

Circus Life: Performing and Laboring under America's Big Top Shows, 1830-1920

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proved to be a vehicle easily converted to conservation's cause at the turn of the century. Certainly, ever since the publication of John Reiger's *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation* (1975), historians have recognized the centrality of sportsmen-writers and their publications to Progressive Era conservation. But we've failed to fully explain why sport hunters' perspectives were so influential in the movement. The hunting narrative provides that crucial missing piece of the explanation. By the time vanishing wildlife became a national concern, sportsmen-writers had an already established format, distribution network, and audience for stories about the proper ways to act in nature. Kelly's study resolves a fundamental paradox at the heart of conservation historiography—sportsmen's advocacy of hunting limitations and outright prohibitions—by reinterpreting that advocacy as the logical outgrowth of a preexisting discourse rooted in manly self-restraint. Anyone interested in the history of environmental policy will find *The Hunter Elite* valuable for this critical rereading of the curious intersections of gender, nature, and narrative that made the American big-game hunter.

Circus Life: Performing and Laboring under America's Big Top Shows, 1830–1920, by Micah D. Childress. Sport and Popular Culture Series. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2018. xiv, 247 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$57.00 hardcover and pdf.

Reviewer Chris Rasmussen is professor of history at Fairleigh Dickinson University. He is the author of *Carnival in the Countryside: The History of the Iowa State Fair* (2015).

Anyone who has ever dreamed of running off to join the circus should read this book first. Micah D. Childress's *Circus Life* recounts the "hard, dangerous work" (90) and grueling itineraries of America's traveling circuses in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The circus attained enormous popularity in the nineteenth century, and Americans ranked "circus day" alongside the county fair and the Fourth of July as summer holidays. But for roustabouts, the circus employees who traveled incessantly, loaded and unloaded wagons and railway cars, and raised the big top, circus work was a demanding, ill-paid job.

Childress credits the circus with launching the show business, and his account of the show business focuses on the business, not the show. He acknowledges that the circus, a transient show boosted by hyperbolic advertisements and featuring outlandish acts and costumes, stood as "a world apart" from Victorian society, but he emphasizes instead the

ways the circus was shaped by the same forces that remade other businesses in the nineteenth century. He examines the workaday world of circus employees and managers and the ways the circus was transformed by the spread of railroads, the rise of advertising, and the growth of large, bureaucratic enterprises. Ultimately, the circus fell victim to consolidation, as a few large circus companies became dominant, only to see their popularity eclipsed by movies, radio, and other amusements in the 1920s. "The rise and fall of the circus," Childress writes, "followed changes in society" in the nineteenth and twentieth century (179).

Prior to the Civil War, small circus troupes rumbled from town to town by horse-drawn wagon. Many Americans eyed these itinerant "rolling shows" warily, condemning them as immoral and fretting that frivolous entertainment would undermine the work ethic. Over the course of the nineteenth century, though, showmen changed the perception of the circus and persuaded Americans that entertainment was harmless and even offered a beneficial respite from work. By the 1880s, the circus was no longer "reviled and rejected" (6) as a roving gang of "fakirs and humbugs" (20), but had gained respectability and become America's first nationwide form of commercial entertainment.

The circus, like other businesses, was transformed in the late nineteenth century, as consolidation winnowed the number of circus troupes and gave rise to a handful of large, successful circus companies, such as Barnum & Bailey, Forepaugh-Sells, and Ringling Bros., which bought many of their smaller competitors or drove them out of business. The growth of these large circuses was made possible by America's vast network of railroads, and successful circus managers became expert at logistics, transporting hundreds of employees, tons of equipment, and wild animals across the country.

As circus companies grew larger, though, they became bureaucratic, like other big businesses, and the gulf between managers, performers, and manual laborers hardened into a "caste" system. Star performers earned enormous sums, while workers scraped by on low wages. African American roustabouts were paid even less than their white counterparts and subjected to segregation. A few women became star performers, but the circus otherwise employed only men. Determined to protect the circus's reputation, employers enforced strict discipline on workers. An unregulated workplace and the dangers of railway travel contributed to accidents, injuries, and deaths. Despite these hardships, some circus employees chose to work for a traveling show rather than in a factory or on a farm. Still, working for the circus was far from glamorous or lucrative.

Consolidation exacted a price not only on workers, but on the entire circus business. As the number of circus companies dwindled, large circus companies became monopolistic and less innovative. No longer spurred by competition, circus managers contented themselves with rolling out the same show season after season; the circus, which had formerly been regarded as a daring form of amusement, became “increasingly stagnant” (179) until it began to be considered an entertainment principally for children. The heyday of the circus ended nearly a century ago, as the advent of the automobile, motion picture, and radio crowded out the big top, which began to seem old-fashioned by the 1920s.

Childress’s account of the show business focuses exclusively on the circus, neglecting the role that fairs, carnivals, and vaudeville played in creating the show business. But, as Childress writes, the traveling circus, as America’s “first popular amusement on a truly national scale,” contributed enormously to the rise of the show business and helped persuade Americans to accept a role for commercial entertainment in their lives and in their society (179). Other books offer more detail about the acrobats, clowns, daredevils, and animals that performed under the big top, but *Circus Life* presents an informative and interesting analysis of the workers and managers who created the circus and helped make the show business into big business.

Populism and Imperialism: Politics, Culture, and Foreign Policy in the American West, 1890–1900, by Nathan Jessen. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017. x, 331 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Andrew Offenburger is assistant professor of history at Miami University. His forthcoming book (2019) examines how the Mexican North became “the next frontier” for many Americans between 1880 and 1920, while at the same time the region constituted an international borderland with global ties to southern Africa and beyond.

In *Populism and Imperialism*, Nathan Jessen examines two conflicting currents in U.S. history during the 1890s: the push for reform among western Populists (and others), and the extension of American power beyond the nation’s shores. Defined as a coalition of Populists, silver Republicans, and Democrats, these reformers in trans-Missouri states have been long misunderstood by historians, the author suggests. Far from being eagle-screaming imperialists and jingoists, these farmers and laborers saw how capitalism had shaped the American West and distrusted its expansion to Hawaii, Cuba, and the Philippines. As a result,