

Things Not Seen

How faith was received in the Era of Good Feelings.

BY EDWARD SHORT



Washington, ca. 1825

In *The Making of the English Working Class*, E.P. Thompson famously claimed that he wrote his history to rescue his subjects “from the enormous condescension of posterity.” This did not stop him from saddling his weavers, tailors, croppers, and artisans with aspirations that they would hardly have recognized and bundling away any of their prejudices that did not tally with his Marxist theses, particularly with respect to religion, empire, monarchy, and the aristocracy, with whom the working classes had so much in common. Yet Thompson was certainly right to insist that the historian should take up his subjects on their own terms, even though he proved incapable of following this good advice himself.

Here, Professor Nancy Schultz of Salem State University revisits a forgotten miracle in early 19th-century Wash-

ington to attempt to shed new light on early American social and religious history, but in the process exemplifies precisely the sort of condescension that good historians should eschew.

In March 1824 Ann Mattingly, the widowed sister of Mayor Thomas Carbery, had been bedridden for seven years with breast cancer, which left her ulcer-

ated body on the brink of death. Then, three of her local Roman Catholic priests wrote a controversial German faith healer, Prince Alexander Leopold Hohenlohe, asking him to pray for

her. Having arranged for a novena, one of the priests visited Mrs. Mattingly at her home on 17th and C Streets NW and gave her communion—after which, several deponents testified, her ulcers disappeared and she rose from her sickbed entirely healed.

In describing the aftermath of the cure, Professor Schultz writes of a divided Catholic Church, one camp pressing for broadcasting the miracle and the other downplaying it; a nativ-

Mrs. Mattingly's Miracle

The Prince, the Widow, and the Cure that Shocked Washington City

by Nancy Lusignan Schultz
Yale, 288 pp., \$30

ist Protestant mainstream suspicious of what it perceived to be the superstitious, foreign character of Catholicism; a divided Mattingly family intent on closing its skeletons; and a new republic struggling with questions of religion and society.

This is promising fodder for micro-history, which Schultz might have fashioned into an engaging study. Instead, she devotes most of her energies to pointing morals: taking the Catholic Church to task for what she considers its tribal separatism; upbraiding 19th-century Americans for getting “gender” wrong; and remonstrating with the Mattingly family for their unenlightened views on race in the slave-owning capital.

Here is that “enormous condescension of posterity” against which Thompson inveighed. Rather than presenting her readers with the surprise of history, Schultz simply serves up lashes of political correctness. In one passage she quotes something from a colleague that epitomizes her own enlightened view of her subject:

For women who came of age in the antebellum era, a devotional ethic that promoted passive resignation as the appropriate Christian response to pain resonated with prevailing gender norms that associated true womanhood with self-sacrifice and submission.

Throughout *Mrs. Mattingly's Miracle*, Schultz rubber-stamps this radically false view, not only of women but of religion. She also repeatedly misrepresents the separation of church and state in America, which the Founders put in place to prevent established religion, not to remove religion *per se* from the public square. In this case, as in so many others, the author's prejudices prevent her from grasping the true character of her material.

Such prejudices notwithstanding, Schultz is a diligent researcher. As she notes in her introduction, she spent 10 years uncovering the details of her heroine's cure. When she restricts herself to sharing this copious research, she can be usefully informative. For example, she unearths a number of amusing facts about the Jesuits and their slaves, and

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she is good on the part that Georgetown College played in the aftermath of Mrs. Mattingly's cure.

But she is also given to bloviating. In summing up her history, for example, she writes thus:

Mrs. Mattingly's diseased body became a central object at the junction of mind and spirit during a period when a social order for the nation was being built. For ultimately, the process of answering the body's needs and desires is what creates a nation's language, culture, social institutions, and laws.

Reading this, you wonder whether undergraduates at Salem State are regularly treated to such pronouncements, sound judgment not being one of the author's strong suits. This is most evident in her conclusion, where she claims that "unlike the broader culture of the United States, which was in the throes of inventing the mythology of assimilation, the Catholic Church actively nurtured ethnic separation by founding parishes for various ethnic groups."

These are untenable assertions. First, parishes were established as geographical, not ethnic, units. Second, there is no evidence to suggest that parishes separated American Catholics from their non-Catholic fellows. On the contrary, they continue to foster a sense of citizenship in the Catholic faithful. The projects that the state created to replace parishes may promote dependency, crime, isolation, and despair, but they do not inspire citizenship. And last, the claim that assimilation was something for which it was necessary to invent a "mythology" is typical of her theoretical approach to the subject. Imagine trying to convince George M. Cohan of such a notion—or better yet, James Cagney, who gave such life to Cohan in *Yankee Doodle Dandy*.

Schultz begins with an epigraph from W.E.H. Lecky, the 19th-century historian of rationalism, who argued "that the progress of civilization produces invariably a certain tone and habit of thought which make men recoil from miraculous narratives with an instinctive and immediate repugnance." She ends with a quote from Nathaniel Haw-

thorne's daughter, Rose Hawthorne Lathrop, a convert to Catholicism who devoted herself to caring for the cancerous poor: "Mrs. Mattingly," wrote Lathrop, "was destined to become and to remain . . . a living instance, to every one, of the doctrine and mystery of the Holy Eucharist, at the moment when she was restored to health, after receiving the real yet glorified body of our Lord in the consecrated wafer."

Schultz cites these epigraphs to suggest that there has always been a divide in America between the mystery of Catholicism and a modern civilization contemptuous of the miraculous. But this is unpersuasive: America has never been as antagonistic to Catholicism as Schultz imagines—or as rationalistic. That Catholicism provoked nativist resentment was a tribute to its power, not evidence of its unpopularity.

Indeed, to grasp the import of Mrs.

Mattingly and her miracle we must go not to Lecky but to David Hume, who wrote (in his essay "On Miracles") of how "the Christian Religion, not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity. And whoever is moved by Faith to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person."

This is the sort of faith to which Americans have customarily been drawn, and an essential element in the history of Mrs. Mattingly and her miracle. Hume was convinced that such faith "subverts all the principles of . . . understanding" and is "most contrary to custom and experience." But he wrote this in 1772, and could not have known that the faith of America is perfectly consonant with the custom and experience of the American people. ♦



Requiem for a Dream

*The international man of mystery
ain't what he used to be.* BY JOE QUEENAN

When the pitiful octogenarian Hugh Hefner got ditched by his scheming fiancée a few weeks back, it was a pitiful reminder that the only living "playboy" who can still be considered suave, debonair, sexually irresistible, and, well, *cool*, is the middle-aged man in the *Dos Equis* commercials.

With the primavera suicide of *über*-playboy Gunter Sachs, the passing of director Blake Edwards (whose films helped create "Gstaad Chic"), the dismal reception accorded the feeble Russell Brand remake of *Arthur*, Hefner's ignominious repudiation by his runaway bride, and the low profiles kept

by geriatric roués like Warren Beatty, Robert Evans, and George Hamilton, it seems that the age of the playboy—stretching all the way back into antiquity—has run its course.

The Most Interesting Man in the World is no longer Lord Byron or Beau Brummel or Porfirio Rubirosa. And it is certainly not Taki. It is an actor in a beer commercial. A Mexican beer commercial. Women will probably not mourn the passing of this golden age. But men will. Most men.

God, you ask yourself, what happened?

The term "playboy" traditionally refers to well-heeled predators who do not have to work for a living, whose primary concern is the pursuit of pleasure, and who are obsessed with beautiful women. If the women are

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