

Morality and the Mail in Nineteenth-Century America. By *Wayne E. Fuller*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003. xiii + 264 pp. Index, notes, illustrations. Cloth, \$39.95. ISBN 0-252-02812.

Reviewed by Gaines M. Foster

“No arm of the national government was more intimately tied to the daily lives of American people than the post office,” Wayne E. Fuller writes in the introduction to *Morality and the Mail in Nineteenth-Century America*, “and because Congress controlled it none was as closely connected to American politics or subject to more pressure from various interest groups” (p. xi). Fuller then goes on to explore one example of the post office’s influence—its role in spreading secular, urban values—and to chronicle the efforts of one interest group, evangelical Christians, to prevent it from doing so by convincing Congress to enact legislation to respect the Sabbath and ban what they considered immoral goods and publications from the mails.

The first of Fuller’s two major themes, the post office’s role in the diffusion of urban, secular values, receives less attention than the second, the evangelicals’ legislative campaign, but it remains important. By charging less to mail certain publications than it cost to deliver them, Fuller convincingly argues, the post office subsidized their distribution and thereby fostered the expansion of various businesses. Some of these businesses, most people today would agree, were of dubious value—pornography for example; others people then and now would disagree about, such as information on, and products for, birth control or abortion; and still others most people would consider of clear economic and social value—Sunday newspapers, for instance. The post office’s role in the distribution of Sunday papers, magazines, and paperback books is an often overlooked example of the effective way in which government subsidies stimulated business expansion during the nineteenth century. Fuller stresses that the government subsidized immorality and, in the end, contributed to the secularization of American society. He makes an effective case that the mails brought modern, urban values into the rural countryside and gives a fascinating account of how Sunday newspapers spread a commercial culture with a component of sensationalism, a process historians often

attribute to other media and a later era. By the end of the nineteenth century, he concludes, the United States was well down the path of secularization.

Fuller devotes more attention to his second theme, the evangelicals' efforts to purify the mails, and it proves to be the book's major contribution. Evangelical activists convinced Congress to ban from the mail lottery materials, information on and goods for birth control and abortion, and various forms of obscenity, but they failed either to end the distribution of paperbacks and certain types of magazines or to stop the transportation and delivery of the mail on Sunday. Fuller offers a slightly new, though not fully convincing, account of the failure of antebellum attempts to end Sunday mail delivery. This campaign has already been the focus of several first-rate studies, but Fuller provides by far the fullest account of the evangelicals' efforts after the Civil War to keep Sunday papers, obscene goods and publications, and lottery materials out of the mails. He adds an especially valuable chapter on how the post office actually enforced the bans that Congress passed. That chapter and the others benefit greatly from Fuller's expertise on the post office—he has written two other books on the department—and rest on careful and extensive research in post office and congressional records.

Fuller also does an excellent job of describing the beliefs and goals of the evangelicals who campaigned to purify the mails, in large part because he “takes the evangelicals' word” for what they tried to do (p. xi). In contrast, however, he often does not take the word of their opponents: not just pornographers but also advocates of free religion and free love, other liberals, and various legitimate business interests. The difference in treatment encourages the conclusion that, intentionally or not, Fuller couches his story in the evangelicals' own terms. It is sometimes difficult to be sure where Fuller explains how his protagonists interpreted events and where he offers his own interpretation. He apparently conceives of his story, as the evangelicals did, as one in which a “moral majority of evangelicals” fought to preserve a “Christian nation” (p. 253).

Fuller repeatedly refers to the “nation's evangelical moral majority” (p.105). The term may or may not be intended to invoke a parallel with the more recent organization bearing a similar name, but it certainly seems to imply that more than half of Americans were evangelicals who shared the goal of purifying the mails. Fuller explains passage of

a ban on obscenity in the mails as the will of that majority, but he attributes Congress's refusal to pass similar legislation to political machinations, corruption of the system by business leaders, or even unfortunate timing. Could the failure of some of these bills, like the passage of others, have reflected the will of a majority of Americans? Although Protestants dominated American public life in the late nineteenth century, not all Americans, indeed not even all Protestants, necessarily shared the Christian activists' conceptions of morality or of the proper role of government in people's lives.

The existence of a nineteenth-century "moral majority" needs to be more carefully established. So too does the claim that America was a Christian nation. Fuller begins the book by invoking the Puritan's notion of a city on a hill, but beyond that he provides little systematic explanation of what he means by "Christian nation." Other historians have argued that the national government, which is what some mean by nation, had always been secular. If they are correct, the conceptualization of the fight for Sunday observation and "pure" mails as a battle to preserve an existing Christian nation becomes more problematic.

Even historians who have reservations about Fuller's underlying conceptualization of his story, however, will benefit from reading *Morality and the Mail in Nineteenth-Century America*. Well written and engaging, it offers many insights into the role of the post office in a changing society and provides an important case study of the role of religious interest groups in politics.

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