

BOOK REVIEW:

HUMBUG: THE ART OF P. T. BARNUM

by Neil Harris. 337 pages. Boston:
Little, Brown and Co. \$10

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DR. TRULAN BARNER

Phineas Taylor Barnum wrote the first edition of his autobiography in 1855. In 1869 he published Struggles and Triumphs; or Forty Years Recollections of P.T. Barnum, which he updated with appendices each succeeding year until he published a revised third edition in 1889. Biographical accounts by others began during his lifetime and continued through such studies as Werner's Barnum (1927), Root's The Unknown Barnum (1927), and Wallace's The Fabulous Showman (1959). Supplementing these were innumerable briefer articles on Barnum as he influenced the circus, the theater, museums, popular culture and advertising. With this multitude of publications already at hand, does Barnum's career merit another analysis by a serious student of history? Neil Harris -- Ph. D. in history from Harvard and currently Professor of History at the University of Chicago-- believes it does, as he sets out to demonstrate in his recent study, Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum.

Harris recounts those aspects of Barnum's life traditionally featured in his biographies--his birth and early life in the Danbury region; his travels with the circus of Aaron Turner, also a Danbury resident; his early theatrical enterprises; the huckstering and flamboyant advertising techniques he developed into an art while marketing such personalities as Joice Heth (supposedly the nurse to the infant George Washington), General Tom Thumb (Barnum's name for Charles S. Stratton, a midget from Bridgeport), the Siamese Twins, and Jenny Lind, the Swedish Nightingale; his experiences with the American Museum in New York City; his part in creating the first great traveling circus; his involvement in local and state politics; and his world-wide renown as an entrepreneur of entertainment.

But his book is more than a reworking and a lively restatement of the familiar. Through new research and reinterpretation of old data, Harris has added new dimensions to the traditional picture. For example, while the author makes excellent use of the work of earlier scholars, he also has searched widely for other sources not utilized previously, the Barnum-Limball correspondence in particular. However, the real merit of Harris' contribution rests not on new manuscript material, but on the questions he asks from the information long available to others.

Especially rewarding is Harris' careful rereading of the many editions of Barnum's autobiography, as well as his other writings, through which he sought the changing image which Barnum wished to project to his reading audience and which revealed much about the values and ideals which motivated him at various periods of his life. Those sections of the book which focus on the autobiography, plus the brief, but excellent, bibliographical essay, indicate how necessary it is to look at the whole range of Barnum's writing,

rather than concentrate on a selected edition of his life story.

Even more fascinating is Harris' attempt to examine Barnum in terms of the times in which he lived. Thus, he depicts Barnum as a product of the egalitarian, "common-man" syndrome of the pre-Civil War era, a period in which not only the political authority, but also the social, moral, aesthetic and religious authority, of previous life styles had been swept aside. The deference, the rituals, the myths of the past were gone and had not been replaced by satisfactory substitutes. Into the vacuum stepped men like Barnum, appealing directly to the "vanities and conceits" of the new democratic sensibility.

Barnum thus appears to reflect an early nineteenth century Yankee morality that many modern readers would prefer to believe really never existed. Whether the chicanery and competitiveness of the inhabitants of Danbury, as portrayed by Barnum, is an historically accurate description of life in the community certainly is open to debate, but he personally believed his world-view to be the product of an environment in which "the slightest inattention on the part of the storekeeper and he is fooled on weight and measure; the least heedlessness on the part of the farmer and he is swindled....The customer cheated us in their fabrics, we cheated the customers with our goods. Each party expected to be cheated, if it was possible. Our eyes, and not our ears, had to be our masters. We must believe little that we saw, and less that we heard." Although Harris seems to accept such statements at face value, more detailed research at the local level to ascertain how widespread such behavior was among the general population seems to be in order.

Harris also explores the question of why, in an atmosphere in which the individual need be constantly on the alert to avoid being hoodwinked, Barnum, the master of humbug and hoaxing, should become so popular. The answer suggested is a complex one that involves the extensive experiences with science and technology Americans had which led them to accept "the futility of declaring anything impossible"; the enjoyment of the competition inherent in the interplay between victim and hoaxer; and the fact that focusing on the question of whether an exhibit was genuine or contrived permitted the common man, unprepared to deal in a sophisticated manner with the exotic and unfamiliar, to reduce "that experience to a simple evaluation." Indeed, Harris believes that Barnum made a major contribution to American Culture by providing vehicles, such as the American Museum which emphasized the process of problem solving and information collecting, by means of which the common man was exposed to theatrical performances, works of art, and the like, that he would otherwise have been unprepared to accept.

Barnum himself made a somewhat different attempt to justify his use of exaggeration and humbug when he said that "many persons have such a horror of being taken in that they believe themselves to be a sham, and in this way are continually humbugging themselves."

Thus, exaggeration and humbug were good for the American people because they needed it, for they believed too little rather than too much. In Barnum's view he served "as a healer, a lubricant for the continual pressures engendered by the money-getting, self-discipline and competition of American life." Humbug served as social therapy.

Persuing his analysis of the times to help explain the individual, Harris offers the interpretation that a static view of Barnum's beliefs is untenable. Post Civil War America was decidedly different from the Jacksonian atmosphere of his early career. Because he successfully related to the culture of the nation in both these periods, the author describes the hoaxing Barnum of the early days as considerably different from the expansive entrepreneur managing the gigantic spectacles of the great traveling circus. The viewpoints and tastes of the nation had changed, and Barnum had changed with them.

Although the author uses Barnum's description of the Danbury region to help explain some of his motivations toward humbug, neither he, nor other researchers, offer an hypothesis to explain why the same general region of Danbury, Brewster, Somers and Carmel was also the focus of so much circus activity. The presence of a surprising number of circus connected families and individuals--Turner, June, Titus, Bailey, Barnum, Howes, Crane, Angevine--all living within a day's journey of each other may have been purely fortuitous, but the interconnections between them and their jointly held motivations, if they had such, remain unexplored. While a study of this nature was not in the province of the volume here under review, Harris' excellent examination of the period in which Barnum lived as a source of explanation hopefully will inspire similar attempts to help us understand more clearly the history of the circus itself.

For most Americans the name of P.T. Barnum evokes images of the three ring circus, the art of ballyhoo, and the phrase "There's a sucker born every minute." But to others his contributions are of a more influential nature. Thus, M.R. Werner, in the preface to his biography of Barnum, noted that "a distinguished American Editor said recently that he considers Lincoln and Barnum the most typical American figures, and that he is rather afraid to think which is the more typical." Harris similarly believes that Barnum symbolizes much that is typically American and therefor serves as a focus for examining some of the major themes in American history. Perhaps the best summary of the study is Harris' evaluation of the original autobiography that it "is simply not the chronicle of a life, but a text on the social functions of illusion and the role of the deceiver in an egalitarian society."