



William Cullen Bryant: Author of America

Gilbert H. Muller

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Proclaimed by James Fenimore Cooper to be "the author of America," William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878) was one of nineteenth-century America's foremost poets and public intellectuals. In this, the first major biography of Bryant in almost forty years, Gilbert H. Muller reintroduces a quintessential New Yorker who commanded the nation's literary, cultural, urban, and political life for more than half a century.

A transplanted Yankee, Bryant arrived on the unpaved streets of Manhattan in the early 1820s and he would soon find himself at the locus of the many political and cultural transformations sweeping Manhattan and the nation. The bedrock of Bryant's cultural authority was his reputation as "America's first poet," and he enthralled a nation and his peers--including Whitman, Poe, Longfellow, and Emerson--who praised the excellence of his verse. A literary celebrity for almost seventy years, Bryant served as the editor of the *New-York Evening Post* for five decades, and was a major force behind the establishment of Central Park, the National Academy of Design, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, among others. Drawing on previously unavailable letters and nineteenth-century files of the *New-York Evening Post*, Muller creates a humanistic portrait of New York City's "first citizen," establishes him as a first-rate poet, and makes a convincing case for Bryant's role in defining the idea of democratic culture in America.

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Jonathan says

A fine biography, full of color and energy, but not a particularly good intellectual biography. Muller peppers the text with unhelpful and often entirely misleading terms like "progressive" and "reactionary," and he judges every other Bryant poem to be "innovative" somehow. He also falls into the biographer's trap of making his subject the most important person ever, taking note of every hyperbolic statement Bryant's many admirers made to that effect. On the other hand, Muller does make a good case for Bryant's importance in American letters and politics, and he is largely effective in using Bryant's long life as a way to examine a changing society. Much more could be done in that respect, however -- which is not necessarily a bad thing, from my perspective. I do highly recommend the book to those interested in the nineteenth century.

Karen says

*On Jackie Bateman's Top 5 List

Children used to recite his work in the streets

Carl Rollyson says

William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878), one of the major cultural figures of 19th century America, receives a rousing re-consideration in this engaging biography, which could also serve as a lucid introduction to the literary and political phenomena of his period. Although Bryant is mainly known for a few anthologized poems ("Thanatopsis" and "To a Waterfowl"), he was also editor of the New York Post for five decades and contributed to the establishment of city institutions such as Central Park and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. No one quite like Bryant exists today-a poet who could command the attention of the public as well as the admiration of figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Charles Dickens. Muller's deft discussion of Bryant's poems arguably raises the poet's status in the American literary canon. While Muller's subtitle is hyperbole, there is no doubt that Bryant played a central role in the development of democratic culture.

John says

I found a lot of the detail in this biography fascinating; Bryant was one of the most famous Americans of his day, and today he seems to be almost completely forgotten. He was widely regarded as one of the best if not the best poet of the early to mid 19th century, he was the editor of an important NYC newspaper and met with practically every president from Jackson to Lincoln, he toured the world and published popular books...you would think that people would remember him. Bryant Park is named for him. But for whatever reason, he didn't last the way Whitman or Hawthorne or Melville or Cooper did.

I did wish a few times in reading this that the author had broken away from a purely chronological biography though. It seems like Muller was just going through old issues of Bryant's newspaper, reading his editorials,

and explaining what events in American history they related to. For the years where Bryant was writing in his paper every day, the 1840s and 50s, this just ends up being so much detail to cover. I don't really care about the intricacies of New York State party politics in the 1840s, knowing which candidate Bryant favored and why doesn't enrich this story for me. And all of Bryant's trips blend together as well; Muller could have just devoted a chapter to them, "Bryant's Travels," and been done with it. Every twenty pages or so it seems like he goes on another trip.

I appreciated all the snippets of poetry mixed into the narrative, it helped the man come alive for me. But Muller also doesn't need to nudge the reader with praise for the poetry every time. I can decide for myself whether I like the poetry, I don't need the little authorial "he still could compose varying metrical rhythms, even at seventy!"

Still, good biography for anyone who is interested in Bryant, or interested in America in that pre-Civil War period, when New York was growing like crazy and the country was expanding and everything was new and thrilling.
