

Much recent criticism has drawn our attention to the place of the nation in the making of literary texts. The two works under consideration modify this concern by treating the writing of national history in the late nineteenth century as a matter of literary study. Christopher Hill’s work addresses its subject from the outside, while Gregory Pfitzer tells the inside story. Hill takes a comparative approach, as indicated by his subtitle; he devotes two chapters each to historical writing in Japan, the United States, and France. In addition, he considers that writing in the contexts of both national and international political and economic issues. In contrast, Pfitzer focuses on the creation of texts within the United States and specifically on the biographies and careers of the writers and the production and marketing of the texts. One irony of these choices is that the literary scholar (Hill) gives us a much fuller sense of the history of the period than does the historian (Pfitzer).

Hill’s National History and the World of Nations examines the construction of national identities through analysis of literary and historical texts during the period of developing systems of international markets and nation-states. His selection of Japan, the United States, and France is intended to establish the different conditions under which such histories were produced while simultaneously revealing their common concerns. Thus, Japan, beginning with the Meiji Restoration, sought to make itself into a modern nation on par with European powers; the United States, emerging from the Civil War and with a flood of immigration, sought to find unity in the face of conflict
and diversity; and finally France, with the fiasco of the Franco-Prussian War, sought to regain a sense of itself as the emblem of civilization. In response to these circumstances, historians, novelists, and textbook writers attempted to narrate the past so as to both justify and create a national identity consistent with the modern global reality.

Hill divides his study into two parts, one each on the spatial and temporal aspects of the nation; he then devotes a chapter to each country on these aspects. What emerges from this analysis is a set of insoluble problems for historians during that period. The very need to write national histories results from ruptures in the recent past that raised doubts about the existence of a national identity. In the United States, for example, war, immigration, and westward settlement all suggest contrary and conflicting cultures, values, and purposes, rather than any impulse toward unity. Writers such as Josiah Strong, Frederick Jackson Turner, and Henry James undertake to resolve the difficulty by suppressing difference and by projecting a national future in which such unity will exist. But this future can only come into existence through willful action on the part of the populace. Thus, historians must try to offer a sense of national inevitability while demanding reform. At the same time, they must present a notion of the difference that is the nation while recognizing its sameness with other nations as part of the modern system and also its distinctiveness as an entity even as global capitalism overrides such distinctions. The end result, as Hill sees it, is that national histories must always fail as nation-building projects.

Pfitzer’s Popular History and the Literary Marketplace engages another aspect of national history, those works produced by literary men to be popular histories of the United States. The word “popular,” as Pfitzer makes clear, was meant in two ways: to be a version of the national narrative for the general public and to be a successful product in the marketplace. In some instances, it had a third connotation: to be the story of the people rather than of great figures or major events. The argument of the book is that these aims, especially the first two, increasingly went against the grain of history as a field of study.

Publishers selected literary figures based on whether their narratives were likely to be read by a large audience. Frequently, writers were chosen because of their popularity; William Cullen Bryant was the first to have his name attached to a multivolume history, although the actual writing was done by Sydney Gay, who was Bryant’s choice as his “assistant.” Similarly, Julian Hawthorne was approached because his surname was instantly recognizable, even though his own work was not. One virtue of Pfitzer’s study is that he has examined correspondence and publishers’ records to elucidate the processes by which writing and selling got done. We learn, for example, of the tension between Bryant and Gay when the latter wanted to emphasize the facts and the former the drama and grand patterns of U.S. history. We also learn what pressures publishers would bring to bear on writers to get work done quickly rather than carefully. Unfortunately, Pfitzer is not consistent in presenting such material.
What interests him more are the responses of professional historians to these works. From the beginning, even before history fully emerged as an academic field, these writers criticized the emphasis on story rather than factual representation of the past. Focus on this concern, although necessary to some extent, displaces attention to the marketplace as the space in which national identity was being constructed and to the very need to sell national identity to the public. We do not get an adequate sense of why such histories ultimately failed as consumable goods. A little more of Hill’s perspective, in which state, narrative, national identity, and capitalism intersect, would have made this a stronger book.

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Shari Huhndorf and Mark Rifkin do the vital work, to paraphrase Huhndorf, of putting Native studies at the center of American studies (3). Rifkin reads antebellum nonfiction texts to “examin[e] the ways U.S. policy has sought to naturalize its authority over internalized populations and lands and to disown countervailing geopolitical formations” while showing how indigenous insistence on the validity of these formations manifests as active, continual resistance to usurpation by imperial processes (16). Huhndorf’s study analyzes “literary and visual practices at times as separate, distinct modes of production that circulate and signify differently,” to “position visuality alongside literature as a ground of political contestation that potentially counters the invisibility of Native peoples and redefines their social place” (22). Both writers critique prevailing conceptualizations of nationalism—Rifkin through an examination of “the logic of voluntary expropriation” that “legitimize[s] the exertion of imperial force ‘within’ the nation” (36), and Huhndorf through an emphasis on tensions created when the limitations of nationalism intersect with “transnational forces that increasingly animate contemporary Native culture” (24). Both employ methodological approaches that elucidate the form and mechanics of imperial mapping, literal and figurative, that culminate in ongoing U.S. hegemony.

In Mapping the Americas, Huhndorf makes the case that “continuities and contradictions” between national and transnational orientations “have historically shaped Native cultural production” (2). Although indigenous nationalisms, including the recently evolved critical position of Native literary nationalism, have been central to Native American studies, Huhndorf argues that