

time; were all well, were becoming inured to privations, and things were moving along quite satisfactorily."

This is not to suggest that women had an easy life on either the farmstead or the westward trail but only that the picture was not quite as bleak for women nor as bright for men as Faragher presents it. The book is a smoothly written expansion of a 1975 article in *Feminist Studies* and the author's 1977 dissertation at Yale which pulls together some significant data on the overland trail episode, but it should be read cautiously.

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Chariot of Fire: Religion and the Beecher Family. By Marie Caskey. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978. Pp. xv, 442. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$25.00.)

Henry Ward Beecher: Spokesman for a Middle-Class America. By Clifford E. Clark, Jr. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978. Pp. 288. Notes, illustrations, note on sources, index. \$12.95.)

If the Beechers were alive today, they would live in California and lecture on Gestalt psychology. As it was, they were Victorian preachers, some using the pulpit, others the novel, tract, and classroom. All of them expounded the joy of salvation through the Bible, not through primal scream. Nevertheless, the Beechers were spiritual ancestors of our age of narcissism. Despite fame and impressive achievement, they loved nothing better than the joyous misery of being Beechers, preoccupied as they were with identity and *angst*. A trail of heresy and gentle scandal followed them as if unconventionality added a welcome pungency to their name.

Three obsessions gripped them: their relation to God; to each other; and to the world audience they craved. They almost seemed to worship not the Lord, but the Madonna Roxanna, mother of the first seven of the eleven children. Her deathbed wish about the children making known God's mercy lay heavily on all Beecher consciences. There was also a singular resemblance between the Beecher's God and Lyman, Abraham of the tribe. A New England Congregationalist of unflagging evangelical drive, Lyman at seventy once traveled literally day and night on horseback through wilderness Indiana to preach at son Charles' installation. Though Lyman endowed them all with the impulse to seek Truth, he provided a tortuous roadmap for

getting there. Nearly all his progeny inherited his "hypo" and other signs of severe depression that took such forms as dyspepsia, alcoholism, neuralgia, insomnia, and nervous breakdown. Also they married partners with complementary symptoms as if to insure that mirrors reflecting their own soulful distresses were never in short supply. They strove to be different from each other, but ended up being commonly eccentric. Amidst all the neurotic debris, there was, however, a steady faith in Christ, though each Beecher had a curiously different vision shaped from the compulsion to piety that all of them shared.

With such able portrayers of Beecherdom as Edmund Wilson, W. G. McLoughlin, and K. K. Sklar to guide, scholars have come to know this family as well as the Adamses. Yet, the two books under review greatly expand our understanding. Clifford E. Clark, Jr., provides an appropriately sympathetic life of Henry Ward. Marie Caskey offers a study of the religious journeys that various Beechers undertook through life. Clark's objective is the more traditional, since he concentrates less on psychology and more on Henry's active, "romantic Christianity" and the reform mentality arising from it. Centered on the redemptive Christ, Henry Ward Beecher's benign theology served to justify cautious, fair-minded, bourgeois reform. It pre-saged the Social Gospel, Clark correctly maintains, and, one might add, Christian "relevance" in today's mainline, liberal churches as well. Beecher's opportunism, though not denied, is seen in the context of finding what would actually work amid the storms of sectionalism, war, reconstruction, and postwar money-getting. Thus, liberty, preached the Plymouth Church minister of Brooklyn, had to be posed against "the general needs of society" (p. 168). Likewise, he worried lest freedmen be seduced into indolence by an overindulgent government, a sentiment appropriate to the complacency of the day. Yet, the author does not delve very far into the Beecher-Tilton sex imbroglio or its ramifications. (Caskey omits the episode altogether.) One wishes to know more, but we must await Richard E. Sewell's forthcoming study.

Though a more difficult book to read, Caskey's volume is the more provocative. She refrains from overt psychologizing in favor of a heavy theological fare that leadens the layman's eyes. Nevertheless, her chapters on the lesser Beechers are sensitive and brilliant, providing rare insights into family emotions. On Catharine, Henry Ward, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, others have done better than Caskey, but she has shown

the interaction of all the Beechers in novel ways. Her study of Thomas Beecher, for instance, is skillful and moving, not because his pastorate at Elmira, New York, mattered much to Christendom but because he had detached a part of himself from the others. So ambivalent was he toward the family that he refused to give them the satisfaction of seeing him mourn in conventional ways when his death-haunted bride expired in childbirth. Instead, he insisted on his joy and hers. No wonder an angry melancholia that remained unself-recognized carried him toward half-humorous cynicism. He loved, yet could not forgive earnest brother Henry Ward for his ministerial fame and enthusiasms, writing in unVictorian irony, "We . . . are lost children in a mazy wilderness of life. Let us be gentle, humble, forgiving. . . . By and by our elder brother will come to lead us to our home" (p. 283). Henry Ward, it seemed, had all the answers.

Caskey and Clark have both thoroughly mastered the Beechers' theological sources of inspiration and explained their convictions with clarity and precision. Their books impressively reveal the family's attitudes about reform and other themes but most of all their jealousies and dependencies upon each other, as if the struggle for differentiation among so many could cease only at death. For those partners marrying into this Christian hothouse, life could not have been very pleasant. Yet such intellectual reforming sticks as Harriet's Calvin Stowe and Isabella's doting John Hooker were chosen precisely because they could be so easily crammed into the unceasing dramas of hypochondria and Yankee rumination. As Caskey shows, almost all of them took up spiritualism to reach dead Beechers—another way to commune narcissistically among themselves.

Just as Beechers loved to write and preach, so too have scholars, as these handsome volumes attest, made them a thriving industry. Their appeal lay chiefly in their enviable capacity to demonstrate conviction. But for all the differences between their era and our skeptical times, the Beechers touch us because they too found themselves the ultimate dramas, their souls' condition the most fascinating of topics. Caskey and Clark have skillfully reintroduced their readers to their Victorian past, its triumphs and its grand flirtations with the self.

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