

Everyday Ideas: Socioliterary Experience Among Antebellum New Englanders

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Review

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Zboray, Ronald J. and Zboray, Mary Saracino. *Everyday Ideas: Socioliterary Experience among Antebellum New Englanders*. University of Tennessee Press, \$48.00 cloth ISBN 1572334711

Knowledge through Reading

The Intellectual Lives of Antebellum New Englanders

Reading books and journals, attending lectures, scribbling in diaries, writing letters—this was a way of life for antebellum New Englanders, who, according to the Zborays, achieved a stunningly high level of literacy. And as they show in this book, not just the wealthy, but farmers, factory workers, domestics and shopkeepers, men and women in all walks of life engaged in literary activity.

The authors have harvested some 3,800 documents from several dozen archives and identified nearly 1,000 individuals who commented on the everyday ideas they acquired in as many as 10,000 titles—or just about everything in print at the time—from the late 1820s until the beginning of the Civil War. New Englanders of this era read everything and refashioned ideas gleaned from literature into webs of local knowledge (xvii).

The Civil War, however, disrupted this flourishing intellectual discourse in New England with unusual force and permanency (xxiv). Although the war itself is treated in only a ten-page epilogue in the book, and the informants are winnowed down to about two dozen, the shock of war is apparent. Literature had become instrumental to warfare, like cannonballs or rifles (294). Local and regional concerns quickly became national concerns as the youth of New England marched south to save the Union. The sometime solitary self edifying reader became a literary patriot who identified with an often anonymous, indeed abstract society of Unionists caught up in the furor of war (286). Book clubs became forums not just for the discussion of literature but for the vetting of war news. Trivialities of all sorts became casualties of the larger conflict. One

perplexed diarist wrote of her amusement at the ridiculous manner in which I mix up home incidents with news of great public interest (287).

Literary activity shifted from edification and enlightenment to documentation, propaganda, news compilation, and correspondence necessitated by wartime separation. Newspapers, not novels, became central to conversation but news changed the temperature of discourse. News was unsettling, intrusive, shrill, and agitating. A young student complained about the news he received from a telegraph office: I can tell you it didn't make it any easier to study! (293).

Literary gift giving such as the presentation of books on ceremonial occasions continued, but with a twist. Now soldiers in the field were sending home confiscated volumes from the libraries of Confederates. Before the war, New Englanders would have considered the acquisition of such literary trophies objectionable. That such relics were acceptable is but another sign of the severance between social and literary experience and the appropriation of the two by patriotism (290).

Nor was the antebellum calm restored in the aftermath of the war. New Englanders found it impossible to repair that delicate chain that had once so intimately linked human relations and literary meaning. Ideas would never be quite so everyday again (294). In sum, Civil War scholars will find chapters in this book interesting, but the overall work will be useful mostly to nineteenth century literary and journalism historians.

Paul Ashdown is a professor of journalism at the University of Tennessee. He is the co-author of The Mosby Myth and The Myth of Nathan Bedford Forrest, and is the author of A Cold Mountain Companion.