

Book Reviews



Brown, Richard D. *The Strength of a People: The Idea of an Informed Citizenry in America, 1650-1870.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Pr., 1996. 252p. \$29.95, alk. paper. (ISBN 0-8078-2261.) LC 95-35013.

A few years ago, Richard D. Brown, a professor of history at the University of Connecticut, produced the important study, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865*. Now he follows that work with an equally important book, this time on the history of the idea of an informed citizenry in America. It is a superb intellectual history of a subject that, unlike the principle of freedom of the press, has never been explored in a thoroughgoing and systematic way. Furthermore, as Brown clearly shows in his new study, *The Strength of a People*, "the more closely we approach the idea of an informed citizenry, . . . the more evident it is that the meaning of this idea is not fixed but fluid and imprecise."

Reflecting on the significance of Brown's book sparked two memories from this reviewer's undergraduate days. The first is the recollection of the words "The hope of democracy depends on the diffusion of knowledge" carved high on the stately exterior of the college library. The second is the experience of having read Milton's *Areopagitica* in an English course, and the professor declaring to the class that this classic defense of freedom of the press should become "a part of your intellectual equipment." In Brown's tracing of the origins of the idea of an informed citizenry in seventeenth-century England, *Areopagitica* stands as one of the basic documents in the formulation of the concept, born out of the turmoil of the period of the English Civil War. The thought of Milton and Locke,

the significance of the Glorious Revolution, and the role of the English gentry all are discussed by Brown as background for the developing idea of an informed citizenry that was transplanted to Britain's American colonies, where it took root and flourished. In this regard, Brown has surprisingly little to say about the John Peter Zenger case in New York in 1735, often cited as an American landmark in the history of freedom of the press, one of the prerequisites for a well-informed citizenry, as the significance of *Areopagitica* attests.

It was the American Revolution, however, that stimulated the idea of an informed citizenry and solidified it as a crucial American one. After the Revolution it was nurtured and shaped by Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and others, although early American leaders differed on how the citizenry should become educated and informed, and were ambivalent about the role of the common people in the new republic. At the same time, American religion and the cultural life of the new nation fostered a concern for inculcating virtue and morality among the people, and this fed the impulse for an informed citizenry. The great expansion of democracy in the Jacksonian era augmented the idea even more through the promotion of education for the masses, the growth of publishing, the development of libraries and museums, and the rise of the lyceum and public lecture movement. With the elimination of property ownership as a qualification for voting, even American workingmen of the pre-Civil War period began to take seriously the notion that they, too, would become well-informed citizens. Finally, Brown shows how the ideology of an informed citizenry in America was shaken

by challenges to the definition of citizenship from women, blacks, and Native Americans in the mid-nineteenth century and beyond. All this is discussed by Brown in an erudite and readable narrative.

The significance of *The Strength of a People* transcends its function as a scholarly history. In a thoughtful and modest epilogue, in which the author makes clear that he is stepping outside his customary role of historian, Brown reflects on the idea of an informed citizenry within the context of the troubled state of American democracy today. In fact, his book can be read as a companion piece to other recent volumes that focus on the problems of American democracy at the end of the twentieth century, including works such as Robert H. Wiebe's *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy* (1995) and Lawrence K. Grossman's *The Electronic Republic: Reshaping Democracy in the Information Age* (1995). Indeed, the subject of Brown's book is at the heart of much that is central to Wiebe's and Grossman's concerns. How can American democracy be revitalized in our time (Wiebe), how will it be shaped by the new information age (Grossman), and what is the role of an informed citizenry in this brave new world?

If the idea of an informed citizenry is not fixed but dynamic, how will the idea function in a presumably open society geared to instantaneous access to information? Will the age of democratized electronic information promote a responsible citizenry, or will it contribute to a more rapid fragmentation of society—toward the disuniting of America? Will the citizenry's ease of electronic access and response to information lend itself to a tyranny of the majority or to a stalemate of conflicting minorities? Certainly if education is presumed to be vital to an informed and responsible citizenry, it would appear that the current lack of reform in American education augurs ill for the future.

Although a brief essay on sources would have been helpful, Brown has written a thoroughly researched and carefully documented book. Both the text and the thirty-five pages of notes reveal a firm grasp of early American historiography, as well as an informed reading of pertinent primary sources. Certainly Brown's *Strength of a People* provides the necessary historical perspective for the idea of an informed citizenry in America, and also reinforces the need for the highest civic responsibility on the part of educators, librarians, archivists, and information managers. It also points to the need for the cultivation of civic virtue in an America that is increasingly strained by the tensions of multiculturalism, failing institutions, and an apparent inability to reform its educational system. Brown's book serves as both a valuable history lesson and a warning for the future.—*Gerald F. Roberts, Berea College, Berea, Kentucky.*

Nonacademic Writing: Social Theory and Technology. Eds. Ann Hill Duin and Craig J. Hansen. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Pubs., 1996. 376p. \$29.95, acid-free paper. (ISBN 0-8058-1628-3.)

Odd as it might sound, most of the writing done in academe is nonacademic, especially by those of us in service and administrative roles. By "nonacademic," these editors mean writing "that gets something done, that matters," that will not appear in the scholarly or popular media. It means writing that is specialized for a technical audience (e.g., memos and annotations). And it means the kinds of writing done by workers in business and other real-world locations.

Why put together a book about it? (1) Nonacademic writing, according to these editors and their twenty-three chapter authors (many of them graduate students or junior faculty), is important for shaping the communication and cultural patterns of our work sites. (2) It bears closer