 1887. Within a few months she taught Keller to communicate by finger spelling and after another few months, Sullivan was back in the Boston area with Keller in tow. Keller impressed Anagnos, and Anagnos loudly celebrated the achievement of Sullivan, his former student. But as Kellerâs celebrity grew, Sullivan found herself at odds with some powerful people of Sanbornâs social class–and indeed of his acquaintance.

Howe, by then dead for more than a decade, was a hero to the liberal upper class of New England. After graduating from Harvard Medical School, he had traveled to Europe to fight for Greek independence from the Ottomans. He later toured European institutions for blind children and returned to New England to head the Perkins School, where among his accomplishments, his work with Bridgman stood out. Howe died several years before Sullivan arrived at Perkins, but Bridgman lived at the school until her death at age fifty-nine. Sullivan knew Bridgman, and Keller had the opportunity to meet her.

For Howeâs widow (the writer Julia Ward Howe) and others, the claim that Sullivan–Irish Catholic orphan, child of a sickly mother and drunken father, who herself was illiterate until her teens–could in less than a year have such profound success with a deaf-blind child, was troubling, even offensive. Kellerâs brilliant reception upstaged Bridgman, and Sullivanâs reputation threatened to obscure Howeâs.

This was a problem for Anagnos, who was both fond of Sullivan and closely associated with Howeâs family. Born in Greece, he had come to the United States as Howeâs protÃ©gÃ© and assistant, had married Howeâs daughter, and was Howeâs immediate successor at Perkins. While Julia Ward Howe disparaged Sullivanâs accomplishment, Anagnos knew first-hand of Sullivanâs capabilities. Anagnos was also keenly aware that Sullivan and Keller could provide excellent publicity for the school, even though Keller was never formally a student there.

And here, Sanborn–an admirer and disciple of Samuel Howe–reenters Wagnerâs narrative. On hearing of Sullivanâs success, he claimed to remember neither having met her at Tewksbury a decade earlier, nor having received her letter of thanks. Sanborn acknowledged Sullivanâs work, but he was inclined to believe that she had done nothing original and merely made use of the techniques devised by Howe.

Meanwhile, Sullivanâs ties to Anagnos were strong enough that she had Keller send him, as a birthday gift in 1892, a supposedly original story called âThe Frost King.â Interested in further publicizing Sullivanâs success, Anagnos published the story in *The Mentor*, the Perkins student magazine. Publication of âThe Frost King,â when Keller was just eleven–and a mere four

years since she had begun to develop language skills–raised the level of Kellerâs celebrity and, to some, of Sullivanâs notoriety.

Skeptics believed that Sullivan had planted the story in Kellerâs mind, and possibly had even written it herself. Then, because *The Mentor* was distributed widely, âThe Frost Kingâ came into the hands of someone who recognized it as all but identical to an older story in a childrenâs anthology. It was thus clearly established that Keller had not written the story. Charges of plagiarism flew. Sullivan denied ever having read âThe Frost Kingâ to Keller and suggested that someone else must have done so.

A set of prominent New Englanders funded an inquiry that identified a time when Sullivan was ill and Keller had been placed in the care of other friends. One of these friends had apparently read the story to Keller, but an air of scandal remained. Julia Ward Howe, in particular, accused Sullivan of fraud and plagiarism. Anagnos was in a difficult position, and his relations with Sullivan and her student never returned to where they had been. At this point, Sanborn spoke up to defend Sullivan. With others, including a growing number of well-known people who had come to know Keller, he credited Keller with an impressive memory and made light of the charge of plagiarism.

So wherein lies the conflict between Sanborn and Sullivan? In Wagnerâs story, Keller, her accomplishments, and the âFrost King scandalâ are marginally relevant. And disability–or, at least, the fact that some of the protagonists are disabled–is not of great importance. Sullivanâs poor vision and her work with Keller did indeed bring her into contact with Sanborn on several occasions, but disability was not central to the differences between them. What mattered was social class writ large–to include immigrant status, ethnicity, and religious background–which could manifest itself in attitudinal differences toward social service, the social order, and what constituted progress.

In many dimensions, the content of Sullivanâs and Sanbornâs beliefs was similar. Both were anti-imperialist and opposed U.S. entry into World War One; Sanborn had been an abolitionist before the Civil War and both were liberals on questions of race; both were dismayed by poverty and other social evils. But Sullivan–and, incidentally, Keller–was a socialist; an ardent advocate of the trade union movement; supporter of Eugene V. Debs for president; and, after Sanbornâs death, sympathizer of the Bolshevik revolution.

The well-documented meeting of the fourteen-year-old, illiterate Sullivan, and Sanborn, the middle-aged social reformer–a meeting that changed Sullivanâs life but was quickly forgotten by Sanborn–provides a fortuitous hook to entice the reader to greater curiosity about how these two fascinating characters sometimes clashed, and sometimes agreed, in the course of the succeeding decades. Wagner has picked an excellent story to tell, and he does a good job of doing so. While the prose occasionally falters, this book is suitable for undergraduates and even high school students, while also being a worthy piece of scholarship that merits a presence on graduate reading lists.