

Editors' Note

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In the very first issue of this journal, published in 2002, then-president of SHGAPE Walter Nugent celebrated the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, declaring that this period in American history exhibited “the most intriguing and challenging confusions of cause and effect” and inspired “an efflorescence” of scholarship. Nugent hoped the fledgling journal would embrace that efflorescence in all its diversity.

Sadly, we lost Walter Nugent in 2021, but we still honor his legacy by embracing that efflorescence and by exploring the many facets of late-1800s and early-1900s American history. Throughout his long and productive career, Nugent made many contributions to the discipline by way of his scholarship, teaching, service to the profession, and—most importantly of all—close, enduring friendships. In this issue, we remember Walter with a roundtable conversation between friends and colleagues who gathered together last April at the OAH annual meeting in Los Angeles to commemorate his life and legacy.

Appropriately, we also remember Walter Nugent’s hopes for the journal in this special issue on “Literary Studies and the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.” Issue editors Elizabeth Sheehan and Nancy Unger have brought together literary and historical scholars to think broadly and deeply about the ways literary and historical methodologies push practitioners of both disciplines to tackle those “challenging confusions” with new questions about the past and the present. Brian Rouleau examines self-published fiction written by children for other children; he suggests that many of these works both supported and subverted middle-class norms, approvingly reinforcing settler colonialism while rejecting an extended supervised childhood. Meanwhile, Sarah Ruffing Robbins analyzes the writing of Elaine Eastman, a white woman married to a Native American man. In *Yellow Star*, a 1911 novel for younger readers (now, of course, we would call it a “young adult” book), Eastman effectively tried to destabilize the ideas Rouleau’s child authors embraced, though at times she ended up simply reiterating them. In her piece, Nancy Unger turns to the still-popular coming-of-age novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943) to explore how a World War II-era story taught readers about the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Unger suggests that this highly sentimental book exposed many of the most pressing issues of the period and its historiography. Nathaniel Cadle continues the discussion of literary sentimentalism, considering its role in fiction by socialist writers from the well-known (Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, 1905–06) to the now-forgotten (Ernest Poole’s *The Harbor*, 1915). In the final research essay of this issue, Hunter Plummer examines representations of female journalists—both fictional and nonfictional—to explore the “social gerrymandering” that women confronted when they tried to enter public workspaces. The special issue concludes with two essays on how to teach some of the unusual literary pieces discussed here. Rouleau reproduces several hard-to-find children’s texts and offers ideas for their use in the classroom, while Robbins discusses how documents by Charles Eastman, Elaine Eastman’s husband, can expand class discussions about Indigeneity, authenticity, authority, and identity.

These contributions remind us that there are many different ways historians can use literature. For Unger, a well-known book illustrates many aspects of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era: poverty, machine politics, eugenics, birth control, and organized labor, just to name a few. Literature is storytelling, after all, but Robbins reminds us that it is a key aspect of “history-telling”; literary texts, notes Plummer, are best understood as narratives that reveal the attitudes of an era. Historians can read literature as primary source material, of course, but we also need to remember to virtually read over the shoulder of past readers, to understand their varied contexts and contingencies. For Cadle, muckraking novels by Sinclair and Poole existed within a complex “text network” that illustrated the radical potential of proletarian literature. And even when the writing is far from canonical (i.e., it’s not very good), it can be memorable and significant. After all, Rouleau’s amateur young authors created a discursive space where they articulated tropes of American imperialism while simultaneously revealing “fantasies of their own empowerment.” Through such works, we and our students can learn that literature serves not just as an ornament to historical narratives, but rather as an important building block for our understanding of the past.

We conclude this issue, as always, with a fine selection of book reviews.