

What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848

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Review

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Howe, Daniel Walker *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*. Oxford University Press, \$35.00 hardcover ISBN 9780195078947

The Technological Revolution

Daniel Walker Howe's contribution to the *Oxford History of the United States* series deserves the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for History that it recently won, and it provides excellent company to the other illustrious volumes in that series—including James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* (the winner of the 1989 Pulitzer Prize). Howe, who is professor emeritus at Oxford University and UCLA, proves the continuing value of grand synthesis and elegant writing. *What Hath God Wrought* breaks little brand-new ground in historical interpretation of the period between the end of the War of 1812 and the end of the Mexican-American War, but it provides the reader with an incredibly clear overview of the intertwined developments in politics, economics, and religion during that era. Howe also expresses a strong point of view in the volume and draws together previous scholarship in a way that challenges readers to make connections and will send them back into other historical literature and debates full of fresh questions.

At the end of the book's finale, which uses the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention to assess the social and political developments charted throughout, Howe writes on page 849 that This book tells a story; it does not argue a thesis. While it is true that Howe shies away from one, central thesis in the volume, he does provide specific interpretations of events—both in the way he organizes material and in strong arguments he advances in various sections of the book. Howe shows how narrative history can take a strong position in major debates over democratization, the importance of slavery and racism, the concept of market revolution, and the globalization of U.S. history. Howe rarely misses a chance to make his own perspective on controversial issues clear.

Howe grants politics the central role in his narrative, but he also places heavy emphasis on religion (both the Protestant Second Great Awakening and simultaneous developments in Catholicism) and its effects on economic change and political ideology. Howe also maintains that history is a story best told both from the bottom up and the top down, and he does a good job of balancing these perspectives throughout the narrative, interspersing analysis of large trends with stories of individual Americans, both elite and non-elite. Most of Howe's individuals—from Charles Grandison Finney to Paul Cuffee to Frances Trollope—will be familiar to readers, but he masterfully weaves their stories together with one another and with the contours of social and political change.

Howe sets his book in opposition to Sean Wilentz's 2005 *The Rise of American Democracy* by arguing that the *consequences* of white male democracy, rather than its *achievement*, shaped the political life of this period (5). In contrast to Wilentz, Howe does not hide his contempt for Andrew Jackson. He argues that the most fundamental belief and goal of Jackson and his fellow Democrats was the extension of white supremacy across the North American continent, a theme he traces through Indian Removal policy, economic policies, and electoral debates (357). In Howe's narrative, Jackson is a vivid character who shapes American politics from the end of the War of 1812 to the election of James K. Polk with his territorial expansionism, hot temper, and suspicion of a strong centralized state.

As the author of *The Political Culture of American Whigs* (1984), perhaps it is not surprising that Howe seems rather more taken with the Whig party and its leaders. Howe dedicates the book to John Quincy Adams with a laudatory epigraph from Harriet Martineau, and he devotes sustained attention to Henry Clay's political talent and how U.S. history might have differed if he had ever won a presidential election. Howe argues that the Whigs were more forward-looking than the Democrats in their promotion of economic development and internal improvements that did not rely on slavery, and he includes praise for Whigs' benevolent view of an American society in need of constant change for the better.

Howe locates the differences between Democrats and Whigs at the center of the other major American transformation between 1815 and 1848—the communications revolution. Howe rejects the view of Charles Sellers and others that this period saw the market revolution in the United States, and he cites the work of diverse scholars who have located market transitions squarely in the

colonial and revolutionary periods. Instead, Howe traces the expansion of market forces and emphasizes the relative importance of improvements in transportation and communication in spreading not only trade, but also political and religious beliefs. Howe ties religious and economic changes together, and his excellent chapter on millennialism is particularly inventive. In keeping with the international context that informs much of the book, Howe applies the term industrial revolution to changes in labor, immigration, manufacturing, farming, and finance. He seeks to locate technological developments, like railroads, as phases in a much longer process of economic development. Howe's readers will grasp the enormity of economic and social change between 1815 and 1848, and they will be immersed in the scholarly debate over how best to characterize it.

Even while taking readers on a journey through the major intellectual, literary, political, and social developments of this interesting period, Howe inserts subtle lessons on the craft of historical interpretation. For example, Howe provides a sensitive reading of the founding of Mormonism that allows readers to decide for themselves whether Joseph Smith's revelations might have been true while still praising his inventiveness and literary talent. On occasion, Howe even tells readers how historians should approach their subjects. When discussing John Tyler, Howe maintains that it would be easy to demonize him, but that the historians' duty is to understand, not simply condemn (590).

One of the best lessons offered by Howe's book comes in his refusal to view the period of 1815 to 1848 in anything other than its own terms. He never reduces the early part of the book to an analysis of how developments succeeded or failed the hopes of the founders. Nor does he ever treat political and social developments as though they launched the United States on a high road to the Civil War. He contrasts North and South without arguing that they were fundamentally opposed civilizations, and he pays careful attention to their economic interdependence. He narrates the Mexican-American War and explains manifest destiny without viewing Fort Sumter on the horizon. Precisely because of this clear-eyed vision of the antebellum period, Civil War historians will want to take a fresh look back at Howe's picture of the United States in a constant state of change.

Probably the greatest lesson Howe offers is that narrative history is neither dead nor impossible. Howe provides clear footnotes that summarize the massive amount of specific scholarship he relied upon in constructing his narrative, and he appends a lengthy bibliographic essay. Howe's account of the period, and the

scholarship he cites, will provide an excellent starting point for professional historians and interested readers to dip into the deep waters of specialized scholarship. Readers will have their historical imagination stimulated, and they will want to know more. *What Hath God Wrought* is as enjoyable to read as it is sweeping in scope, and Howe offers provocative and convincing arguments along the way.

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