

Horace Greeley: Champion of American Freedom

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Review

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Innovator and Liberator

A Different Vision of Freedom

Horace Greeley is known to schoolchildren and others as the author of the advice, Go west, young man, go west! We associate his name with this command, which echoed the enthusiasm and unbridled opportunity that led to settlement of the American West. Less frequently, we might recognize Greeley as the publisher of the *New York Tribune*, the country's most widely read newspaper in the run-up to the American Civil War and as a major influence in the anti-slavery movement that led to the War.

Robert C. Williams has written a scholarly but highly readable biography, which is cited as the most comprehensive work on Greeley in the last half-century. To Williams, Greeley was much more than a phrasemaker or editor; he was the voice of the country as it defined itself as a nation devoted not just to liberty for men of property but to freedom for all people. Through research involving many new primary sources, Williams opens our eyes to many unknown or unappreciated facets of this fearless editor and political strategist, as well as his influence over Abraham Lincoln, William Seward, and reformers of society of all types. He worked with, promoted, or communicated with most of the great thinkers of his day such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and editor Charles A. Dana. Even Karl Marx was featured in his pages, as Greeley sought to appeal to the German immigrants who, with the Irish, were flooding the city during the 1850s.

Among the major events Williams details are those surrounding Greeley's starting the Republican Party, then in 1856, manipulating a split through vigorous editorials of the Democratic Party, thereby greatly enhancing Abraham

Lincoln's successful election in 1860. Greeley, through his editorials and columns, pushed for a quick victory over the rebellious South during the Civil War. According to Williams's research, Greeley's urgings (his paper's headline rang, *On to Richmond!*) possibly rushed the Union into the loss at Bull Run in 1862. He pressured Lincoln to free the slaves long before Lincoln was prepared to do so. He pushed for early talks to end the Civil War and kept up indirect correspondence with Lincoln throughout the War, pressing for a quick end and then national reconciliation.

Williams delves into all the biographical information pertinent to the evolution of this prodigy, a reader at the age of four who grew into a man with an uncanny ability to remember dates, facts, and congressional districts all over the country, including the vote tallies. Williams suggests that Greeley's brilliance, which was coupled with a tendency to go his own way, may have been linked with the social isolation, eccentric behavior, and obsession with facts associated with Asperger Syndrome, a mild form of autism. In fact, Greeley's fearlessness as an editor and as an entrepreneur resulted in many reforms in journalism, social structures, and numerous other areas of American life.

Greeley's father suffered economic setbacks, which caused him to move the family several times in the boy's youth, always in a westward direction, from Vermont to New York. Looking west for greater economic opportunity and believing in protectionist policies that would keep native industries from being undercut by countries with slave or poorly paid labor were constant themes in Greeley's life—those and universal freedom. He cut his teeth on the anti-Mason movement, as he opposed secretive societies. He quickly became a social reformer, looking for opportunities to invest in utopian communities that advocated temperance, self-improvement, and sharing resources but always with a capitalist bent. (Most of his investments were in the form of stock companies). Many of his early friendships and long-lasting business contacts were with people whom he met in the attempts to form societies based on the associationist ideas of Charles Fourier or with people he met while staying at a boarding house based on the ideas of health cultist Sylvester Graham. It was in the latter connection that he met his wife, Molly Cheney, and a person whom Greeley would soon make famous, Ralph Waldo Emerson. He also became the publisher and agent of Henry David Thoreau and women's rights pioneer Margaret Fuller. An avid Universalist, he shared sermons with Lincoln, including one by minister Theodore Parker, whose phrase of the people, by the people, and for the people ended up in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

As a journalist, Greeley launched the *New Yorker* magazine at the age of 23. He set the tone of the current publication, showcasing literary, political, and social issues articles, together with book reviews. He began the first editorial section separate from news articles. He advocated selling public lands to make it possible to provide free land to hard-working, needy people including immigrants and those suffering from the Panic of 1837. It was then that he began beating the drum for western migration. Whether Greeley originated the words for the movement in this direction is not clear, but for sure Greeley had the pulpit to preach this important economic opportunity. He envisioned western settlement (in that day, Indiana and Ohio were west) as the perfect vehicle to make the dream of America a reality—a republic peopled by industrious families whose production rendered land useful and remunerative. As these individuals created sustenance and even wealth for themselves, they added to the American promise, an ideal Greeley sought for all individuals. If there was an obstacle to this vision, however, it was the threat of free labor being undercut by slave labor in the South.

Greeley proceeded to start the *New York Tribune* with a partner, and, because he regularly loaned money to people who defaulted and invested in innovations that failed to succeed, he grew the paper to one being read all over the United States. But he did not realize a great deal of personal wealth. He became the country's most relied-upon commentators and created a new kind of journalism, whereby opinions were separated from fact-based stories, and many contributions were sent from correspondents in several European cities. He became involved in the revolutions in Europe, advocating the American model minus this country's single defect, slavery.

In a telling section of **Horace Greeley**, Williams writes of Greeley at the Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1851 in England. This forerunner of the world's fairs featured many examples of American and republican ingenuity such as the steam engine, the sewing machine, and other demonstrations of the free republic's ability to outshine its monarchist rival, England. The English were portrayed as enjoying liberty in the shadow of the monarchy and the aristocracy that made it possible. Williams writes, freedom in America, the white man's republic, Greeley believed, also reflected the blight of slavery. American freedom could only be complete when extended to Europe, the world, and all men and women everywhere.

Interestingly, although he assisted and supported freedom movements in numerous European countries, Greeley supported American women's emancipation but not the right to vote, at least not in any specific time period. When he later was in a bid for the U.S. presidency, opposing Ulysses S. Grant and his corrupt administration, the suffragists turned their organizing power (if not their voting power) against Greeley, and he lost. But it was not just because of them; numerous alliances that Greeley created in his long public life came back on him. Just one of those was his helping Jefferson Davis post bond after his several years of incarceration following the Civil War.

Greeley was clearly a man of constant raging against corruption and a staunch supporter of freedom, at least freedom that would support greater productivity. He was also a person of contrasts who saw no man or woman as having the power to curb his direction. From starting the first model of a community water system in his utopian-style community (Greeley, CO), to his innovating American journalism by hiring bright, young people as correspondents for his paper in several spots in Europe (Mark Twain started *Innocents Abroad* while his foreign correspondent), Greeley was ahead of the curve in many areas of American life.

Williams's work is an essential one for those wanting to understand the social and political climate in the United States during the time between what some have called the two American revolutions—one that was fought for liberty and one that was pursued for freedom.

Estelle Ford-Williamson, who writes in the Atlanta area, is author of Abbeville Farewell: A Novel of Early Atlanta and North Georgia (Other Voices, ISBN 097083201X, \$18.00, paperback). She has contributed previously to Civil War Book Review; her articles and stories have appeared in literary journals, and she is working on a second novel.