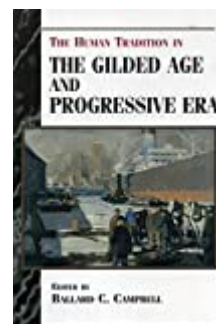


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Ballard C. Campbell, ed.** *The Human Tradition in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.* The Human Tradition in America. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2000. xxiv + 231 pp. \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8420-2735-9; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8420-2734-2.



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This collection of thirteen biographical essays is one of five volumes on the “Human Tradition in U.S. History”, part of a larger series on this same theme world-wide. Aimed at undergraduate courses in American studies and history, the essays are nonetheless written at a level to be of value to all students of the era. Each includes a brief introduction, notes, and recommendations for further reading. In an opening summary, editor Ballard C. Campbell provides context and identifies common themes.

The biographees include social activists Ida B. Wells, Mary Lease, Mary Harris “Mother” Jones, and, Jean-Baptiste Primeau, the pastor of Worcester’s French-Canadians; politicians James G. Blaine, Richard Olney, Francis G. Newlands, James Michael Curley, and Hiram Johnson; social investigators Carroll D. Wright and Clelia Duel Mosher; baseball great Christy Mathewson; naval strategist William S. Sims, and novelist Edith Wharton. Although the majority are native born WASPS, the list includes first- and second-generation Irish and French-Canadian Catholics and one African-American. Born between 1830 and 1880, they provide case studies of the response of several generations to the forces that transformed the United States from the 1870s through World War I.

Rather than attempt comprehensive coverage, the authors focus on defining moments in their subjects’ lives,

for example, Wright’s 1875 annual report prepared for the Massachusetts’s Bureau of Labor Statistics, a budget survey that launched discussion of what today would be called “a living wage;” and Mosher’s survey of the sexual practices of married women that challenged Victorian conceptions of women as “passionless.” For the politicians, the focus is on elections, legislative successes, or unexpected crises: for Blaine, his 1884 presidential bid; for Olney, the Pullman strike of 1894; for Newlands, the National Reclamation Act of 1902; for Hiram Johnson, his career as progressive governor of California (1911-17).

For ethnic and racial minorities, women especially, personal tragedies and indignities provide the back-drop for social activism: Wells’ 1884 challenge of white-only railroad accommodations; Lease’s role in the 1892 Populist convention; Jones’ support of cotton workers and miners. For Edith Wharton and William Sims, in contrast, World War I offered opportunity for unaccustomed public service: organizing civilian relief in France (Wharton); and successfully urging the convoy system that minimized losses to German U-boats (Sims). For pitcher Christy Mathewson, triumph came in a lifetime record of 378-188, and unparalleled public adulation.

For classroom use, this focused approach provides rich opportunities for constructing units that combine biography with primary and secondary materials of the in-

structor's choosing. Readers looking for a new wave of revisionism, however, will be disappointed. One exception is James Connelly's essay on Boston Boss Curley, based on his book *The Triumph of Ethnic Progressivism*, Boston, 1900-1925\_ (1998). Whereas many historians assume that ethnicity was the tail that wagged the political dog, Curley's "politics of resentment" demonstrate that the early twentieth-century image and self-perception of the downtrodden "Boston Irish" was the product of a new style of media-based politics and centralized administration that allowed the cultivation and reward of victimhood.

Other essays succeed more modestly in unsettling conventional views. Blaine—of whom a popular textbook once said he “made no impression upon American politics except to lower its moral tone”—appears in Charles Calhoun's essay as the spokesman for a forward-looking plan of economic development and racial justice that could best be achieved with the help of benevolent government. His career thus contradicts the conventional image of Gilded Age politics as issue-less. Ballard Campbell argues that Richard Olney, often damned for his role in crushing the Pullman strike, was actually sympathetic to the problems workers faced, later softened his opposition to unions, and eventually supported Wilson and many progressive reforms. Add to this Mary Lease moving from Populism to giving speeches for T.R. in 1912 (and then suing the campaign for not paying her enough), and Newlands vacillating between traditional Democratic party programs and Bull Moose activism, and it becomes clear how slippery are the labels “Gilded Age conservatism,” “Populism,” and “progressivism.”

Unfortunately, however, the concept of a “human tradition” cutting across these categories projects more a warm glow rather than new light. If being “sensitive” and “considerate” are its defining characteristics (as remarked in an opening quotation from the British author E.M. Forster) the tradition would appear virtually boundless. If, on the other hand, as Forster also suggests, a sense of humor is one criterion, only “Mother” Jones among those here represented would seem to qualify (West Virginia Governor William E. Glasscock, she told miners in 1912, should henceforth be called “Crystal Peter” [p.92]). In the absence of further definition, reform in the “human tra-

dition” appears too largely the result of pluck and luck, an activist Algerism for our new century.

“Human tradition” also appears to promise a history of “real people” (as series editor Charles W. Calhoun notes in introduction). But the subjects of these biographies are the near-famous rather than the unknown. Although they may have shared experiences with Americans in all walks of life, it does not follow that they were “representative of other citizens” (p. xiv). Their primary interest lies in their unique and exceptional responses to the events of their times. Better to state this fact squarely than to perpetuate the notion that the only history worth doing must deal with the lives of ordinary folk.

Together, these well-crafted, intelligently-written essays stress “the capacity of human will and the tenacity of personal commitment” (p. xxiv), a major theme of the volume. But the authors at their best provide something more. Carroll Wright combined a perceptive understanding of the Americanization process with “racist” stereotypes that deeply offended French-Canadian immigrants. Ida Wells' impassioned opposition to lynching and racial discrimination blinded her to strategies of reform based on black-white cooperation just as “Mother” Jones' dislike of middle class “ladies” precluded cooperation in successful cross-class alliances. While documenting the sexual liberation of women, Mosher was an unhappy loner who refused alliances with other women in her field of medicine, and fantasized about a “perfect friend” who never materialized. Blaine was more talk than action; Johnson ended his career as a conservative isolationist, a caricature of his former self; and Newlands, in addition to calling for repeal of the 15th amendment, shaped a water policy that critics today charge with primarily helping monopoly agriculturists, casino-owners, and real estate developers. Even the near-flawless Mathewson, as manager of the Cincinnati Reds at the end of his career, struggled unsuccessfully to curb the cheating of his first-baseman and later watched as the ever-present dark side of the national past-time unfolded in the Black Sox scandal of 1919. Students in search of role-models will thus discover that virtue is rarely without its defects and that human will sometimes meets circumstances it cannot control.

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