

The Word in the World
Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880
 By Candy Gunther Brown

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. Pp. xiv, 336. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Clothbound, \$59.95; paperbound, \$19.95.)

In 1789 Thomas Coke opened the Methodist Book Concern, “the first publishing house in America to initiate the systematic printing and distribution of evangelical books” (p. 46). Nearly one hundred years later Harper & Brothers, a trade press with Methodist roots, published Indiana native General Lew Wallace’s best-selling novel *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. These two events bracket a century of publishing in the United States that firmly established the evangelical presence in the world of print. Candy Gunther Brown documents this phenomenon and demonstrates the importance of evangelical publishing in American Christianity.

Brown defines nineteenth-century evangelicals as Christians who rejected both sacramental theology and liberal rationalistic theology in favor of a theology centered on “the Word,” that is, the Bible. Thus, words became a powerful tool in fulfilling the evangelicals’ mission of purifying the world and made their entrance into the publishing profession a natural step.

Brown posits the existence of an “evangelical textual community” (p. 9) based on a network of nationally distributed books that promoted evangelical cultural values and connected geographically scattered Chris-

tians. She examines the composition and function of this “textual community,” highlighting both the success of evangelicals in disseminating their ideas and the tensions inherent in their efforts. She closes by linking nineteenth-century evangelical publishing to its modern counterpart, the vibrant media culture of twenty-first-century Christianity.

Two tensions Brown documents illustrate especially well the evangelical dilemma of striving for purity and unity in a fallen world. One conflict involved the pull between loyalty to a denomination and loyalty to a “universal church” of like-minded believers. Evangelical publishers contributed to this tension. On the one hand, denominational presses strengthened church ties by publishing controversial doctrinal work that was compatible with their particular set of beliefs but which heightened sectarian divisions. On the other hand, nondenominational publishing houses and evangelical trade publishers unified their audience by marketing books acceptable to most evangelicals: Bibles, devotionals, biblical commentaries, hymnals, history, memoirs, and eventually fiction. Over time, a core group of these texts evolved into a distinctive “evangelical canon.”

Readers embraced this evangelical canon, evidenced by the number of books they bought, and this market success led to a second important tension within the evangelical world. Some publishers eschewed the “commercialization” of evangelical literature, fearing that financial success undermined their ability to influence the world. Most, however, saw that bigger sales meant a wider exposure for evangelical ideas, and they adopted secular business principles as a way to help them spread their message.

Brown’s research is thorough, and her conclusions are an important corrective to the stereotypical portrayal of evangelicals as anti-intellectual and otherworldly. Indeed, evangelicals were not afraid to engage popular culture to reach the “masses” and puri-

fy society. They maintained a holistic approach to life in which every action—including reading, writing, and publishing—served a godly purpose. Thus, concludes Brown, evangelicals’ experience of religion went beyond altar calls and tent revivals to a lifelong commitment to changing the world through the power of words.

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Constantine Samuel Rafinesque
A Voice in the American Wilderness
 By Leonard Warren

(Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004. Pp. xiv, 252. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$40.00.)

Constantine Samuel Rafinesque was arguably the oddest naturalist of his time. In the early nineteenth century he knew as much botany, zoology, and history as most men in those fields, and he published works on archaeology, linguistics, medicine, and banking as well. So how did this gifted man, a kind of walking curiosity museum, manage to outrage so many of his scientific contemporaries? Leonard Warren’s biography

of Rafinesque seeks to answer this question, and to further rehabilitate his scientific reputation. Warren does a fine job of illuminating Rafinesque and his obsessive drive to find and catalogue new species; what is more, the author examines in depth the troubling aspects of Rafinesque’s character and work.

A great part of the book re-creates Rafinesque’s world in the early nineteenth century, particularly the world