



# Popular History and the Literary Marketplace, 1840-1920 (Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book)

*Gregory Pfitzer*

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Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, most Americans "heard" rather than "read" national history. They absorbed lessons from the past more readily by attending Patriots' Day orations and anniversary commemorations than by reading expensive, multivolume works of patrician historians. By the 1840s, however, innovations in publishing led to the marketing of inexpensive, mass-produced "popular" histories that had a profound influence on historical literacy and learning in the United States. In this book, Gregory M. Pfitzer charts the rise and fall of this genre, demonstrating how and why it was born, flourished, and then became unpopular over time.

Pfitzer begins by exploring how the emergence of a new literary marketplace in the mid-nineteenth century affected the study of history in America. Publishers of popular works hoped to benefit from economies of scale by selling large numbers of inexpensive books at small profit. They hired authors with substantial literary reputations to make the past accessible to middle-class readers. The ability to write effectively for wide audiences was the only qualification for those who dominated this field. Privileging narration and effusive literary style over dispassionate prose, these artists adapted their favorite fictional and poetic conventions with an ease that suggests the degree to which history was viewed as literary art in the nineteenth century.

Beginning as a small cottage industry, popular histories sold in the hundreds of thousands by the 1890s. In an effort to illuminate the cultural conditions for this boom, Pfitzer focuses on the business of book making and book promotion. He analyzes the subscription sales techniques of book agents as well as the aggressive prepublication advertising campaigns of the publishers, including the pictorial embellishments they employed as marketing devices.

He also examines the reactions of professional historians who rejected the fictionalizing and poetic tendencies of popular history, which they equated with loose and undisciplined scholarship. Pfitzer explains how and why these professionals succeeded in challenging the authority of popular histories, and what the subsequent "unpopularity of popular history" meant for book culture and the study of history in the twentieth century.

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