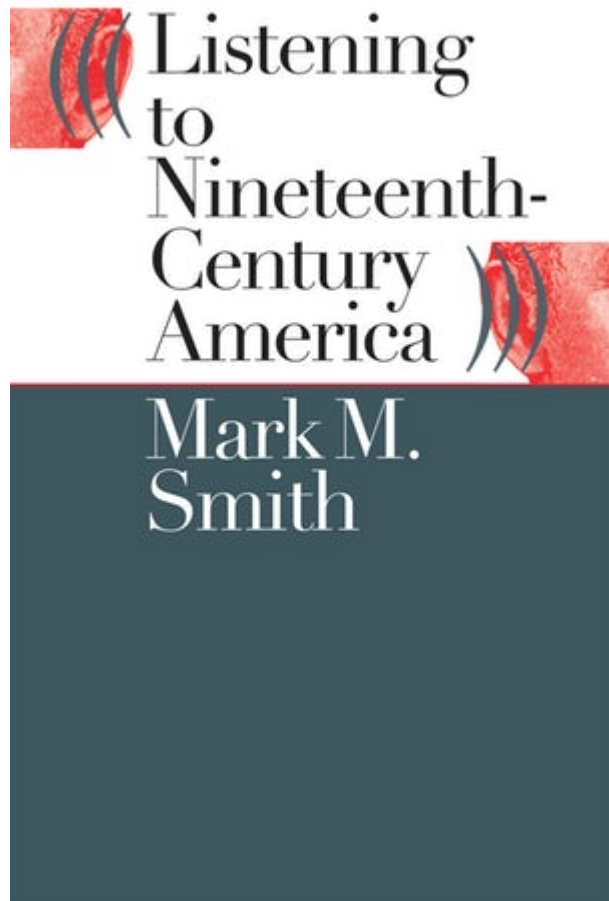


Hearing History



Mark Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. 372 pp., paper, \$19.95. Review by Amy S. Greenberg.

Human beings have five senses, but history focuses on only one. Visual sources (words, texts, the seen world) provide the raw material with which historians construct their narratives about the past. As a result, what we know about the past is really what people saw. But as Marcel Proust made clear with his madeleine, the visual is not always the most evocative of the senses. In real life, what you see is not always what you get.

Does history, as currently written, represent only one-fifth of lived experience? Mark Smith thinks so, and wants to render American history twice as rich and meaningful with his history of sound and hearing. *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* offers an account of the forces leading to the Civil War, as well as two short chapters on the war itself and Reconstruction, focusing on a second sense, sound. Soundscapes, Smith argues, were crucial in constructing the sectional consciousness of antebellum Americans. "Without

listening to what and how nineteenth-century Americans heard, we will remain only partially aware of the depth, texture, and nature of sectional identity and deny ourselves access to a fuller explanation of how that identity came into being with such terrible resolve" (7).

Americans in both the North and the South had preferred soundscapes, just as they had preferred landscapes. Not surprisingly, both Northern and Southern elites were generally satisfied with the sounds of their own section of the country, and disturbed by those elsewhere. What is remarkable is the extent and depth of their conviction. Southerners were horrified by the noises of the city, especially those of manufacturing and urban disorder, and celebrated the bucolic quiet of the plantation. Northerners heard the "sublime" tones of progress in even loud industrial noise, but shuddered at the "enfeebling quietude and loud cruelty" of the slave plantation (93). These potent and irreconcilable images worked to alienate Northerner from Southerner just as surely as did John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry and the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

Smith does a marvelous job describing the soundscapes of antebellum America, making skilled use of diaries, personal narratives and letters, as well as novels and political tracts. Some of the Southern postbellum accounts he draws upon reflect a nostalgia about a quieter past more than the reality of rural noise, but Smith reads this nostalgia as further evidence of the significance of the Southern soundscape within the ideology of the South. His evocative descriptions of the sounds of different seasons, events, and activities turn up the volume on the entire fabric of nineteenth-century life.

While the majority of this volume focuses on the experiences of elites, Smith also describes the aural worlds of working men and women, and of slaves. Neither of these groups was completely comfortable with the reigning soundscape, and each worked to undermine the norms of the ruling class. Especially interesting is Smith's close analysis of the ways in which masters attempted to control the aural landscape of the plantation, and the ability of the slave to control sound. Not only was slave noise potentially subversive of the carefully constructed fiction of the submissive servant, but so too was slave silence. As plantation mistress Mary Boykin Chestnut put it, "If they want to kill us, they can do it when they please, they are noiseless as panthers" (88).

Smith's analysis of the aural landscape reinforces current wisdom about the growing divergence of antebellum North and South, tactics of slave resistance, the experience of the common soldier in the Civil War, the dynamics of the Confederate home front, and the contested nature of freedom during Reconstruction. While the object of his investigation is novel, his conclusions will be familiar to students of nineteenth-century America. The final chapter, "Sounds of Emancipation, Reconstruction, and Reunion," is perhaps the most provocative here. Smith considers the attractiveness of the Southern soundscape to Northerners weary of the increasingly strident sounds of democracy and capitalism, and reveals how little we know about the marketing of the South as

a vacation district in the late nineteenth century. Yet, while it is true that the Northern elite escaped the excesses of industrial capitalism in the relative quiet of the South, they flocked in even greater numbers to the towns and countryside of rural New England and other emerging Northern vacation districts, and also praised the peace and quiet of these Northern escapes. Clearly these postbellum Northerners did not see all Northern soundscapes as equal.

The heard world was obviously important to nineteenth-century Americans, but most readers will probably remain unconvinced that "Sectional consciousness was sensed, and hearing and listening as much as looking and seeing were important to its creation" (7). Indeed, the very quotes Smith chooses seem to argue for the greater importance of the visual. The narrators quoted here generally present a single observation about sound within a context of visual observations. Aural observations complement and reinforce visual ones, but rarely do visual observations complement and reinforce aural ones.

Smith's argument is problematic in other ways as well. His thesis that there were two competing soundscapes—those of the plantation and industrial city—depends on the reduction of Southern experience to that of the plantation-dwelling slave owner, and Northern experience to that of the city dweller or factory worker. But what about urban Southerners? Or rural Northerners? What about the majority of white Southerners who owned no slaves? Was their soundscape any different from that of the Northern yeoman farmer? Did the "drone of bondage" truly "muffle the sounds of modernism" (125) in the upper South? Smith does a great job showing the way in which sound and hearing contributed to sectional ideology, but it is questionable whether any given individual had an especially sectionalized understanding of his or her soundscape. If Smith is correct, and sound matters, then it follows that urban Southerners and rural Northerners would be less inclined to secession than urban Northerners and rural Southerners. There is no evidence that this was the case.

Indeed, it would be just as easy to focus on the similarities between the Northern and Southern soundscape as on the differences. True, the North was becoming increasingly urban and industrialized in the nineteenth century, but only a small percentage of Northerners lived in cities or near mills during the period. Elites in the two sections also shared common expectations about noise. Certainly elite Northern women worked as hard to silence their children as did Southern women, and Northern farmers complained just as strenuously as their upcountry Georgia brethren about the noises of the railroads, while newspapers of both sections celebrated those same noises as sounds of progress. Wealthy Northerners were as likely as Southerners to choose heavy insulating fabrics for the interiors of their homes, and to buy quietude by moving to residential neighborhoods far from the noise (and dirt, and poverty) of the city. Christmas bells, fire bells, and noises of celebration all point to a remarkable, shared aural culture.

Ultimately this study raises more questions than it answers. Smith repeatedly claims that it is “difficult to grasp how utterly meaningful and potent the heard world was to antebellum Americans” (265) but provides little convincing evidence that it actually was more meaningful and potent than the heard world is today. Nor is it clear that the traditional sources this study is based on could allow even the most subtle and creative historian to accurately contextualize, to translate, really, the social and historical meaning of nineteenth-century soundscapes to the many different listeners of the period. We can listen to nineteenth-century America, but can we believe our ears?

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