

Note from the Editor

As I write this in early June, the press is full of warnings about the imminent ruination of publishing and perhaps literature. In competition with this gloom is predictable futuristic hot air about the glories of liberation from outmoded print. What set off this current round of prophesy pro and con were reports of a marked downturn in attendance and activity at the annual BookExpo America. Of course, I read about this event mainly online, including from the websites of two newspapers to which we do not subscribe. (Our household does subscribe to three other newspapers, so I don't feel much free-rider guilt.) As the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, among others, has reported, history journals such as this face their own internet-related challenges and opportunities. Clearly, online publication will transform publishing. But if the modern history of business and technology offers any guide, it is useless to be millennial or apocalyptic about such matters. The analysis of defunct futurisms is a subgenre of cultural history. The railroad, electricity, the automobile, and so on, did make things different, but not quite in the way that the prophets anticipated. In a wonderful book from 1995, *American Plastic: A Cultural History*, Jeffrey Meikle recounts a recent (and subsequently mocked) episode of technology-inspired futuristic enthusiasm. Meikle's story of the world as plastic would remake it encourages skepticism about analogous enthusiasms now. In such matters, it is generally more functional to be engaged but open-eyed and methodical.

Such a thought process explains two changes that readers will note on our masthead page. As of this issue, the journal enters JSTOR, though with a five-year window on availability, because our current issues remain accessible to individual members and subscribing libraries through the History Cooperative. More important, John McClymer of Assumption College has joined the journal as the first online editor. People who follow discussions of digital history know that Professor McClymer is a respected authority on the use of new media for historical research, presentation, and teaching. The goal of participating in organizations such as the History Cooperative and JSTOR is to use the internet to spread the content of the existing print journal more widely and easily. With Professor McClymer on our staff, we intend as well to take advantage of digital technology to develop distinctive features and activities beyond the capacity of a customary print journal. The point is not to render the customary journal obsolete, but to enhance and expand it, as we hope people see over the next year.

For the record, this editor expects the digital presentation of history to develop rapidly in the next few years but believes that it will be a long time

before the print editions of economically sound journals disappear. But I could be wrong about that.

Jeffrey Meikle is an analyst and historian of technology who works in an American Studies department. He thus belongs to a species perhaps more endangered than the print journal: American Studies academics whom historians read. In a deliberately provocative essay, Rich Lowry (another Americanist worth reading) reviews how the once-respectful and supportive relationship between American Studies and American history disintegrated. Lowry explains that while the concepts of present-day American Studies may seem rarified to historians—and the methodology often suspect—in fact the two disciplines still share substantive goals and concerns. Lowry provides examples of recent American Studies writing that historians can appreciate and use to their profit.

Julia Irwin's article on the Red Cross in World War I-era Italy offers an example of the interaction between cultural analysis and historical method for which Lowry argues. Irwin draws upon ideas and books that Lowry discusses as indicative of the current emphasis within American Studies on U.S. interactions with other peoples and countries. Her article illustrates as well history's special strengths in documentary research, evidence, grounding in events, and narrative clarity.

The remaining articles are examples of recent ferment in the most standard of subjects, political history. Over the past twenty years, historians of urban politics have repeatedly questioned two items of received wisdom: that patronage mattered a lot to urban machine politicians and that genteel, Anglo-American liberals seriously wanted to limit the Irish working class's political role. Edward Miller's recounting of the movement for civil service in Massachusetts invites the conclusion that the received wisdom on spoils and mugwumpery had a sound basis, at least in Gilded Age Boston. Meanwhile, David Macleod's thorough article on the politics of food prices during the Progressive Era pushes forward a theme that has appeared repeatedly in this journal over the past few years. The electoral politics of the early twentieth century, it seems, was more fluid and contested than allowed for by the New Political History concept of a Realignment of 1896. In the Progressive Era of Macleod and some other recent writers, party systems were not rigid, new issues could swing elections, and politicians' fortunes depended to a large degree on the effectiveness of their policies. For nonacademics this might seem unexceptional, but it amounts to a powerful critique of the standard way that graduate students learned political history for more than thirty years.