

# H-Net Reviews

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**Lewis O. Saum.** *Eugene Field and His Age*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001. xii + 324 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-4287-6.

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*Eugene Field and His Age* by Lewis O. Saum was published, I presume, to fill a large gap in Field scholarship and to preserve the work of a respected authority on the nineteenth century. Except for late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century books and articles, little has been published about Field in general, even less in the area of journalism. Francis Wilson wrote *The Eugene Field I Knew* in 1898, and Slason Thompson published *Life of Eugene Field: The Poet of Childhood* in 1927. Two earlier works have been republished, *Eugene Field: A Story in Heredity and Contradictions* (1901, reprinted in 1973) by Slason Thompson, and *Eugene Field's Creative Years* (1924, reprinted in 1973 and 1992) by Charles H. Dennis. Except for *Eugene Field in His Home* (1978) by Ida C. Below and the *Eugene Field Book* (1977) by Mary E. Burt *et al.*, the only book that has come out on Field recently is *Eugene Field: The Children's Poet*, published in 1994 by Carol Greene *et al.*, which is out of print in both paper and cloth. Karl E. Meyer's *An Omnibus of American Newspaper Columns* (1990) at least includes Field's contributions, but he is only one of many.

The only works that approach Field's role in journalism history are articles, such as "My Recollections of Eugene Field as a Journalist in Denver" by Joseph G. Brown, in *Colorado Magazine* (1927); "Eugene Field's Newspaper Days in St. Louis" by Harry R. Burke, published in the *Missouri Historical Review* (1947); "The Birth and Death of a Satirist: Eugene Field and Chicago's Growing Pains" by Robert A. Day, in *American Literature* (1950); "Eugene Field: Pioneer-Colyumist, Managing Editor and Poet" by Walte Stewart, in *Journalism Quarterly* (1966), "Eugene Field: Political Satirist" by Duane A. Smith, in *Colorado Quarterly* (1974); "Melville K. Stone, Eugene Field, and the Beginnings of Literary Journalism" by David D. Anderson, in *Society for the Study of Midwestern Litera-*

*ture Newsletter* (1980); and "Eugene Field and the Political Journalism of St. Joseph," published by Saum in *Missouri Historical Review* (1999). Fortunately, many editions of Field's writings, mostly his verse and his collected works, are still in print. Everyone agrees on the importance of his contributions, but almost nobody seems to write about him. The meager publications about Field prove the need for more Field scholarship.

As a result, I approached *Eugene Field and His Age* by Lewis O. Saum with eagerness and enthusiasm. The promise in the subtitle of placing him within his time period and with contemporaries was especially appealing. From glancing through the entries in the book's bibliography, Saum appears to be a leading authority on Eugene Field and an important scholar in journalism history. That he has published scholarly books before and that he has done his research on this one is obvious. That the University of Nebraska Press has a reputation for publishing important works is well known. That the book will have diverse appeal is another story.

Saum's introduction to the book is one of the stronger sections in the work. He briefly highlights major aspects of Field's life that pertain to his focus and summarizes the book's content. The first three chapters, "The West," "The Politics in Missouri," and "The Politics in the Nation," explains Saum, "treat some convictions or professions of Field's era," especially politics. The last three chapters, "Ball Games," "Theater," and "The Literary Arena" concern "diversions and entertainments" that interested Field. Saum shares with us the complexities and frustrations of nineteenth-century newspaper research as well as the almost overwhelming amount of Field material he has discovered and with which he had to familiarize himself. Those of us who have done such

work understand the time-consuming, eye-straining, and demanding nature of such scholarship.

Chapter 1, "The West," discusses Field's work starting in 1881 on the *Denver Tribune* and his growth as a writer. Saum begins with Field's primer style of writing, whose moral lessons were ostensibly written for children, but better understood by adults. Field soon turned his attention to politics and often used what Saum terms "plaintive poetry." After cataloging a myriad of people and events that Field wrote about while in Denver, Saum explains, "Field wrote a great deal about the West, both in journalistic description and in literary creation, both during his stay there and after. Much of the literary material has stock characters and situations, and its rank in the genre of letters will be left to others." Saum does state that the West was more of a "process than a place" and that Field's attitude toward it was "positive" (p. 32).

For some reason, Saum chose to devote chapter 2, "The Politics in Missouri," to the time Field spent in that state during the 1870s, the years before he went to Denver, the topic of the discussion of chapter 1. Although this chapter offers some interesting biographical information about Field and his marriage, it, too, is crammed with names and events occurring in Missouri, most unknown except to people familiar with the history of politics in the South, especially Missouri. Chapter 3, "Politics in the Nation" continues the political theme, this time emphasizing people and events in Chicago and across the United States. Field's column, "Sharps and Flats," appeared regularly for twelve years in Melville Stone's *Chicago Daily News*. John M. Hamilton, John F. Finerty, Elijah Haines, Richard M. Oglesby, William Johnson, Henry Evans, William Ralls Morrison, George A. Anderson, Frank Bridges, John A. Logan, Andy Welch, the Cook County Democratic Club, William McKinley, Grover Cleveland, and even the crisis in Cuba are a few of the subjects of Field's column. Saum notes that Field "offered a myriad of details about persons and events now nearly beyond reclaiming" (p. 103). Even those Saum is able to annotate are obscure today to even the educated reader. A staunch Republican, Field generously or playfully lauded those who were "good," but he roasted the Democrats who wavered from his ideals of unity and harmony. "For over twenty years Field contributed hugely to the whimsical and comical literature regarding American politics," Saum states. "One might even wonder if any others contributed as much. So it puzzles one that Field receives so little attention in works dealing with political humor" (p. 126).

Chapter 4, "Ball Games," and chapter 5, "Theater," confirm Field's significant contributions regarding the new interest in public entertainment in the late nineteenth century, and "Field did yeoman work in bringing Americans into accommodation with its athletes, actors, and the like," especially its "bohemian" aspects (pp. 131-132). Field's writing responded to the Progressive Era's interest in physical culture, and he closely followed the White Stockings baseball team and player Michael J. "King" Kelly, whom he admired immensely. When the White Stockings were losing, however, he chided them for their "shiftless playing," and he noted that one game had been "the most humiliating showing their admirers had ever been called upon to witness" (pp. 141-142). When the team lost the World Series and Kelly left the game in 1886, Field's passion for the team waned. Field also commented on other sports, such as football, golf, cricket, billiards, yachting, hunting, and boxing. Although Saum notes that Field left no memorable writings about baseball, he argues that his writings "lent luster to the rage for sports" and "played an active and critical role in ushering in those greater enjoyments and sportier times" (p. 162). Field performed the same role in fostering interest in nineteenth-century theater: "He described; he criticized; he championed; he chided and parodied; and in nearly all spread a comforting glow over once-suspect activities" (p. 161). Actors and actresses, such as Helena Modjeska, Mary Anderson, Francis Wilson, Lily Langtry, Emma Abbott, Edwin Booth, Francis Wilson, and Sol Smith Russell, and musician Theodore Thomas, are some of the personalities who received his attention. He applauded their victories but sometimes ridiculed their arrogance.

The last chapter, "The Literary Arena," describes Field's contributions to promoting imaginative literature. "In Field," Saum writes, "one deals with a person of literary instincts and aspirations; whatever he wrote had an artful and imaginative cast. In this he was doing what a fair number of his acquaintances of his formative years were doing. Essentially journalists, they branched out to poetry, prose, lecturing, and acting" (p. 211). The chapter describes Field's literary involvements with Edmund C. Stedman, Richard H. Stoddard, Julian Hawthorne, and Arthur Conan Doyle. "Field befriended these and others, and he defended them in season. He chided them and he praised them; he laughed with them and occasionally at them" (p. 223). Among other writers discussed in this chapter are James Russell Lowell, Mark Twain, Hamlin Garland, and Mary Hartwell Catherwood. The chapter, too, touches on Field's bibliomania, his preservation of

archaic English, and his sentimentality.

In the epilogue, Saum comments briefly on Field's family and his reputation after his death in 1895. Field's fall from grace, he believes, was due to several factors: his political writings discuss now forgotten state and local topics; the reputations of his close friends and associates suffered, and he failed "by association"; his sentimentalism became outmoded; his Genteel tendencies and rebellion against the Realists was a losing battle; his popular poetry went out of style; and even his patriotism became unappreciated. Saum summarizes, "Field deserves attention for what he did and what he wrote in his own time. Much of it retains its interest, whether satirical or sentimental. Much of it does not, and that only illustrates a fact of life and history. As has been noted, the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there" (p. 255).

Unfortunately, the book's organization is challenging to follow. The audience might be larger if a stronger context of Field's life and times had been expanded in the chapter beginnings and his contributions even more strongly summarized at their close. Biographical information about Field is relegated to a brief chronology, approximately one page of information at the beginning of the book, and is sprinkled only sporadically throughout the chapters. If Field's life were well known or if a contemporary biography were available, this would not be a problem. However, it becomes a handicap to an understanding of Field's work because his personality shaped his writing. Saum's style, too, is disappointing. The writing is strong where he analyzes and interprets in his own voice, such as in the introduction and epilogue. And, where Saum allows Field more than a few phrases or lines, the reader appreciates Field's humor and style. Regrettably, a large part of the text becomes a Saum/Field

duet as Saum patches snippets of Field quotations into his own sentences. Although this presentation of data for support is requisite in the social sciences and humanities, for me, the two styles, each excellent in its own way, are so disparate as to become discordant and disruptive when used together so frequently. This is a dilemma for all writers who find much to admire in their subjects, for they want to share this quote and that one and still another and another and I-can't-leave-this-one-out until it's just too much.

Perhaps my problem with *Eugene Field and His Age* lies within my expectations. Extremely interested in late-nineteenth-century columnists, Chicago in the 1880s in particular, and even in Eugene Field himself as a journalist, I had a scholarly agenda. I wanted to learn more about Eugene Field and Chicago journalism. As a book for specialized audiences—turn-of-the-century American political scholars, baseball fans, and Eugene Field devotees—this book will reward their patience, especially if they have an interest in a political event or a person about which little is known. Saum's index, mostly names, will help in that search. In addition, its impressive bibliography, especially the primary resources, may intrigue others into doing further study and giving this important pioneering journalist his due.

The density of the content, the patchwork style, and the narrow audience that it addresses, however, makes it a book you may want to borrow in order to read a particular chapter or two; it may not be a book you'll want to buy.

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