

**Book Review: *The Atlantic* and the American Identity**

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**Republic of Words: The Atlantic Monthly and Its Writers, 1857-1925.** Susan Goodman. Lebanon, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2011, 330 pp. hardback.

In the wake of one of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War, Oliver Wendell Holmes received a telegram announcing that his son had been “shot through the neck” at the Battle of Antietam. A physician and writer, Holmes knew just how dire such an injury could be. He set off on a frantic journey to find his son, whom he pictured wasting away uncared for and alone.

In truth, the 21-year-old future Supreme Court justice was being nursed to health on a feather bed by a farmer’s wife. Later, after the senior Holmes finally found his son in a Pennsylvania train station, he wrote about the incident in *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., was furious, writes author Susan Goodman in her account of the events. The junior Holmes, having been shot retreating from a battle where 23,000 lost their lives, resented his father’s profiting from the war, criticized his collecting of souvenirs from battle sites, and mocked his “frivolous” Fireside poetry and the naiveté of his armchair patriotism.

The competing perspectives of father and son presaged the struggle the country would face as it attempted to re-create its national narrative during Reconstruction and beyond. And forging a national consciousness was an overarching mission of *The Atlantic Monthly*, argues Susan Goodman in her authoritative history of the magazine—*Republic of Words: The Atlantic Monthly and Its Writers, 1857-1925*.

Indeed, when an elite group of Bostonians (including Holmes, Sr., Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow) met at the Parker House on the brink of the Civil War to found *The Atlantic Monthly*, Goodman notes that they explicitly envisioned a magazine that would, in the words of its first editor, James Russell Lowell, “be the exponent of what its conductors believe to be the American ideal.”

From the beginning, it was a magazine of politics and literature that strove to educate and reflect America, to welcome contrary ideas but often to promote the liberal, to represent all the country but to trade on Boston’s cultural capital. In a book both scholarly and revealing, Goodman tells the story of *The Atlantic* through the works and personalities of its editors and writers, including many of the most influential names in American literature—

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Harriet Beecher Stowe, John Greenleaf Whittier, Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Edith Wharton, Robert Frost, John Steinbeck, Jack London, Ernest Hemingway, and Virginia Woolf...to name just a few.

Early *Atlantic* editors cultivated writers and were in turn supported by their publishing houses, helping ensure the survival of the fledgling magazine at a time when reams of others folded. As Goodman notes, Lowell believed the magazine should “have opinions...and not be afraid to speak them.” Over the years, *The Atlantic* would publish essays by Darwinist Asa Gray and Harvard’s popular anti-Darwinist Louis Agassiz, by apologist for American slavery Nathaniel Shaler and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois, by pacifist Bertrand Russell and Margaret Prescott Montague, who praised Woodrow Wilson’s decision to enter World War I.

The magazine believed in the power of American literary realism to help create a national identity and, Goodman notes, expand that identity by seeking writers who were women, Westerners, and foreigners. *Atlantic* naturalists helped foster an America in awe of its natural inheritance, while the magazine’s muckrakers fostered empathy for the plight of its oppressed populations.

The magazine took risks—not always without cost. In 1869 then editor James Fields allowed Harriet Beecher Stowe, the most famous woman in America, to contribute the essay “The True Story of Lady Byron’s Life.” In it, Stowe defended her late friend, who had been blamed for her husband’s philandering, by accusing Lord Byron of having had an incestuous relationship with his half-sister. The piece, which Goodman notes was replete with errors, outraged readers and cost *The Atlantic* almost a third of its 50,000 subscribers.

Nor was the magazine always first in recognizing new talent. In the early 1900s the magazine was edited by Ellery Sedgwick, whose leanings were more political than literary, Goodman writes. (He published an indictment of the Sacco-Vanzetti verdict, for instance.) But when Sedgwick read Robert Frost’s first submission to the magazine, he saw no value in the poetry and sent the author a definitive rejection letter. Later, after the poet had gained his reputation in Europe, Frost happily recounted how Sedgwick invited him to *The Atlantic* offices and begged for his poems. Frost relented, handing over three, including “The Road Not Taken,” for which he was paid \$55.

*The Atlantic* bore an influence that often exceeded its circulation. In 1903, writes Goodman, *The Saturday Evening Post*’s circulation was 1 million. Two decades later *The Atlantic* succeeded in topping 100,000. Soon *The Atlantic* would be challenged by the youthful, urbane upstart *The New Yorker*. Yet throughout *The Atlantic*’s history, writers understood the panache of publishing in the magazine, which retained its authority, says Goodman, “partly from its mission to hold the nation to a higher idea and partly from example, which assured readers that even the most daunting problems could be resolved through meaningful dialogue.”

A Guggenheim Fellow and H. Fletcher Brown Chair of Humanities at the University of Delaware, Goodman has also written biographies of Edith Wharton and William Dean Howells. In this, her seventh book, she offers an insightful and meticulously documented history not only of *The Atlantic Monthly* and the changing publishing world in which it operated over seven decades but also of an evolving American identity.

Goodman writes that “what the *Atlantic* achieved that no other magazine before or after has managed to achieve—whether the *Nation*, *Scribner’s*, the *New Republic*, or the *New Yorker*—was a grasp of implicitly ‘American’ aspirations, in a format that combined high literary excellence with political, ethical, and educational imperatives.” Her book should prove equally attractive to the literary critic, casual *Atlantic* reader, and serious student of American intellectual history.