

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. xiv + 336 pp. Index, notes, appendix, bibliography, illustrations. Cloth, \$59.95; paper, \$19.95. ISBN: cloth, 0-807-82838-6; paper, 0-807-85511-1.

Reviewed by Peter J. Wosh

Religious publishing remains a profitable enterprise in contemporary America. Christian bookstores thrive in suburban shopping malls, the venerable American Bible Society entered the new millennium with annual expenditures that exceeded \$100 million and assets that approached \$500 million, and the *New York Times* provided front-page coverage when Tim LeHaye and Jerry Jenkins released the final novel in their blockbuster *Left Behind* series in 2004. Candy Gunther Brown attempts to historicize these twenty-first century developments by immersing readers in the nation's vibrant antebellum evangelical literary scene. She charts the institutional, personal, and ideological currents that flooded pious nineteenth-century households with a torrent of bibles, tracts, hymnbooks, published sermons, advice manuals, missionary memoirs, theological treatises, children's literature, denominational periodicals, and religious fiction. By 1880, Protestants had successfully created a recognizable print culture that would remain an enduring fixture on the American business landscape.

Brown organizes her argument around the dual notions of purity and presence. Evangelicals used print first as a means of purifying themselves and maintaining their own distinctiveness. Books united a national community of readers that transcended time and space. A textual canon developed, nurturing and sustaining religious beliefs. By aggressively entering the publishing marketplace, evangelical Protestants combated more profane influences and sanctified their common values. But purity constituted only part of the story. Print also allowed evangelicals to maintain a presence in secular circles and thereby fulfill Jesus's Great Commission to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). They routinely adopted the most up-to-date technological innovations, experimented with a variety of new publication forms and genres, and selectively implemented modern marketing techniques and organizational structures in

order to communicate their message. Evangelicals used every appropriate means at their disposal in their efforts to sanctify a publishing industry that threatened to move the nation in more worldly and dangerous directions.

Protestant publishers played a major role in defining the nineteenth-century book trades, and Brown provides a good description of the three principal institutions that dominated the evangelical marketplace: denominational houses, national philanthropies, and trade publishers. The Methodist Book Concern, established in 1789, exemplified the most innovative and successful of the denominational endeavors. Methodists embraced technological change, developed an efficient distribution network based on itinerant ministers who doubled as traveling booksellers, established book depositories throughout the nation, and freely adopted modern packaging styles. National nondenominational philanthropies, such as the American Bible Society (1816), the American Sunday School Union (1824), and the American Tract Society (1825), centralized production and distribution to an unprecedented degree, incorporated systematic management techniques and economies of scale into their operations, and achieved impressive levels of capitalization. Trade publishers necessarily proved more flexible and expansive than the nonprofits, in terms of their product lines and sales strategies, offering a full range of sentimental fiction and freely operating through retail bookstores. Brown convincingly demonstrates, however, that the religiously inspired owners of such commercial firms as Harper & Brothers, J. B. Lippincott & Company, Robert Carter & Brothers, and A. D. F. Randolph viewed their enterprises as holy callings. They forged important partnerships with both the denominational agencies and the nondenominational societies in order to promote evangelical interests, unapologetically blending business and faith in fundamentally new ways.

Two interpretive points will especially interest historians of business. First, Brown argues against the notion that interaction with the market necessarily fueled secularizing tendencies within the Protestant polities. Evangelicals agonized over marketing strategies and distribution practices, debated the appropriateness of adding novels to their product lines, and often resisted standard trade practices at great cost to their operations. Their efforts ultimately served more to sanctify the marketplace than to compromise with the larger culture. Brown wisely observes that “the mere presence of

secular elements in religious texts or marketing strategies does not constitute secularization” (p. 19). A more complex, subtle, and richer relationship emerges from her book. Second, Brown offers an unexpected and intriguing insight into nineteenth-century attitudes toward copyright. Evangelicals claimed the right to exert communal control over their canonical works and most popular hymns. For much of the century, they routinely modified texts, altered stories to satisfy denominational purposes and support theological stances, and shamelessly borrowed from each other without attribution. Notions of communal ownership and persistent beliefs in the divine inspiration of published work routinely overrode any authorial claims to exclusivity or originality. Evangelicals valued the free and unfettered circulation of ideas and orthodoxies more than the privileges of individual creators to control access to their supposedly unique texts.

Despite the clarity of her overall argument, Brown remains hazy on a few points. She appropriately begins her story in 1789, with the founding of the Methodist Book Concern, but a clear rationale for ending the book in 1880 never appears. Brown claims only that the decision in 1880 by Harper & Brothers to publish Lew Wallace’s popular novel *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* served as a defining historical moment that “bridged the categories of religious and secular literature” (p. 77). The point remains underdeveloped, and *Ben-Hur* receives only a few scattered mentions throughout her narrative. A more systematic effort at periodization would have sharpened the argument. Further, Brown’s belief in an overarching evangelical culture and her contention that religious historians have excessively emphasized denominationalism seem strained at times. Her evidence itself suggests that denominational cultures and theological issues mattered at many key moments. Methodists clearly approached their publishing enterprises very differently than Congregationalists or Episcopalians. Baptists especially engaged in significant internal bloodletting and protracted internecine culture wars over the very existence of denominational publishing houses and missionary efforts, a story that deserves more extended historical analysis. By and large, however, *The Word in the World* succeeds admirably. It will take its place alongside such works as Leigh Schmidt’s *Consumer Rites* (1995), Paul Gutjahr’s *An American Bible* (1999), and the

essays in Mark Noll's *God and Mammon* (2001) that have advanced our understanding of the relationship between religion, commerce, and print in nineteenth-century America.

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