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BOOKS

VAST DESIGNS

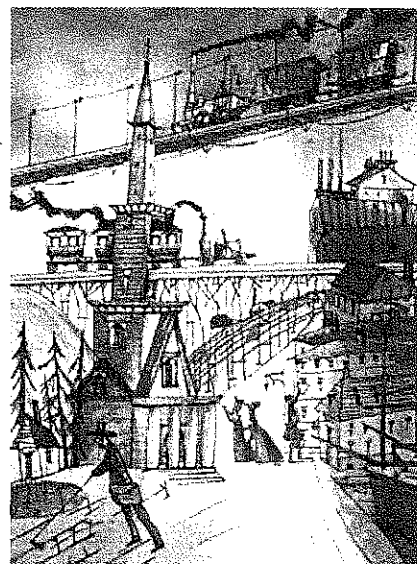
How America came of age.

by Jill Lepore

OCTOBER 29, 2007

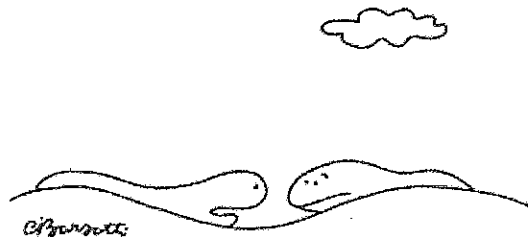
In February, 1844, Ralph Waldo Emerson rhapsodized about young America, “the country of the Future,” as “a country of beginnings, of projects, of vast designs and expectations.” That May, Samuel F. B. Morse telegraphed the message “What hath God wrought,” from Washington to Baltimore, overthrowing, in one electric instant, the “tyranny of distance.” The next month, a railroad from Boston reached Emerson’s home town of Concord, Massachusetts. Less than a year later, in the spring of 1845, by which time the Boston railroad had snaked its way to Fitchburg, forty miles west, and telegraph wires had begun to stretch across the continent like so many Lilliputian ropes over Gulliver, Emerson’s eccentric friend, the twenty-seven-year-old Henry David Thoreau, dug a cellar at the site of a woodchuck’s burrow on a patch of land Emerson owned, on Walden Pond, about a mile and a half outside town. (Thoreau had lived in Emerson’s house, as his handyman.) He borrowed an axe, and hewed framing timbers out of white pine. “We boast that we belong to the Nineteenth Century and are making the most rapid strides of any nation,” Thoreau later wrote, from the ten-by-fifteen-foot cabin he built over that cellar, at a cost of twenty-eight dollars and twelve and a half cents. He used the boards from an old shanty for siding. He mixed his own plaster, from lime (two dollars and forty cents: “that was high”) and horsehair (thirty-one cents: “more than I needed”). He moved in on the Fourth of July, 1845. Before winter, he built a chimney from secondhand bricks, and reckoned it an improvement, but he didn’t think the same could be said for the nation’s “rapid strides” and “vast designs.” The telegraph? “We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate.” The postal system? “I never received more than one or two letters in my life . . . that were worth the postage.” The nation’s much vaunted network of newspapers? “We are a race of tit-men, and soar but little higher in our intellectual flights than the columns of the daily paper.” Banks and railroads? “Men have an indistinct notion that if they keep up this activity of joint stocks and spades long enough all will at length ride somewhere, in next to no time, and for nothing; but though a crowd rushes to the depot, and the conductor shouts ‘All aboard!’ when the smoke is blown away and the vapor condensed, it will be perceived that a few are riding, but the rest are run over.”

Daniel Walker Howe’s ambitious new book, “What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848” (Oxford; \$35), chronicles every development that Thoreau despised, many that he admired, and a great deal about which the man in Walden’s woods cared not one whit. Between 1815 and 1848, the United States chased its Manifest Destiny all the way to the Pacific; battled Mexico; built thousands of miles of canals, railroads, and telegraph lines; embraced universal white-male suffrage and popular democracy; forced Indians from the South and carried slavery to the West; awaited the millennium, reformed its manners, created a middle class, launched women’s rights, and founded its own literature. “What Hath God Wrought” is both a capacious narrative of a tumultuous era in American history and a heroic attempt at synthesizing a century and a half of historical writing about Jacksonian democracy, antebellum reform, and American



Boats, trains, and telegraph wires—changes in transportation and communication—had surprising social and political effects.

expansion.



"We're slugs—we don't have a creation myth."

Howe's book is the most recent installment in the prestigious Oxford History of the United States. This would not be worth mentioning except that the book that was initially commissioned to cover this period, Charles Sellers's "The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846," was rejected by the series editor, the late, distinguished historian C. Vann Woodward, and it is Sellers against whom Howe argues, if with a kind of gentlemanly diffidence. (Oxford did publish Sellers's book, in 1991, just not as part of the series.) Sellers, a historian at Berkeley, claimed that the greatest transformation of the first half of the nineteenth century—indeed, the defining event in American and even in world history—was no mere transformation but a revolution, from an agrarian to a capitalist society. "Establishing capitalist hegemony over economy, politics, and culture, the market revolution created ourselves and most of the world we know," Sellers wrote.

Sellers's energetic, brilliant, and strident book may not have reached readers outside the academy—perhaps Woodward anticipated this—but among scholars it enjoyed a huge influence, not least because "The Market Revolution" was published just after many of the nation's best historians had written essays sounding urgent calls for synthesis in American historical writing. During the nineteen-sixties and seventies, historians had produced longer and longer monographs on smaller and smaller subjects. A decade in the life of a town. A year in the life of a family. Dazzling studies, many of them, but pieces of a puzzle that no one had been able to put together. "The great proliferation of historical writing has served not to illuminate the central themes of Western history but to obscure them," Bernard Bailyn complained, in 1981, in his presidential address to the American Historical Association. There followed similar, heartfelt laments by Eric Foner ("History in Crisis"), Herbert G. Gutman ("The Missing Synthesis"), and Thomas Bender ("Making History Whole Again"). Sellers's paradigm seemed to offer an answer; he had dumped all the pieces out of the box, and put them together, joining decades of meticulous empirical research about Western farmers, Eastern bankers, Southern slaves, artisans, immigrants, politicians, everyone.

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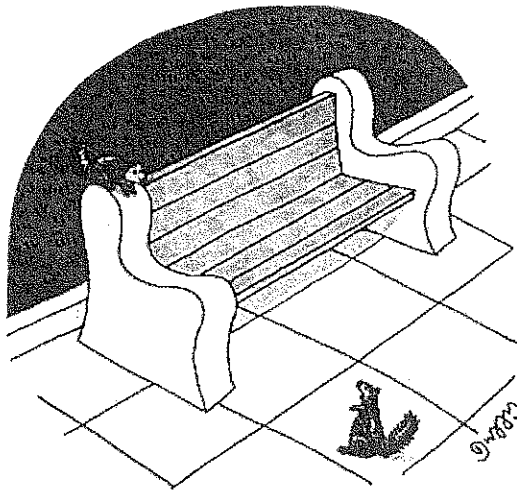
Before the market revolution: Americans grew food and made things for themselves or to barter with neighbors; they were humble but happy, rallying around “enduring human values of family, trust, cooperation, love, and equality.” After: they grew food and made things to sell, for cash, to cold, unfeeling, and distant markets; they were frantic, alienated, untrusting, competitive, repressed, and lonely. “Inherent and ongoing contradictions between capitalist market relations and human needs” plagued the nation, as Sellers had it, and plague us still. For leading the anti-market struggle against the “business class” and attacking paper money and credit, Andrew Jackson served as Sellers’s hero, especially for having vetoed, in 1832, the charter for the Second Bank of the United States. But Old Hickory, and democracy, proved no match for the tyrannical business minority of bankers, merchants, and strivers, whose capitalist machinations made the poor poorer, the middle-class smug, pious, and bourgeois; and the rich richer. As Thoreau put it, “A few are riding, but the rest are run over.”

The literary scholar Perry Miller once said that “Walden” is “a manifesto of Yankee cussedness.” Sure, but, even if high-school sophomores forced to wade through “Walden” miss it, Thoreau can be very, very funny. “I have thought that Walden Pond would be a good place for business,” he wrote, mischievously. “It is a good port.” His experiment was, of course, not a business but an anti-business; he paid attention to what things cost because he tried never to buy anything. Instead, he bartered, and lived on twenty-seven cents a week. At his most entrepreneurial, he planted a field of beans, and realized a profit of eight dollars and seventy-one and a half cents. “I was determined to know beans,” he writes in a particularly beautiful and elegiac chapter called “The Bean-Field.” He worked, for cash, only six weeks of the year, and spent the rest of his time reading, writing, hoeing beans, picking huckleberries, and listening to bullfrogs trumping, hawks screaming, and

whip-poor-wills singing vespers. "Mr. Thoreau is thus at war with the political economy of the age," one reviewer commented, after "Walden" was published, in 1854. But Thoreau wasn't so much battling the market revolution as dodging it, "not to live in this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century, but to stand or sit thoughtfully while it goes by."

What Thoreau tried to escape, historians studying his America have found in every sparrow's fall. Sellers's was the thesis that launched a thousand dissertations; evidence of the market revolution seemed to be everywhere; it seemed to explain everything. In "The Market Revolution Ate My Homework," a thoughtful essay published in *Reviews in American History* in 1997, the historian Daniel Feller observed that "a monograph that presupposes a market revolution will certainly discover one." His caution went unheard.

So it is a rare and refreshing kind of heresy that Daniel Walker Howe, who studied briefly under Sellers at Berkeley in the nineteen-sixties, and who is best known for his 1979 book, "The Political Culture of the American Whigs," refuses to use the term "market revolution" in his grand synthesis. (Signalling his quarrel with the other recent sweeping interpretation of this period, Sean Wilentz's pro-Jackson "The Rise of American Democracy," Howe dedicates his book to the memory of John Quincy Adams, Jackson's political nemesis, and avoids using the phrase "Jacksonian America," on the ground that "Jackson was a controversial figure and his political movement bitterly divided the American people.") Howe has three objections to Sellers's thesis. First, the market revolution, if it happened at all, happened earlier, in the eighteenth century. Second, it wasn't the tragedy that Sellers makes it out to be, because "most American family farmers welcomed the chance to buy and sell in larger markets," and they were right to, since selling their crops made their lives better. Stuff was cheaper: a mattress that cost fifty dollars in 1815 (which meant that almost no one owned one) cost five in 1848 (and everyone slept better). Finally, the revolution that really mattered was the "communications revolution": the invention of the telegraph, the expansion of the postal system, improvements in printing technology, and the growth of the newspaper, magazine, and book-publishing industries.



"Try to remain calm. I'm going to talk you down."

Howe offered an early version of his critique of Sellers at a conference held in London in 1994, in which he demurred, "What if people really were benefitting in certain ways from the expansion of the market and its culture? What if they espoused middle-class tastes or evangelical religion or (even) Whig politics for rational and defensible reasons? What if the market was not an actor (as Sellers makes it) but a resource, an instrumentality, something created by human beings as a means to their ends?" Sellers summarized Howe's argument as "Market delivers eager self-improvers from stifling Jacksonian barbarism" as against his own "Go-getter minority compels everybody else to play its competitive game of speedup and stretch-out or be run over." Fair enough. "Where Howe's assumptions suggest that I undervalue capitalism's benefits and attractions," Sellers continued, "my assumptions suggest that he underestimates its costs and coercions." Again, fair enough. But Sellers attributed these "warring assumptions" not to different evidence, methods,

theories, or strategies of analysis but to the two historians' different values. Howe writes from "within the bourgeois middle-class culture," Sellers scoffed, while his own (presumably more Waldenesque) life had taught him that "relations of capitalist production wrench a commodified humanity to relentless competitive effort and poison the more affective and altruistic relations of social reproduction that outweigh material accumulation for most human beings." In other words, money talks, but it can't buy you love.

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“Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth,” Thoreau demanded. One question woke him up every morning, as regularly as the screech of the whistle of the Fitchburg locomotive that chugged by his cabin, on tracks built just up the hill from Walden Pond: Were all these vast designs and rapid strides worth it? In truth, no. “They are but improved means to an unimproved end.”

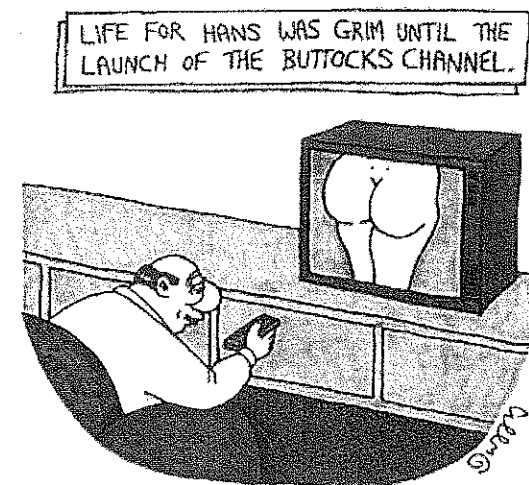
Howe, quoting Samuel Morse quoting Scripture (Numbers 23:23), asks more or less the same question: “What hath God wrought?” Howe’s debate with Sellers is provocative and important because the answer to this question ought to explain, or at least illuminate, the historical relationship between capitalism and democracy. The so-called consensus historians of the nineteen-forties and fifties argued that the seeds of capitalism “came in the first ships” and were planted on American soil by the earliest Colonial settlers. With this, Sellers and Howe disagree, but differently. For Sellers, capitalism is the imported kudzu strangling the native pine of democracy. For Howe, capitalism is more like compost, feeding the soil where democracy grows.

Consider two major nineteenth-century events: the religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening and the temperance movement. In 1776, about one in six Americans belonged to a church; by 1850, that number had risen to one in three. In roughly the same period, the amount of alcohol that Americans drank dropped from more than seven gallons per adult per year to less than two gallons (about what it is today). If you were to look at a map, and chart these changes, you’d see that they follow the course of the nation’s growing network of canals and railroads. The canal or railroad arrives, and the people join churches; the people join churches, and they drink less. How do historians account for these correlations? The

answer, at first, seems obvious: preachers spread the Gospel; the same boats and trains that carried cash crops from farms to towns brought revivalist ministers from towns to farms. But, once they got there, why did anyone listen to them? Sellers argues that the heightened religiosity and teetotaling of nineteenth-century Americans can be attributed to “class needs for work discipline, social order, and cultural hegemony.” (In factory towns, some bosses required their workers to go to church.) The market needs industrious, reliable, orderly workers; the market produces them. Howe disagrees. “Evangelical religion was not foisted upon the industrial working classes,” he writes. Factory workers and farmers joined churches, and stopped drinking, for the same reason that their middle-class counterparts did: they were persuaded by evangelism’s embrace of egalitarianism, and “its trust in the capacities of ordinary people.”

Or consider sex. In agrarian America, as Sellers conjures it, “unsegregated nudity, casually exposed genitalia, and the sounds and smells of coition were commonplace in crowded cabins.” The market revolution replaced this earthy carnality with unrelenting prudishness: restrictive clothing, private bedrooms (with mattresses!), revivalist ministers’ militant campaigns against masturbation, and “an unprecedented denigration of eroticism.” In the eighteen-twenties and thirties, the Reverend Sylvester Graham, a founder of the American Vegetarian Society and the inventor of the eponymous cracker, argued that, with a proper (flesh-free) diet, lust could be almost entirely extinguished. Sellers acknowledges that the “radical redefinition of gender” associated with these developments eventually led to a powerful movement for women’s rights, but his grim conclusion is that “female power was won at the cost of female as well as male libido.” The market needs workers who don’t think about sex all day long; the market produces them.

Not so fast, Howe counters: “What we think of as Victorian prudery can also be seen as a clumsy effort to make men regard women as something other than sexual objects.” The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed a wholesale transformation of manners, a politeness revolution. Sellers, no champion of courtesy, sniffs at this kind of thing as “middle-class mythology,” but Howe thinks manners matter. (One of the chief merits of “What Hath God Wrought” is Howe’s earnest effort, and great success, at chronicling changes of all sorts, from rates of childhood mortality to the gross national product, from the frequency of bathing to the firepower of cannons.) In short, “ladies first” wasn’t all bad. “Although polite culture put women on a pedestal to avoid challenging the prerogatives of men,” Howe writes, “it represented in important respects an advance over the subjugation of women common in premodern society.”



It’s tempting to agree with Sellers that what really lies between these two interpretations is “values.” Sellers thinks that poor, drunk, lusty, impious eighteenth-century Americans were freer, and happier, than their wealthier, sober, prim, devout nineteenth-century grandchildren; Howe thinks it’s the grandchildren who were better off. They both concede, at length, that not everyone was better off; the people who were really “run over” in Jacksonian America were enslaved African-Americans, who toiled in the cotton fields that spread across the continent; Native Americans, who were forced from their land and marched from the South to the West, under Jackson’s brutal policy of “Indian removal”; and Mexicans, who suffered grievously during Polk’s war against Mexico in 1846-48, and even more in its aftermath. Thoreau decided that voting was too cheap and feeble a response to these grotesque atrocities, inflicted in his name, by his own government: “Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence.” He refused to pay his taxes. In the summer of 1846, he left his cabin and went to jail. As he later explained in “Resistance to Civil Government” (now known as “Civil Disobedience”), prison was “the only house in a slave-state in which a free man can abide with honor.” When Emerson asked him why he had gone there, Thoreau is said to have answered, “Why did you not?”

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Howe's most effective challenge to Sellers's claims about the kudzu of capitalism is his story about what women gained and lost in the transformation of America. Howe argues that, in the end, the market nourished democracy, giving women more, rather than fewer, choices. He closes his book not with the conclusion of the Mexican-American War, in 1848, but with the women's-rights convention held in Seneca Falls that same year, at which Elizabeth Cady Stanton led in drafting the "Declaration of Sentiments": "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal. . . . The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her." Howe relies on decades of prodigious scholarship in women's history—arguably, a field of inquiry that constitutes a revolution in its own right—to tie his thesis together. And what do women gain and lose? If men lose the family farm but gain the right to vote, women lose their reputation as the more passionate sex but gain the capacity to demand suffrage. At least for women, Howe insists, "economic development did not undercut American democracy but broadened and enhanced it."

Abigail Kelley's life is an example. Born in Massachusetts in 1811, she became a Grahamite in the eighteen-thirties. She gave up coffee, tea, meat, and alcohol, and ate a lot of Graham crackers. In 1832, she saw William Lloyd Garrison lecture, and became an abolitionist. She joined the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Lynn, Massachusetts, where her contributions consisted, at first, of stitching and selling pincushions with mottoes such as "Oh sisters! sad indeed's the thought / That in our land poor slaves are bought!" In 1837, she wrote to her sister, "My variety is made up in watching the progress of moral enterprises—Grahamism and Abolition and Peace." Three years later, she was the first woman nominated to an office of the American Anti-Slavery Society. In protest, almost three hundred male conventioners left the meeting, to form a rival abolition society, in which women could neither vote nor hold office. Not long after, at a meeting of the Connecticut Anti-Slavery Society, when Kelley stood up to speak, the chairman declared:

No woman will speak or vote where I am moderator. It is enough for women to rule at home. It is woman's business to take care of the children in the nursery; she has no business to come into this meeting and by speaking and voting lord it over men. Where women's enticing eloquence is heard, men are incapable of right and efficient action. She beguiles and blinds men by her smiles and her bland winning voice. . . . I will not submit to PETTICOAT GOVERNMENT. No woman shall ever lord it over me. I am Major-Domo in my own house.

As Kelley later explained, for her, and for many women, work within the abolitionist movement, trying to free the nation of slavery's chains, persuaded her that "we were manacled *ourselves*."

The women's-rights movement, which grew out of the antislavery movement, which grew out of revivalism, which was made possible by advances in transportation and communication, is the strongest evidence for the interpretive weight that Howe places on social, cultural, and religious forces as agents of change, and makes "What Hath God Wrought" a bold challenge both to Sellers, who is more interested in economics, and to Wilentz, who is more interested in politics. Howe's

synthesis does what a synthesis is supposed to do: it brings all these things together. Economic changes separated men's work

from women's, and made "work" a place that men went to and "home" a place where women stayed. Revivalist ministers celebrated women's moral purity, and drew women into reform movements, including abolitionism, which sowed the seeds for Seneca Falls. "The major disputes, excitement, and violence of American history between 1815 and 1848 did not involve either a struggle to attain white male democracy or the imposition of a new 'market revolution' on subsistence family farmers," Howe argues. "Not the affirmation of democracy itself, that 'all men are created equal,' but attempts to broaden the legal and political definition of 'men' aroused serious controversy in the United States during these years."



"Whoa! I was just playing dead."

In August of 1846, while Thoreau was still living in his cabin, the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society held its annual meeting on the banks of Walden Pond. Speakers, including Emerson, gathered at Thoreau's cabin. In 1837, Emerson's wife and Thoreau's mother and sisters had been among the founders of the society, who maintained, "The truth is, men have faltered and have failed in their duty touching this matter of slavery."

This was an unusual incursion. Thoreau was an ardent abolitionist, but one senses that he preferred jail to a cabin crowded with visitors. If Walden was Thoreau's flight from the market economy, it was, equally, a flight from women, from domesticity, from family life. He walked to town, nearly every day, to dine with friends; his mother often cooked for him. "I think that I love society as much as most," he wrote, "and am ready enough to fasten myself like a bloodsucker for the time to any full-blooded man that comes in my way." But he loved his solitude (a friend of his once said that he "imitates porcupines successfully"), and he hated hearing news. "Often, in the repose of my mid-day, there reaches my ears a confused *tintinnabulum* from without. It is the noise of my contemporaries." Above all, he cherished his manly self-sufficiency (even though he carried his dirty laundry to Concord for his mother to wash): "Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands, and provided food for themselves and families simply and honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally developed?"

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Emerson lost patience with his peculiar friend. When Thoreau died, in 1862, Emerson delivered an ambivalent eulogy, regretting Thoreau's limited compass: "Instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry party. Pounding beans is good to the end of pounding empires one of these days; but if, at the end of years, it is still only beans!" In much the same spirit, he had once written a note, never sent: "My dear Henry, A frog was made to live in a swamp, but a man was not made to live in a swamp. Yours ever, R." ♦