

Book Review

Wagner, D. (2012). *The Miracle Worker and the Transcendentalist: Annie Sullivan, Franklin Sanborn, and the Education of Helen Keller*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers

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David Wagner, Ph.D., MSW, is a professor of social work and sociology at the University of Southern Maine. His academic background in history, social work, labor studies, and sociology, combined with his activism on behalf of the poor, has prepared him well to write this book. He offers a compelling argument as to how and why Sanborn, who secured Sullivan's release from the poorhouse at age 14 and who shared many progressive political positions with both Keller and Sullivan, would turn against them when their popularity soared. Wagner has published several other books focusing on social policy, poverty, and inequality.

Unlike many previous books and articles written about Keller, Sullivan, and Sanborn, attributing the contentious relationship Keller and Sullivan had with Sanborn to personality differences, Wagner's book analyzes their conflicts through the historical and social context of their relationships. He claims that attitudes about class, gender, and disability during the late 18th and early 19th centuries help explain their different perspectives. Wagner argues that although Sanborn and other privileged Transcendentalists of the day held humanitarian sentiments and worked to improve the lot of the poor, they also held very paternal attitudes toward those they helped. Sanborn held little sympathy for those he considered the unworthy poor, such as out of work vagrants, alcoholics, prostitutes, and many of the Irish immigrants such as Sullivan. Additionally, his gender expectations reflected the Victorian attitudes of the day. Proper women

were expected to be docile and respectful of male leadership, so he found Keller's outspoken ways distressing. Although he supported education for the disabled, he held limited expectations for the capabilities of the disabled. As Wagner illustrates, Keller and Sullivan not only disagreed with Sanborn but disagreed publicly, which increased the ire of Sanborn and his fellow humanitarians.

Wagner organizes the book in such a way as to elucidate the historical setting while at the same time providing biographical highlights from each of the actor's lives. He begins by introducing the reader to Sanborn as a younger man to show how his privileged upbringing and his social contacts shaped his increasingly progressive political philosophy and motivated him to activism. He then introduces the reader to young Annie Sullivan, who is confined to the Tewksbury Poorhouse because she is an orphan. Wagner chronicles the conditions and relationships of young Sullivan's life that would shape her later disdain for Sanborn, even though Sanborn was responsible for her release from the poorhouse and entry into the Perkins School for the Blind, where she graduated as valedictorian. Next, Wagner guides the reader through Keller's education by Sullivan and their subsequent fame. After his masterful job of setting the stage, Wagner uses the remainder of the book to explain how the differing backgrounds of Keller, Sullivan, and Sanborn led to a public attack on the two women by Sanborn and other prominent New England Transcendentalists.

While filled with strengths, the most obvious strength in this book is Wagner's style of weaving historical facts together in such a way that makes it feel like you are reading a good novel. Another important strength is his ability to place his analysis within the context of the historical time period. Too often, researchers use today's standards for stratification issues to analyze yesterday's actions. Instead, Wagner takes special pains to introduce the reader to the the political and moral norms of the era. Wagner also presents the characters with all of their flaws and contradictions. We learn that simply because people consider themselves to be humanitarians does not mean that they do not treat others in patronizing ways. He reveals the internal

contradictions that are present in most people. While I truly enjoyed this book and feel enriched by it, I believe it could have been improved by including a few theoretical explanations. All through the book, I found myself thinking of Simmel's work on boundaries and how those boundaries affect our personal perspectives.

I highly recommend this book and believe it would be a good addition to a social work, sociology, or history course. It is a fascinating analysis of the effects of the intertwining of stratification issues with prevailing political ideologies of an era. Moreover, it helps us better understand the battles that Keller and Sullivan faced as they fought against the prevailing prejudices of the era.