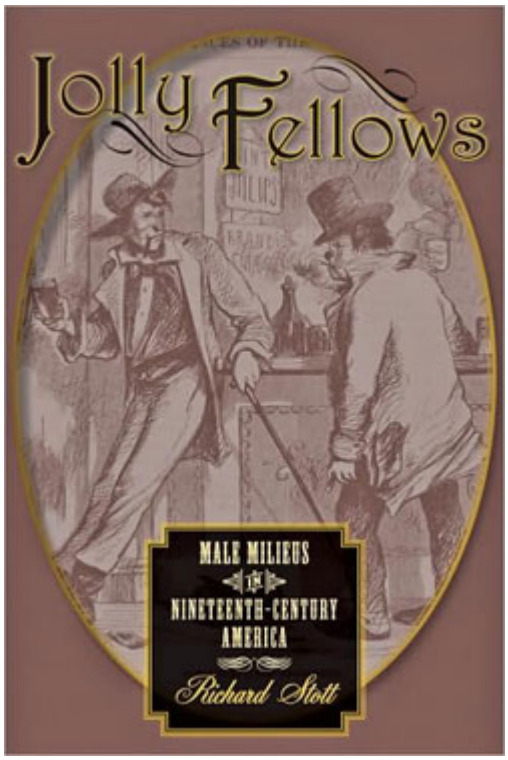
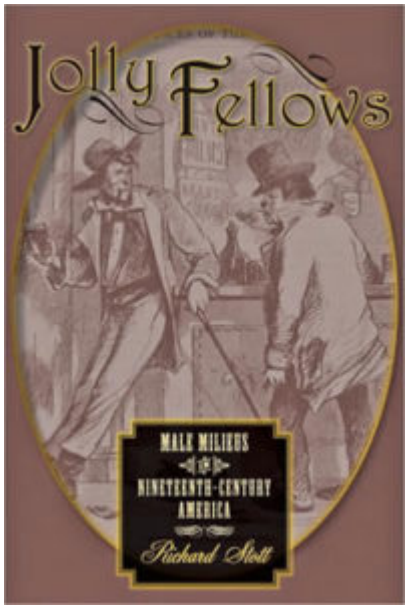
“The man that isn’t jolly after drinking is just a driveling idiot, to my thinking”



As an undergraduate at Wake Forest University, I joined the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity. While I appreciated little of the national fraternity’s history, I was always curious about the remnants of its nineteenth-century heritage that persisted in songs, stories, and symbols. As per one song, a DKE was to be a “gentleman, scholar, and jolly good-fellow,” but beyond some hearty drinking, I never quite grasped what a jolly good fellow should be . . . until now. Richard Stott’s *Jolly Fellows* sheds light on late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century jolly fellowship—”that male comportment that consisted of not just fighting but also heavy drinking, gambling and playing pranks” (1)—as well as the physical



contexts in which it was performed.

Stott begins in the tavern, the eighteenth-century epicenter of jolly fellowship and, well into the 1800s, increasingly the target of critics who condemned the disorder of male culture. Stott seems to date jolly fellowship to pre-modern Europe and colonial America, but as the quote in the title of this review indicates, even Euripides grasped the relationship of jolly fellowship and alcoholic consumption. The impetus of an "American" version of jolly fellowship, however, was "service in the American army during the Revolution [which] had stimulated drinking, gambling, and unruly behavior in general" (9). Throughout the 1810s, both whites and blacks participated in this unruliness, which Stott considers the natural state of men: "Such behavior required no explanation; it was just the way men were" (63).

Gambling, fighting, drinking, and pranks became symbolic of jolly fellows' reaction to reformers' efforts, and the gentility and middle-class values that reform represented.

In response to the excesses of manly disorderliness, some Americans attempted to reform jolly manhood into "subdued manhood" by promoting self-governance over self-expression. The rise of reform frustrated men who "were caught in the transition between an age when male revelry was customary and an age when manly respectability was the standard" (93). Pockets of jolly fellowship persisted, particularly in cities and on the frontiers where men remained undisciplined and unruly. Stott explores New York's Bowery and the California Gold Rush as evidence of the most extreme pockets, but he also includes military action as outlets for unruly manhood: "The incentive [to escape the tedium of everyday life] may have been especially important in the Mexican-American War because the personal moral reforms of the previous thirty years had for many men robbed everyday existence of some of its zest" (131).

Gambling, fighting, drinking, and pranks became symbolic of jolly fellows' reaction to reformers' efforts, and the gentility and middle-class values that reform represented. Popular entertainment in the forms of southwestern

literature and minstrelsy embraced the imagery of jolly fellowship and inspired a new generation of men to resurrect it in the Wild West of the 1870s. Many of this new generation of jolly fellows—sportsmen who promoted themselves as hunters, gamblers, and adventurers—made it a professional pursuit.

But in the 1880s and 1890s, reform movements that had been stalled by the Civil War and Reconstruction found new energy, and by the turn of the twentieth century, jolly fellowship was widely proclaimed dead by men like Teddy Roosevelt who mourned its loss. It found expression in vaudeville, literature, and newspaper cartoons, instilling in American culture an appreciation for the bad boy even as the bad boy disappeared. The new expressions complicated manliness by drawing upon racial comparisons; vaudeville in particular tried to preserve the remnants of white jolly manhood by mocking black manhood.

Jolly Fellows provides a solid narrative of the decline of jolly fellowship in nineteenth-century America, and Stott clearly researched deeply in the primary sources. The book is chock-full of humorous and insightful anecdotal stories. But in many ways, I find this to be a *very* frustrating book. Evidence of the persistence of jolly fellowship is situated in New York City and the Wild West, but evidence of rejection of reform is drawn primarily from popular culture originating in the South. The text abounds with anecdotes, but the reader is left craving analysis. And while it is a book about men, it has little new to say about masculinity.

The incongruence between jolly fellowship in the cities and on the frontiers and the critique of reform that emerged in the South may not seem significant. After all, southwestern literature and minstrelsy expanded beyond the South. Still, I found it curious that Stott spent so little time on the South, particularly given the flurry of scholarship on southern men over the past decade. And I find it even more difficult to reconcile the anxieties over southern manhood expressed in those popular entertainments with the challenges to urban and frontier manhoods. As John Mayfield demonstrated, southwestern literature specifically reflected southern anxieties over shifting economic cultures and social contexts. Such an interpretation may have been applied more broadly to the national scene, but the possibility of joining regions in a common American crisis of manhood is never explored by Stott.

This is just one example of the lack of analysis throughout the book. Over and again, I found myself saying out loud, “but why?” Many of the questions that Stott raises early for the reader should have pushed him toward more analytical insight: “Where did it [jolly fellowship] originate? Was it natural, biological? Why drinking, fighting, gambling, and pranks? And then what happened to jolly fellowship?” (2). Only the last question is truly addressed, but even this conclusion—that moral reform movements (primarily the temperance movement) and a quest for respectability ultimately did in jolly fellowship—just does not satisfy, and seems rather tepid when compared to more nuanced narratives about refinement and social change presented in the works of Bruce Dorsey, Karen Halttunen, and John F. Kasson.

The weakness of analysis must be attributed partly to this underuse of the historiography related to reform, but there are also notable historiographical gaps in masculinity studies. Men's history has exploded over the past decade, but Stott's citations do not indicate any works since 2003. Scholarship by John Mayfield, Lorri Glover, Jennifer Green, Diane Barnes, Robert Pace, Thomas Foster, and those who contributed to edited collections on southern manhood and southern masculinity would have directly complemented Stott's narrative, but he employed none. Even Amy Greenberg's excellent *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (2003) is underemployed, used simply to support Stott's interpretation of filibusters and neglecting the larger significance of Greenberg's model of martial manhood versus restrained manhood.

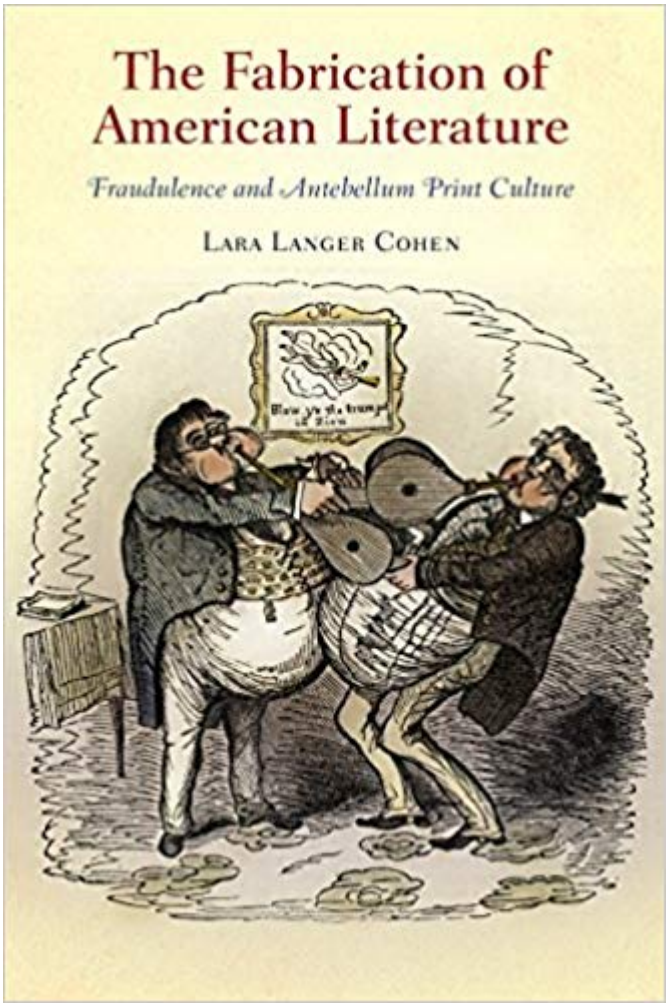
Stott quite successfully teases the reader with provocative (and potentially important) ideas, but he consistently leaves the reader with few answers. For example, of California miners he writes that male camaraderie "was accompanied by brutality toward people of color" (145). He follows with some discussion of fighting and violent pranks that evidence this statement. But he does not engage *why* gender and race became intertwined in this manner. Indeed, early in the book, white and black men seem similarly engaged in jolly fellowship, so this shift is rather significant, particularly since near the end of the book, Stott draws a direct line to the practice of lynching: "If northern audiences could watch blacks being dismembered on stage, southern whites could enjoy the real thing" (180). Why did anxieties over the loss of (white) jolly fellowship manifest in racialized ways?

The intersection of race and gender is tantalizingly woven throughout the text, but never explored. "Miners viewed California as a land where *white* women were so few as to be inconsequential" (136; italics added), Stott writes, suggesting that the absence of white women equated with an absence of moral suasion. But what of Hispanic, Native American, and Asian women? Was their presence inconsequential to the performance and reinforcement of jolly fellowship? Early in *Jolly Fellows*, Stott makes clear that the male milieus he chose to examine were womanless or nearly womanless, but the Bowery, the Wild West, the mining camps of California, the lumber camps of the upper Midwest, the Mississippi River's boatmen culture, and the taverns of the Revolutionary era all had women, just not necessarily *white* women. It seems to me this is a notable oversight because alongside drinking, fighting, gambling, and pranks, one must also recognize the critical role of sex in jolly fellowship, a topic that received less than one-half page of attention.

Most frustrating, however, is that while *Jolly Fellows* is a book about men, it has little new to say about masculinity. The prevailing narrative of nineteenth-century American manhood found in Rotundo, Kimmel, and Bederman among others is one in which refinement and religion revised and softened manliness. Stott attempts to impose that narrative onto his story. But, in fact, Stott successfully demonstrates a different narrative: that, despite nineteenth-century reform efforts, jolly fellowship grew stronger in places like the West and the Bowery, gained notoriety and popular support in American

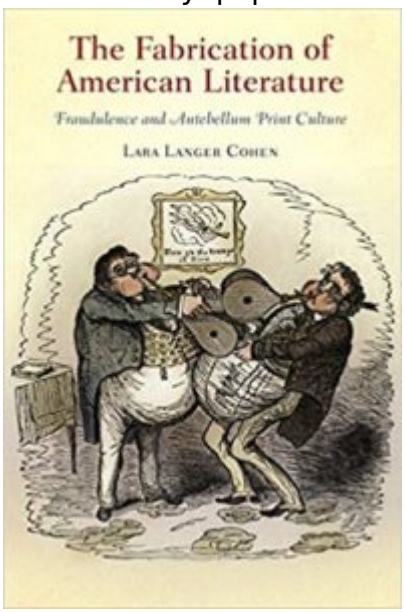
culture, and, according to the conclusion, persists even today (even without the emphases on fighting and gambling). Unwilling to critically challenge the prevailing narrative onto his story, Stott missed an opportunity to offer a counter-narrative to our understanding of American manhood, one in which reform fails in many ways, subdued manhood does not become hegemonic, and jolly fellowship remains a powerful form of manhood.

Fakebooks



The Fabrication of American Literature is a long-overdue examination of the antebellum practice of "puffing" books, or shamelessly promoting them for profit, politics, and other interested motives. Cohen exposes the mechanics and machinations behind the "genuine" literature that was supposed to prove the United States' artistic and cultural maturity to the Old World—as well as behind more marginal publications like "ersatz backwoodsman's tales" and "false slave narratives," which could have suggested just the opposite to cosmopolitans on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet, she is careful to avoid

imagining an entirely disinterested literature and literary criticism as the ideal state from which the antebellum period fell into a world of petty deceit, relentless competition, and utter confusion. Cohen does so by starting from "a paradox at the heart of American literary history: at the very moment when a national literature began to take shape, many observers worried that it amounted to nothing more than what Edgar Allan Poe described as 'one vast perambulating humbug'" (1). She argues that this paradox disrupts not only critical narratives of the flourishing of a representative national literature after its difficult birth and awkward adolescence, but also counter-narratives of the "cultural work" done by popular and political—and not just refined and removed—literature.



Antebellum Americans looked to literature to settle the most complicated and important questions of the day—questions about nationhood, democracy, race, gender, class, and region among them.

By assembling and working from an archive of concerns about "subterfuge, impostures, and plagiarism" in print, Cohen situates mid-nineteenth-century literature within, rather than apart from, the rest of antebellum American culture. As a result, unnoticed family resemblances become more prominent. The practices of publishing and reviewing books of all kinds begin to look a lot like promotions for quack medicine, land bubbles, and worthless shares of stock. Even Poe—best known to us as a poet and gothic fiction writer, but notorious in his own time as a critic who reviewed and promoted his own writings—makes himself heard among the many voices cautioning that the "indiscriminate laudation of American books" is "a system which, more than any other one thing in the world, has tended to the depression of that 'American Literature' whose elevation it was designed to effect" (34).

Again, it is worth emphasizing that Cohen insists on the seamier side of the fabrication of American literature not to expose the idea of American literature itself as a fraud, but rather to show how antebellum literature did and did not work. In making her much more nuanced and responsible argument, she

is careful to distinguish between fraud—cases of intentional hoaxing, forgery, and plagiarism—and fraudulence—what she defines as "the hopelessness of distinguishing impostures, forgeries, plagiarisms, and hoaxes from literature proper" (2). This impossibility of distinguishing fact from fiction, real from fake, true from false in the messy world of antebellum print made significant trouble not just for latter-day critics, but for the public at the time. As Cohen observes, antebellum Americans looked to literature to settle the most complicated and important questions of the day—questions about nationhood, democracy, race, gender, class, and region among them. "The expedients readers, writers, critics, and editors devised to fulfill these impossible tasks, the accusations of fraudulence that inevitably resulted, and the attempts some writers made to turn this fraudulence to account," Cohen explains in her introduction, "are the subject of this book" (2).

The first chapter examines the literary nationalist movement of the 1830s and '40s and the puffery that dominated literary criticism at the time. In the same moment that authors and critics were working to establish a mature literature they hoped would place the United States on equal footing with Europe, many of them were also writing wildly enthusiastic reviews that had less basis in the works themselves than in favoritism, financial interest, and partisan politics. As Cohen argues, these decidedly undemocratic practices significantly compromised the democratic promise that a representative American literature was supposed to hold for the young country and the rest of the world. And antebellum American readers noticed, as we see in the range of anxious responses that Cohen summons to make her case. A memorable example comes from poet and journalist Lambert Wilmer, who warned in 1841 via verse that

'Twould seem no less than destiny's decree
That we the victims of all frauds should be:
Our literature and currency are both
Curs'd with the evil of an overgrowth; (42)

Cohen deftly turns these shaky foundations of a national literature into solid ground on which to build the rest of the book. Following chapter one, Cohen shifts her attention to the periphery that the central literary culture established only to challenge. Doing so, she explains, allowed the center to shore up its legitimacy by making marginal writers' works—and not their own equally vulnerable writings—the suspect examples of the kind of literature that America was capable of producing. The second, third, and fourth chapters of *The Fabrication of American Literature* are case studies of these dynamics in action.

Chapter 2 pairs Davy Crockett and Jim Crow, examining not just the commonalities but also the deliberate linkages of their strange careers as cultural others. They were manufactured as "our ONLY TRUE NATIONAL POETS," as one reviewer put it, to fabricate an idea of authenticity that mainstream American literature would both borrow from and attack to establish its own. Jim Crow and Davy Crockett regularly appeared not only separately but together in

numerous “songsheets, almanacs, plays, and fictitious autobiographies” circulating in the antebellum period. Fraudulence was at the center of both figures’ public personae, with “minstrelsy laugh[ing] at the trickery and pretensions of Jim Crow” and the “Crockett literary industry mak[ing] wild tall tales the frontiersman’s stock in trade” (67). At the same time, “Jim Crow’s shams were acted out by white men themselves shamming as black, while Davy Crockett and the host of semiliterate ‘backwoods’ characters he inspired were largely manufactured out of northeastern publishing centers” (67). Working from this double layering of apparent deceit, the rest of the chapter surveys the print culture of Crow and Crockett to illustrate how these figures “achieved the remarkable feat of parlaying a fake authenticity into authentic fakeness” in “a culture preoccupied with the problem of fraudulence” (67-68).

The third chapter focuses on neglected pseudo-slave narratives by white writers that circulated alongside now well-known narratives written by blacks who had actually experienced slavery. The pseudo-slave narratives allow Cohen to continue her examination of what she calls the “racialization of fraudulence”—or the transformation of “fraud from a national problem” into a characteristic specifically associated with blackness—and how it worked both to legitimize and threaten the center’s authority (102). The popular newspaper columnist and novelist Fanny Fern is at the center of the fourth chapter, in which Cohen shows how Fern both exploited and was made vulnerable by the questions raised for readers and professional critics by her pseudonymity and the deliberate artifice of her writing style. The conclusion succinctly reads Herman Melville’s novel *The Confidence Man* as the ultimate case study for the book’s overall point: “that antebellum fraudulence cannot be embodied in individual acts and persons,” and that such fraudulence and the effort to establish a national literature are impossible to distinguish from each other (22).

While *The Fabrication of American Literature* is one of the most innovative works to be produced in the ongoing scholarly effort to rethink what came in the twentieth century to be designated as the “American Renaissance,” it doesn’t break entirely from its critical forebears who were just as interested in the relationship between literature and nationalism as antebellum Americans were. What is in many ways a radical view of American literature is also a rather traditional one, focused on works produced in the United States from the 1830s through the 1850s. It does not take the “spatial turn” that many scholars have in recent years, looking not just nationally but transnationally, hemispherically, and beyond. Nor does it attempt to bridge the gap between early American and antebellum American studies, as other scholars have encouraged us to do. But of the work that is still to be done in American literature, surely revisiting twice-told tales to retell them in a way that analyzes, synthesizes, and adds new dimensions to those tellings—as Cohen’s book does by balancing subtlety with complexity, serious history and theory with humor—is work well worth doing.

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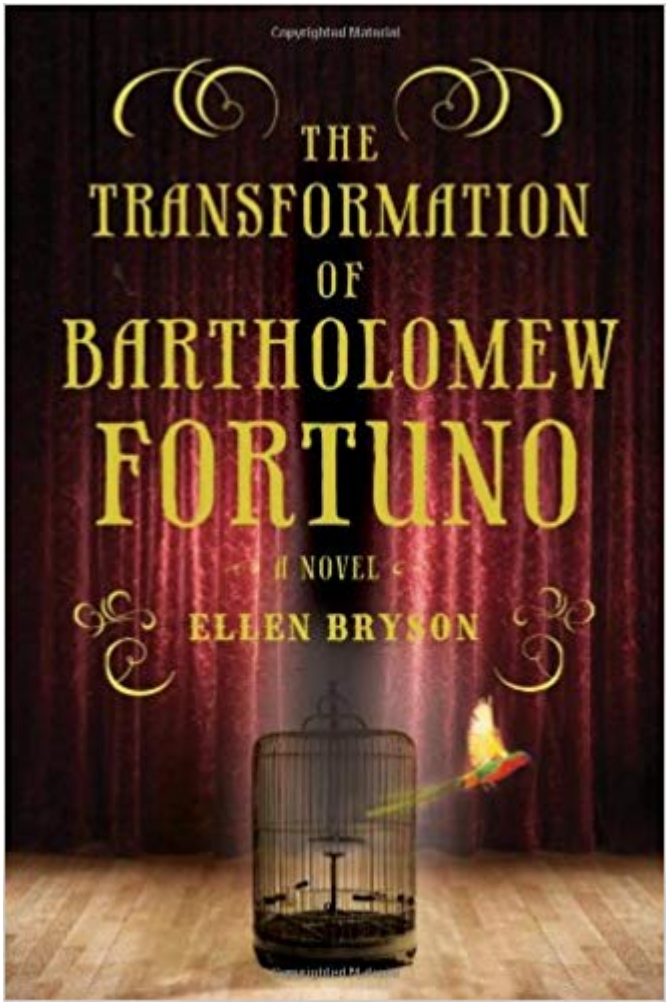
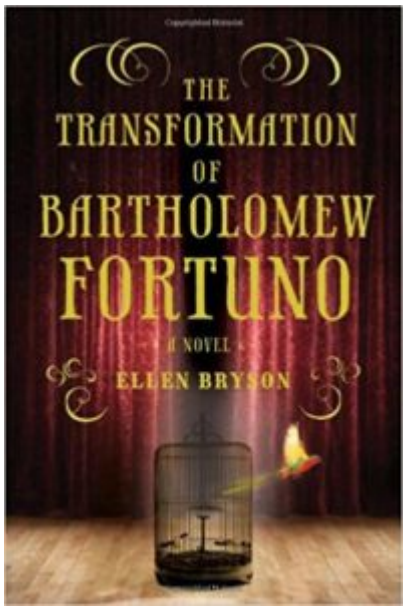
“But, That’s Just Not True!”



I loved novels and short stories long before I loved the study of history. As a child, history came to me through textbooks. In contrast to my other reading, it presented two problems: I couldn’t lose myself, and I couldn’t find the author. The way I liked my history best was in fiction. Esther Forbes’ *Johnny Tremaine*, Elizabeth George Speare’s *Witch of Blackbird Pond*, Rosemary Sutcliff’s *Eagle of the Ninth*: these were my beloved doorways to an imaginary past. I didn’t like these books better because they weren’t true. I liked them

better because you could dream your way into them. As I learned to recognize the writer's craft in setting a scene or penning a line of dialogue, I didn't lose my connection to the fictional world. Instead, I felt another connection to the authors who had made those worlds. I wanted to be like them almost as much as I wanted to be like brave Johnny Tremaine or gentle Mercy Wood.



Like all authors of historical fiction, Bryson has to make not one kind of reality, but two.

None of that came to pass, of course. Not only am I neither particularly brave nor gentle, I'm also completely incapable of writing fiction. The latter realization arrived in college. Around the same time, I began reading really good works of history—the kind with authors. The combination sent me to graduate school in history. There I learned to think rather than to dream my way into the past, and to admire the historian's crafts of fact-based analysis, reconstruction, and detection. But I still loved biographies—they had characters and plots, even though I knew better than to call them that. I also loved those moments in monographs when the author's power seemed to go beyond accuracy to connection, and even to mystery, to that shock of simultaneous intimacy and difference, that sense of knowing without quite understanding, which thrilled me as fiction always had. I slowly learned to cultivate an historian's imagination, one that steered between the Scylla of no invention (Plagiarism) and the Charybdis of too much invention (Making Things Up). I kept reading novels, but swore off historical fiction for years. I believe I was afraid that if I indulged even a little, I might throw aside my copy of Jack Greene and curl up in my office with the American Girl series. In the end, though, I couldn't sustain my ban. I slipped first with Iain Pears' *Instance of the Fingerpost,* then his *Dream of Scipio*, and on it went, down to Kathleen Kent's *Heretic's Daughter*. When Jill Lepore and Jane Kamensky wrote their own novel, *Blindspot*, I purchased it head held high. And now, *Common-place* has decided to review historical fiction such as Ellen Bryson's *The Transformation of Bartholomew Fortuno,* set in P.T. Barnum's American Museum. Let the revels

begin.

Like all authors of historical fiction, Bryson has to make not one kind of reality, but two. She must create the reality of the historical moment she has chosen as her setting, and she must create the reality of her own fictional world within that setting. That this is no easy task is clear in the first few pages. Bryson's fact-ridden portrayal of New York in 1865—its size, its street plan, its class divisions, its mourning bunting hung for Abraham Lincoln—shines the light of historical reality so brightly that it dissipates the mist of the fictional world. You can think, but you cannot dream your way in. But then Bryson brings us inside the museum. And there, her fictional world—the real world of her characters—stirs to life. The title character is the book's narrator, "Bartholomew Fortuno: The World's Thinnest Man since 1855." Living with him in the museum are Matina, sweet, calm, and immense; Ricardo the Rubber Man; Emma the Giantess; Alley the Strongman; and an African-American named Zippy (more on him later). All of them live, eat (with spectacular variability), and work in the museum, competing with each other for the approval of Barnum, his wife, and the crowds who pass through every day. Bartholomew classifies them into groups: at the top, "the highest among us," were the True Prodigies, "men with flippers, armless girls, parasitic twins." Below them "were the regular Prodigies," whose "special gifts emphasized different aspects of human beings—their hunger, their strength, their purity." Next came the Exotics, and lowest on the list were "the Gaffs, self-made Curiosities who faked what came to the rest of us naturally" (20). Barnum's museum consists mainly of "regular Prodigies;" their constrained but peaceful existence is disrupted by the nighttime arrival of a beautiful, red-haired woman wrapped in a veil. Bartholomew is desperately curious: who is this competitor? Why is Barnum so solicitous of her? And then the World's Thinnest Man, long devoid of desire for anything but abstinence in all its forms, is suddenly besotted. The woman, Iell Adams, is revealed to have a beautiful, flowing beard. The transformation of Bartholomew Fortuno has begun.

What follows is a coming of age story. Bartholomew, traumatized in childhood, had never accepted his man's body or assumed a man's role in the world. By starving himself, he had found his way to the fantastical nursery garden of Barnum's freaks. And by imagining his self-starvation as art, he finds a way to believe that his sheltered existence transcends the mundane world of the crowds who stare and gasp. Iell, for her part, is glamorous, sorrowful, and cultured; in one of the mock advertisements Bryson cleverly inserts in the text (along with handwritten notes and museum orders for the day) Iell is described as "a woman of great beauty with a man's beard and of figure so beautiful and comely, she was previously Mistress to kings and arbiter of high fashion" (83). Iell encourages Bartholomew's attentions, partly due to his kindness, and partly due to his willingness to brave the streets of lower Manhattan to bring her little packages of opium from a mysterious shop in Chinatown. Once past the awkwardness of her initial pages, Bryson draws those streets deftly and subtly, so that the sights and smells of Civil War-era New York and the emotions of her characters augment rather than diminish each other's realities.

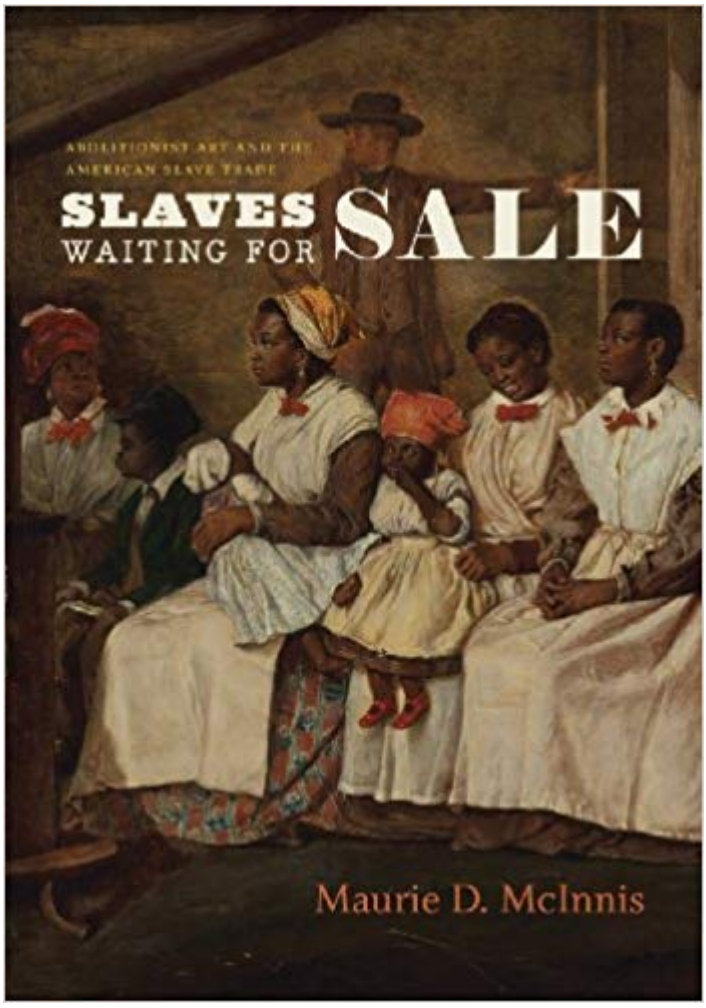
Inspired by his attraction to Iell, Bartholomew eventually reconsiders whether his shocking thinness expresses his true nature. As he does so, he becomes an immensely more sympathetic character. Before this transformation, Bryson risks alienating the reader by making her central character flatly uninsightful about himself and those around him. But it's a risk that pays off. Eating his three daily lima beans and treasuring his isolation, Bartholomew at the start of the story is indeed the Thinnest Man in the World. There is almost nothing to him. And then, after a while, there is.

Does this book specifically appeal to—or repel—readers who are also historians? Two characters resonate differently, I suspect, for historians than they would for lay people. The first is the "son of former slaves," Zippy, whom Barnum exhibits as "the missing link," and whom Bartholomew describes as possessing an "elongated head and simian propensities" (20). Who is this man? Is he mentally retarded, is he traumatized, is he, or Barnum, manipulating racial expectations in a dangerous marketplace? Bryson hints at each possibility, but offers no real portrait of the character. So Zippy seems unreal in Bryson's fictional world, and unreal in 1865 New York. I couldn't help but lament that it was Zippy who remains thus opaque and distant. Must a work of fiction, whose author can roam the archive of the imagination, fail to create the same kind of person that history so often fails to document? The second character who left me uneasy is none other than the bearded beauty herself, Iell. There is, it turns out, a very unmysterious mystery at the heart of this book: Iell is literally hiding something, and no one who's read any cultural history in the last twenty years should fail to guess what it is.

My slight impatience with Iell stemmed not from the lack of suspense, but from the fact that Bryson seems to limn her as the tragic mulatto, inevitably victimized by her betwixt and betweenness (although race is not, in fact, her secret). This reaction left me aware of my own nature—half historian, half novel lover. Does that make me a True Prodigy, uniquely able to resist the suspect trope, or a Gaff, a creature of "no inherent worth whatsoever" (20), desperate to conjure a complication where none exists? Neither, of course: just a reader, suddenly feeling the reality of the fictional world wear thin. As Iell blurs into an archetype, there's less and less sense of an author's distinctive vision, less shock of the alien melding with the familiar. Instead, the alien begins simply to feel familiar, and the specific to feel general. And that may be a failing in both history and literature.

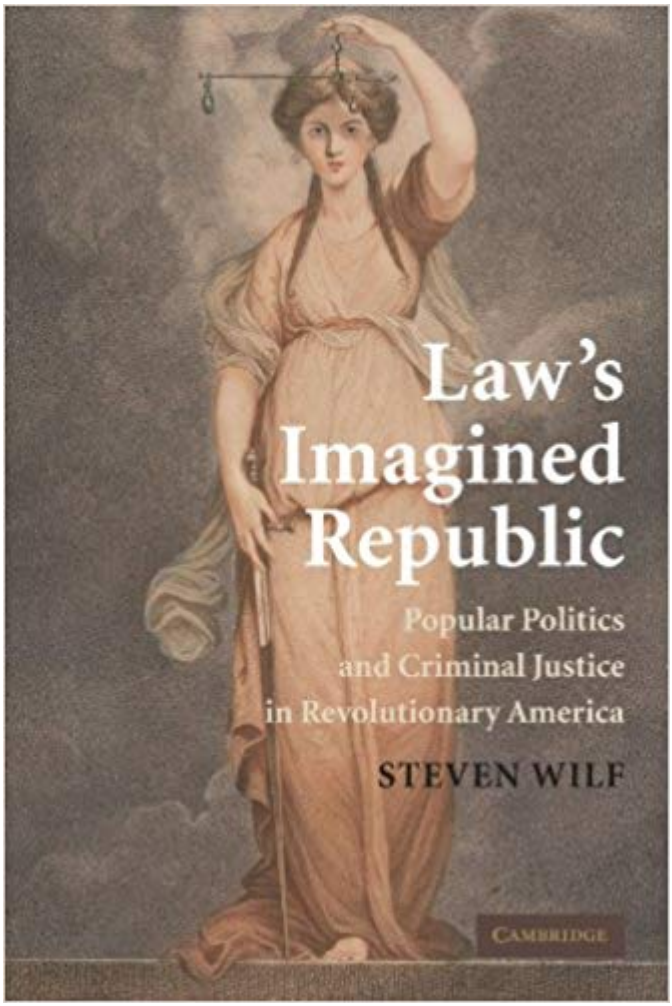
The virtues of this book, however, far outweigh such imperfections. Iell, despite her scene-stealing beauty and oddness, is not the center of the book. Nor is the center the carefully drawn scenes from historic Manhattan or the American Museum. Instead, the center is Bartholomew, in all his prideful, self-delusional, kind, and, at last, hungry glory. I can't say I wanted to become him, like the characters of my beloved childhood fictions. But I do want to make him dinner. And I'd love to raise a toast to his creator.

Eyewitnessing and Slavery



In the antebellum era, well after the fall of the international slave trade, American abolitionists consistently turned to the domestic auction block for propaganda

Imagining a Democracy



In their law talk, Americans had to grapple with difficult questions such as the purpose of punishment, the right to judge, and the authority of lawgivers

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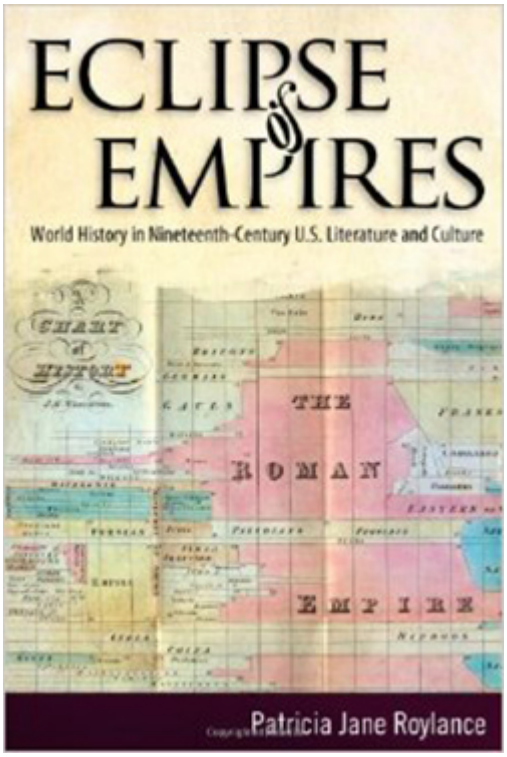
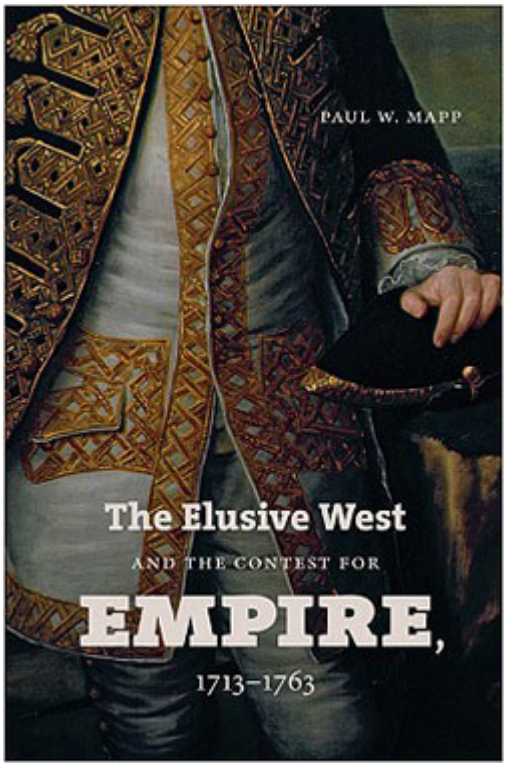
Doomed to Repeat It



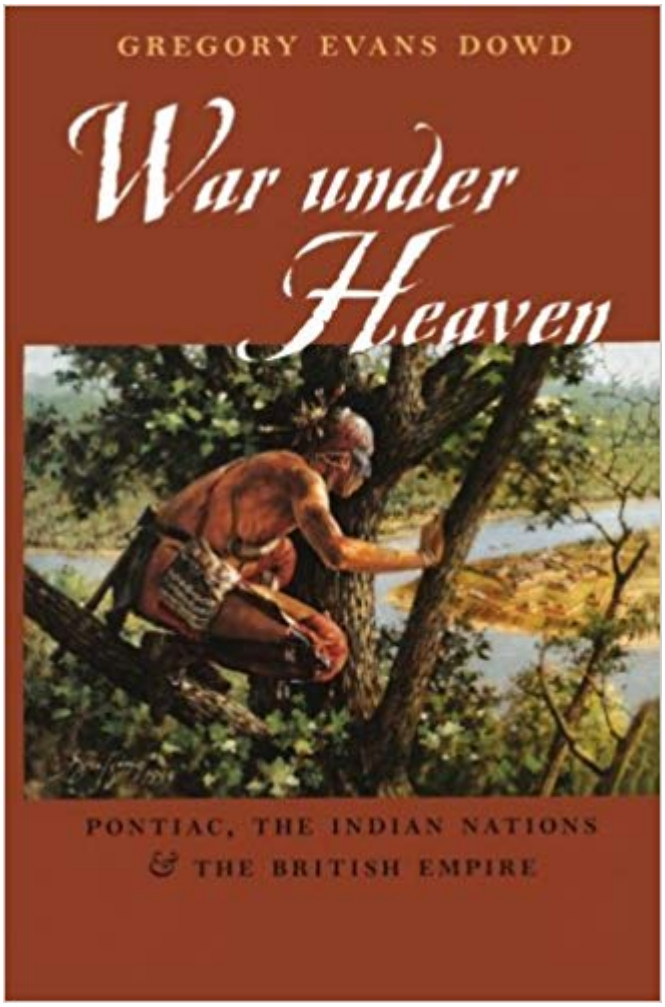
For Roylance, nineteenth-century imperial eclipse narratives did not serve as purely cautionary tales nor as negative examples.

The Great American Question Mark



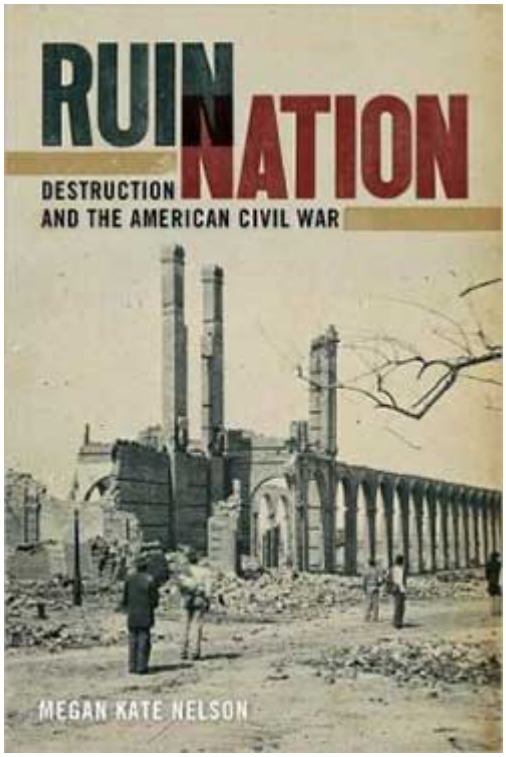
The landscape was often unforgiving, making exploration difficult, and when the Spanish attempted to get help from the many Native groups in the region they were often met with silence or hostility.

A Redesigned Pontiac for the Twenty-First Century



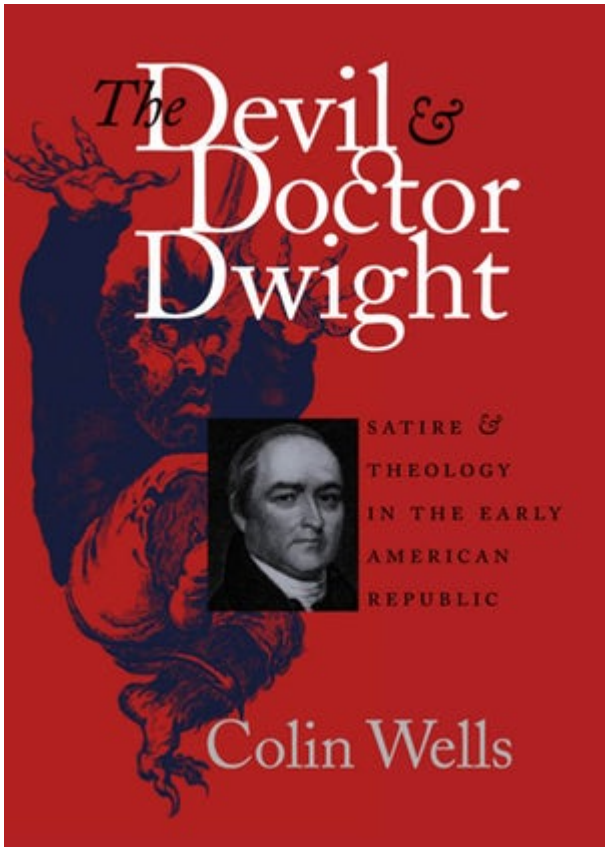
“Convinced of their superior might, the British decided they could do as they pleased. After all, with the French gone, they were now the only game in town. It was time for the Indians to bend to their rules.”

Battlefields, Bodies, and the Built Environment



The ruins of living beings provoked a twinned awe and horror at the transformative power of new technologies.

An American Dunciad



“While Augustan satires were primarily concerned with defending the civic virtues enshrined by classical republican ideology, rather than the doctrines of Calvinist orthodoxy, both belief systems were based on an Augustinian understanding of human nature as tending toward corruption.”