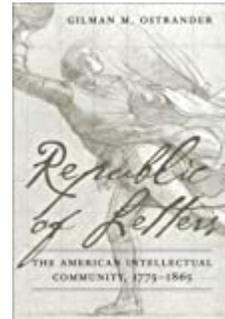




Gilman M. Ostrander. *Republic of Letters: The American Intellectual Community, 1776-1865.* Madison: Madison House, 1999. xvi +379 pp. \$35.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-945612-63-6.



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Intellectual Elites in America from the American Revolution to the Civil War

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When he died in 1986, the peripatetic Gilman M. Ostrander left behind his unpublished *Republic of Letters: The American Intellectual Community, 1776-1865*. Finally published by Madison House Publishers in 1999, this book is an elegantly penned study of Henry Adams's "literary class of the United States," serious American readers and writers from the American Revolution to the Civil War. Throughout the work, while admitting that "the term 'literary class' may imply a greater degree of homogeneity than in fact existed in the provincial societies of antebellum America," (p. xv) Ostrander elucidates the common ground and experiences shared by the American literati.

In the first chapter Ostrander shows that the American literary class was a "collegiate aristocracy" fashioned by liberal arts colleges and a classical curriculum. Charles A. Beard interpreted the founding generation incorrectly in Ostrander's estimation: "the case for an intellectual interpretation of the Constitution remains in some respects more compelling than the case for the eco-

nomic interpretation." (p. 4) In buttressing his argument Ostrander notes that Robert Morris, "the most monied man in the convention and the nation, contributed little to the proceedings [of the Constitutional Convention], for instance; he served on no committees and spoke only twice" (p. 4) while James Madison, by contrast, was bookish and of modest means. Only a minority of the Constitutional Convention did not attend college, and most of those members were well educated outside the confines of the college. Intellectual and ruling elites were classically trained gentlemen and "provincial colleges were intended to perpetuate this ruling class of classically educated gentlemen, and in the nineteenth century even the newer state colleges and universities tended to perpetuate this elitist tradition until the Civil War disrupted the traditional system and the Morrill Land Grant College Act of 1862 prepared the way for comprehensive democratic curricular reforms in higher education." (p. 20) Gradually classical studies would be supplemented by new science and belles lettres until "liberally supplied by Scottish textbooks, American colleges reformulated the curriculum into a new scholasticism appropriate to a modern, moral, republican, Protestant society function-

ing within the framework of a divinely planned, orderly, and essentially changeless universe.” (p. 22) This curriculum was common ground for intellectual elites in the United States.

With the foundation laid in the important first chapter, Ostrander traces the evolution of a national intellectual community and a “Republic of Belles Lettres” in the “Philadelphia Enlightenment,” “Knickerbocker New York,” “Brahmin Boston,” and the slave South. Along the way he discusses the political predilections of the “Literati in Democratic-Whig America,” and the Bostonization of the Literary Republic“ before concluding his study with an examination of the Academy of Arts and Letters founded in 1904, a gerontocracy of forty-nine men and one woman (Julia Ward Howe, aged eighty-nine) whose average age was sixty-five. “If the academy offered an accurate picture of the contemporary American Republic of Letters,” Ostrander contends, “then American high culture of the progressive era represented the fruition of the generation of writers, artists, and scholars that had come to manhood a half century earlier, in the golden age of America’s literary renaissance.” (p. 316)

There is much to commend in Ostrander’s study. The author’s prose is elegant and refined; *Republic of Letters* is a pleasure to read. This book is a fascinating excursion into America’s literary, cultural and intellectual past, and it excels in several key areas. First, Ostrander’s discussion of education and the collegiate aristocracy solidly lays the groundwork for the remainder of his book. Second, the counterbalanced seventh and eighth chapters, “The South in the Literary Republic,” and “Bostonization of the Literary Republic,” effectively demonstrate the sectional tensions brewing in antebellum America. Third, Ostrander adroitly treats the emergence of belles lettres and their tensions with science. In large part this was a generational issue, one that Ostrander cleverly explores using two diary entries from John Quincy Adams. Adams, at home in both the scientific world and the world of belles lettres, recorded a dinner with President Jefferson in 1807 in which Samuel Latham Mitchill discussed scientific issues at length. In November 1831, Adams,

now a former president, recorded a conversation that turned to Shakespeare’s women. By 1831, belles lettres, not science, were the topic of elite conversations. The two disciplines would soon part company: “The founding of the Smithsonian Institution in 1846 as a scientists’ preserve demonstrated beyond the confines of the academy that the physical sciences had seceded from the Republic of Letters and that most literary men were willing to see them go.” (p. 215) Fourth, Ostrander’s discussion of the Academy of Arts and Letters as a curtain call for those towering literary figures of the nineteenth century is a nice touch. Finally, despite being unfashionable, Ostrander’s focus indicates that elite history and culture still has something to say.

Yet, for all its grace, *Republic of Letters* has serious warts as well. Its most noticeable flaw arises from the thirteen years between the book’s completion and its publication; a study written when Reagan was president is simply not current today. This is not to say that it lacks relevancy, but rather that it is dated and does not (cannot) take into account scholarship in the intervening decade. Moreover, this work has a datedness that transcends the delay in publication. Ostrander looked to the past; his book seems to be aimed at/against the revisionist trend in historiography beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, and his salvo against the Beardian thesis of nearly a century ago seems particularly backward looking. Another problem stems from Ostrander’s use of the literary elite: he discusses dozens of writers without delving sufficiently into their works. We know that individuals such as Hawthorne, Emerson, and Poe were towering figures in their day, but why? What in their works resonated with the reading public? These are questions that need to be addressed. Finally, Ostrander tries so hard to homogenize literary figures into one Republic of Letters that he obfuscates their very real differences; the heterogeneity to be found in antebellum literary life is as much a part of the Republic of Letters as the similarities.

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