

The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher

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Review

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Applegate, Debby *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher*. Three Leaves Press, \$16.95 softcover ISBN 9780385513975

The Gospel According to Beecher

Henry Ward Beecher might appropriately be called a minister for the rest of us—the flawed, the inconsistent, and the easily tempted. Many a 19th century American found his or her image of God thoroughly transformed by Beecher's eloquent pulpit oratory and personal magnetism. Henry's father Lyman, the last great Puritan divine, exhorted his parishioners, and his children, to fear a stern, unforgiving patriarch, but Henry Ward encouraged his congregation to draw close to a gentle, patient father. His gospel of love meshed perfectly with the optimistic, adventurous spirit of 19th century America—increasingly comfortable with pleasure and profoundly enthusiastic about human potential—winning him popular fame as the most influential minister of his age. In his sentimental theology, self-indulgent private life, and ongoing crusades for social reform, Beecher both embodied and shaped the society around him. He also prefigured the public figure sex scandals of our own day, radiating a charisma that led him into personal indiscretions serious enough to shatter his image as a man of God.

Debby Applegate's life and times biography vividly captures both the exuberant showmanship and the poignant vulnerability of Beecher's life. It probes the roots of the insecurity underlying his lifelong need to be adored by those around him, and his tendency to seek the adulation of women other than his wife. Seamlessly integrating the personal and political, Applegate suggests that the great contradictions of Beecher's politics, such as his pre-Civil War reputation as a racial progressive and stalwart postwar support of Andrew Johnson's Reconstruction policies, sprang as much from deeply-rooted contradictions inside the man himself as from contemporary events and forces. Beecher could move a crowd to tears with a sentimental evocation of black humanity, but he also possessed a lifelong unwillingness to be a social pariah

and a growing fascination with Herbert Spencer's theory of survival of the fittest, predilections that encouraged his laissez-faire approach to the obstacles confronting freedmen.

Applegate illuminates the theological, experiential, and practical roots of Beecher's shift away from Calvinism toward modern liberal Christianity, revealing a childhood steeped in familial love but scarred by the ever-present specter of a wrathful God, and a youth marked by feelings of loneliness and inadequacy. Growing up in the shadow of his siblings' (including writers and reformers Harriet Beecher Stowe and Catharine Beecher) brilliance, piety, and comparatively model behavior, young Henry considered himself the black sheep of his famous family. Naturally likeable and hungry even as a child for attention and affection, he devoted greater effort to amusing his schoolmates than learning his lessons, and struggled with a constant pull toward activities and amusements his father considered sinful. As might be expected under these conditions—despite the fact that Lyman was a remarkably affectionate and involved father—guilt and insecurity defined much of Henry's youth.

The alternative visions of God that began to cheer him during dark times in college and seminary soothed both the guilt and the insecurity. As he wrote of one particular experience near the end of his seminary years, from that hour I felt that God had a father's heart; that Christ loved me in my sin; that while I was a sinner He did not frown upon me or cast me off, but cared for me with unutterable tenderness (133). As a young Presbyterian minister on the western frontier, locked in competition with Methodist circuit riders for parishioners' allegiance, Beecher drew increasingly upon this softer image of the deity. When combined with his personal charisma and prodigious oratorical skills, the new message drew ever-larger crowds. The pattern held true throughout his career; when Plymouth Church burned to the ground not long after his arrival in Brooklyn, the congregation built an enormous new sanctuary in full confidence that their minister could pack it to the rafters, and he did. The new building became a prominent stop on the New York speaking circuit, and only a change in venue due to an approaching storm ensured that Abraham Lincoln's famous 1860 New York debut would go down in history as the Cooper Union address rather than the Plymouth Church address.

The Most Famous Man in America fully merits its billing as not just a biography, but rather the biography of Henry Ward Beecher. In addition to bringing Beecher to life in all his flamboyant vitality, Applegate provides vivid

sketches of the landscapes and cultures that formed him. Readers take from the book indelible images of the exoticism of Cincinnati, the rawness of Indianapolis, and the gentility of Brooklyn; as well as sheer amazement at Beecher's uncanny ability to repeatedly land in the century's hot spots at the very moment they underwent seismic cultural shifts. The rich detail of Applegate's narrative provides historical context broad enough to allow the biography to double as an engaging survey of the reforms and revolutions of 19th century America. But it is the near lyrical quality of her prose that truly sets the book apart. *The Most Famous Man in America* is a true page-turner for historians and general readers alike, the sort of rare work that employs the intersecting plotlines and careful character development of a good novel to make an important contribution to our understanding of the 19th century. In its eloquence, humor, and accessibility, the book is a fitting tribute to a man whose ability to make words shimmer was the envy of his age.

Jill Ogline is associate director of the C.V. Starr Center for the Study of the American Experience at Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland. She holds a Ph.D. in U.S. History from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and particularly enjoyed Applegate's description of the town at sunset, when the jagged notch of the Pelham Hills glowed a deep royal purple. She saw this view from her window every evening, but never found such words to describe it.