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Peter Messent, *Mark Twain and Male Friendship: The Twichell, Howells, and Rogers Friendships* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, \$49.95). Pp. 259. ISBN 978 0 19 539116 9.

Mark Twain and Male Friendship draws together two fields of inquiry – Mark Twain and male gender. Studies of Mark Twain’s writing and life continue to proliferate, and sometimes I wonder if there is anything more to be said about the quintessentially American author. No need to worry: books keep multiplying with new interpretations and investigations of facets of Twain’s literary productions, performances and multiple personalities. Male gender studies also keep appearing, although compared to studies on Twain and his work, the field is minuscule. Peter Messent, already one of the most lucid, perceptive critics of American literature and culture, crosses the two, producing a fascinating hybrid important to both fields.

Messent notes that male friendship is a topic that is particularly “underexplored” (11), even within male gender studies, and he examines three extraordinary, socially powerful friends involved in religion, literature and business who orbited the iconic figure of Twain. Each of these men was among the most important relationships, male or female, in the life of Samuel Clemens, each interacted with different aspects of his career as Mark Twain, and at the same time all were major figures in their respective fields. In grouping these relationships together, Messent not only illuminates Twain’s multifaceted career but also reveals dimensions of how subjectivity and instrumentality operated through male bonds in nineteenth-century American culture.

Reverend Joseph Twichell was an important, well-known Protestant clergyman who grew away from narrow self-righteous New England gentility after his service during the Civil War as a chaplain to a unit that comprised mainly Irish Catholic immigrants and other working-class men. It may seem odd that one of Twain’s best friends was a minister, considering Twain’s difficult relationship with religion. But Twichell, broad-minded and compassionate, gave Twain the ability to plumb his doubts without scolding or sanctimoniousness. Plus, the minister and the infidel were able to have genuine fun. William Dean Howells was the leading literary critic of his time and an acclaimed novelist, and Messent explores their careful literary friendship, the mutual respect both cultivated, explicating how Howells’s views of literary realism and socialist politics veered from Twain’s with no rupture in their bonds. The most opaque of the friends – mostly because the personal documentation is not as rich – is Henry Huttleston Rogers, vice president of Standard Oil, who funded Twain’s world lecture tour after he declared bankruptcy. The two made a team, as Twain quipped: “you are the most useful man I know, and I am the most ornamental” (130). Twain’s failure in business was well known, as well as his denunciations of the plutocracy. Rogers had a well-earned reputation as a ruthless businessman, which Twain preferred to ignore, even sleeping on the couch in his office as he made deals. It seemed that Rogers was the moneymaker that Twain always dreamt he could become, but the evidence does not entirely reveal what kind of ornament Twain meant to the millionaire.

Each of these relationships was filled with contradictions. Nonetheless, “if the relationships were predicated on a personal liking and sense of strong (and intimate) connections, they also depended on the social and professional interests held in common and the benefits in such areas that the friendships brought with them” (168). These friendships gave these men “their sense of social identity, provided support and camaraderie in both personal and professional terms, and were of enormous importance in their lives” (169). Messent traces these male relationships during a period when friendship increasingly moved away “from the intimacy and intensity of the sentimental model” (21), being replaced by “a more pragmatic and self-contained Gilded Age business culture” (32). This emerging culture brought about a “sense of individuation and separateness in relation to the larger social whole.” One result was “a new emphasis on nuclear family bonds; an increasing move to companionate and family-centered marriages” (168). It was not as if strong feelings and male companionship disappeared; in fact, Messent reveals that, despite the ways sentimental culture was changing, sentiment continued to have “its place in business” (135). Messent peels back the ways in which emotional connection and empathy entwined with professional interests to create these enduring friendships. “Critical work on constructions of manliness in the period is still very much an ongoing project,” Messent reminds us, and “we should remember the multiform rather than homogenous nature of the term” (127), but he has done major work to explicate one social layer, while at the same time revealing further dimensions of the multiform, contradictory personality of Mark Twain.

Stanford University

HILTON OBENZINGER