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BOOK REVIEWS

Comic Relief: The Life and Laughter of Artemus Ward, 1834-1867. By John J. Pullen. (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1983. Pp. 202. Cloth. $22.50.)

One of the great humorists of recent times was Fred Allen, whose weekly radio programs delighted the American public. His quips, pauses, and ad-libs were comparable to those of another great humorist of more than a century ago: Artemus Ward. Both were light and gay; their careers sparkled like a rocket, then faded into the mists of time. Analyzing the works of such personalities is a difficult task; "All I know about humor," Allen once said, "is that I don't know anything." Yet both Ward and Allen commanded wide audiences and contributed to the repertoire of American humor; both deserve biographical attention.

Humor has always been a complement to literature, drama, art, and poetry, but relatively few writers have depended upon humor alone for success. Humor for its own sake does not appear until the mid-nineteenth century, with creators like Mark Twain, Bill Nye, and O. Henry. In modern times humor has blossomed forth with writers like Dorothy Parker, James Thurber, Stephen Leacock, Robert Benchley, Marc Connelly, and Garrison Keillor. It has prospered with modern mass media in programs by Jack Benny, Red Skelton, and Bob Hope. Humor, in its best American style, emerges from everyday instances, in the form of quips, buffolas, repartee, anecdotes, and pranks, ranging from the ridiculous to the rather grim. Two examples come to mind — both rural in origin. A young hand at haying sat around a dinner table with others of the crew devouring baked beans. After wiping his plate with a slice of bread, he spied a plate of cookies. Too bashful to ask, he reached across the table with his fork to stab a hard ginger snap. The cookie skittered across the oil cloth, so he made a second attempt — and again proved unsuccessful. Finally, overcome with embarrassment, he asked, "Please pass me a tiddly-wink."

Another shows humor in its grim aspect. A western outlaw, sentenced to be hanged, is lead up the platform where the noose awaits. The sheriff asks if he has any final words. Noting the large crowd assembled, the outlaw responds, "Well, if it wasn't for the honor of the occasion, I'd just as soon be somewhere else." It is sources like these that humorists tapped for their writings or programs.

One of the earliest examples of American humor is found in Seba Smith's Major Jack Downing letters, published in the Portland *Daily Courier* (1830-1831), edited by Smith. Downing is a backwoods farmer, an ill-tempered Jacksonian Democrat, typical of the shrewd, cunning Yankees of his time. Voluble in his political opinions, Downing showed common sense mixed with ready wit. Smith's writings won wide national attention and were reprinted in other newspapers and later in book form. Charles Farrar Brown, another Maine native, became familiar with Smith's later books and imitated his style in Brown's own newspaper articles, which, like Smith's, would exert a strong influence on developing forms of American humor.

For one whose career was relatively brief (he died at age thirty-three), Charles Farrar Brown has been fortunate with his biographers. His first biography appeared in 1870, three years after his death, entitled *The Genial Showman*, by E. P Hingston, his close friend and traveling manager. Next was Don Seitz's *Artemus Ward*, published in 1919. The most recent, by John J. Pullen, contains new research and defines the impact this genial showman had on his contemporaries, particularly Mark Twain.

Charles Farrar Brown (he added an "e" in 1861) was born in 1834 in Waterford, Maine, where he had an unhappy childhood. At age thirteen he was apprenticed to a printer and learned type setting for a Norway newspaper that failed in 1850. The next year he worked in Boston for the *Carpet Bag*, edited by Benjamin Shilaber, a kindred soul. This experience put him in touch with talented writers, who wrote for the paper. With the failure of the *Carpet Bag* in 1853 he started westward,

finding work eventually with the Cleveland *Plain Dealer.* Here, under the pseudonym Artemus Ward, he began writing selections that were to bring him nationwide recognition in the coming years. He parted company with the *Plain Dealer* in 1860 and assumed a position more to his taste in the offices of Charles Godfrey Leland's *Vanity Fair* in New York City. Browne became its chief editor in 1861. In the big city, Browne quickly found boon companions from the theatrical world. One of the group was the notorious Adah Isaacs Menken, for whom Browne had a brief attachment. Diverted by a growing taste for fame, Browne decided to leave journalism and try the lecture platform. Basing his lectures on the Artemus Ward articles, Browne discovered his real calling. His first appearance in New York and his second in New London met with only moderate success, but his appearance in Boston's Tremont Temple brought accolades from critics and audiences. Browne, a born actor, spoke in an *ex-tempore* style. His topics were composed of sheer nonsense; his innovative approach left audiences guessing.

Browne became master of the unspoken joke — a seemingly significant statement followed by a pause, a facial expression or gesture, and finally an irrelevant comment that amused his audience greatly. He established a playful rapport by providing a comical situation rendered with earnestness and solemnity. There was, however, suggested in his commentary, an attack on hypocrisy, narrow-mindedness, and bigotry. (Browne had little sympathy for the Puritanical, austere Maine of his boyhood.)

For six years Browne lectured across the continent. While on vacation to Maine in 1864 he gave performances in Biddeford, Portland, and Lewiston. Late in 1864 Browne left for San Francisco via the Isthmus. His western tour proved a marvelous success; he spent his leisure time with rough miners in Virginia City and with young Sam Clemens, who showed him the bar rooms and gambling houses. (Pullen devotes an entire chapter to Browne's later impact on Twain.) The next stop was Salt Lake City, where despite former quips about Mormons, he was given a cordial reception. (Tickets bore a notice, "Admit the

bearer with one wife." Browne began his lectures with an aside: "The Mormon religion is singular and his wives are plural"; or "The pretty girls of Utah mostly marry Young.") From Utah Browne endured the rough wintertime stagecoach trip across the plains and prairies and arrived in the East with plans to make a conquest of Great Britain.

Despite his deteriorating health, strained by heavy schedules in the United States, Browne performed brilliantly in England. Expecting the stranger from the States to be a vulgar, hickish fellow, English audiences discovered an elegantly dressed figure exuding charm and polish. Overnight his fame spread; the British critics praised him in eloquent language. Shortly thereafter, however, his health failed and Browne died on March 6, 1867.

Mr. Pullen has written a scholarly and definitive biography. For over a decade Pullen probed the libraries, conducting an exhaustive research project, as his long bibliography testifies. He has organized his material to produce a biography that, like its subject, has elegance and humor. Hingston's work is personal and sprightly; Pullen's commands authority and is written in engaging style.

Modern readers would perhaps find Browne's humor archaic, but it is the influence he had in his lifetime that is important. During the tragic Civil War era he brought entertainment to a dispairing nation. Abraham Lincoln, an Artemus Ward devotee, read excerpts at a cabinet meeting, adding his comment: "Gentlemen, ... with the fearful strain that is put upon me night and day, if I did not laugh, I should die, and you need the medicine as much as I do."

Perhaps more important, Browne gave respectability to the American theater, gave a new impetus to American humor, and pioneered a way for a new group of native humorists to carry on where he left off. This biography introduces us to a figure whose singular talent made an indelible mark in the annals of American humor.

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Houses of New England. By Peter T. Mallary; photographs by Graydon Wood. (New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1984. Pp. 208; 213 photographs. Cloth. $35.00.)

This attractive book, the American edition of a British publication, is an entertaining collection of twenty-four anecdotal descriptions of historical personalities and their already well-known homes. The author's taste, as he explains in his introduction, has determined the choice of the houses, and it is an essentially old-fashioned taste, focusing for the most part on Colonial and Federal houses still Colonial (or Georgian) in design, the only exceptions being the Wilcox-Cutts House, Orwell, Vermont, a Greek residence; Kingscote (the George Noble Jones House), Newport, Rhode Island, Richard Upjohn's influential Gothic villa of 1840-1841 with additions by Stanford White; the Morrill Homestead, Strafford, Vermont (1850), a distinguished local reflection of the Gothic Revival style; and The Elms, the great turn-of-the-century classicizing mansion at Newport, Rhode Island, designed by Horace Trumbauer.

Thus the author has chosen to ignore the complexities of American political and social history in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Italianate style, and all the other creative, frequently concurrent later nineteenth-century styles: the Romanesque Revival, the Stick and Shingle styles, and the Queen Anne. Surely the selection could have included an example of Italianate style as urbane as Portland's Victoria Mansion (Morse-Libby House), which was recently brought to the attention of the British public in *Country Life* (March 1980). The verticality of the developing Italianate contributed as much, if not more, than the Gothic Revival to "full-blown Victorian architecture" (p. 14). And although Mallary also omits mentioning it, the other important late-nineteenth-century style, the Colonial Revival, is the foundation for his choices — the classicizing French or Beaux-Arts style of The Elms is essentially the academic manifestation of the Colonial Revival.

Mallary is still thinking in the tradition of Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman, Jr., *The Decoration of Houses* (1902), although the sections devoted to individual houses belong to the more modern tradition of structural analysis. Typifying this Colonial Revival taste is the equation of almost complete restoration (the replacement of almost all details of a badly stripped house) with preservation, as in the Ashley House at Deerfield. This kind of recreative preservation, pioneered at Colonial Williamsburg, is now outdated and was itself an outgrowth of the Colonial Revival. (See F. C. Kaynor, "Thomas Tileston Waterman: Student of American Colonial Architecture," *Winterthur Portfolio* [1985].) The contrast between the reconstructive approach to preservation, seen at the Ashley House, and the careful archaeological restoration of the decoration of the first Harrison Gray Otis House by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, could have been singled out as a sign of evolution in the field of architectural preservation, thus giving the book an overall unity of perspective.

The Sayward House, York, and the Tate House, Stroudwater, are the only Maine houses in *Houses of New England.* Like all but three houses in the book, these two are in public hands, and with a little effort, the reader can visit almost all the structures described. Unfortunately, the "Notes and Acknowledgements" do not give seasonal visiting dates, hours, or telephone numbers, which would have given the book utility as a guide.

Mallary's co-author, Graydon Wood, is responsible for the handsome black-and-white and color photographs which take up about half the book.

Architectural history is not always best served by current photographs, and sometimes the choice of a detail shows misunderstanding of the integrity of a building. For example, the introduction, while in addition to justifying the author's choices gives a capsule history of style, is illustrated by details of a number of houses, including one of the tower at Kingscote (fig. 11). This detail is the kind of photograph

solicited by the editors of the *Old House Journal* to demonstrate how not to remodel historic houses. It shows the tower, formerly covered by rusticated matched boarding like the rest of the house, now covered by cedar shingles (a rough texture peculiarly unsuited to the simulated stone of this Gothic design); it also shows that the upper, former casement, windows have been poorly remodeled: shortened, turned into double sash reusing one diamond-panel as the upper element. These changes apparently occurred when the house was in private hands, and the Preservation Society of Newport County will undoubtedly work to restore the tower to its original appearance. (Mallary's incorrect attribution of Kingscote to James Renwick on pp. 14 and 16, contradicted on p. 174 where Upjohn is properly named, is another misfortune connected with the presentation of this landmark house.) Similarly, it might also have been better if in at least one photograph the paneled front door of the Gardner-Pingree House, and not the louvered summer door, could have been illustrated (figs. 155 and 158).

Minor inaccuracies in the description of architectural detail can also be found (such as Palladian window on p. 169 when a tripartite window is meant; "drop tracery" for ornamental barge, or verge, boards, p. 175; the confusion of dentils with modillion blocks, p. 169). These things all suggest that an editor's hand was lacking or that the project was done in haste, with little effort to relate separate texts to each other, and with the quality of texts dependent upon the sources available for each house.

Mallary makes clear that, "This book is supposed to be fun," and that, "It is not intended to be a seminal work of scholarship (p. 16). (Speaking as a scholar, I might say here that scholarly work is hard enough to produce without having to worry that one's work will be seminal.) The reader should therefore beware, use it mainly for amusement, but seek other sources to feed a growing interest in architectural history or historic preservation.

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