



Michael C. Cohen. *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America*

Michael C. Cohen. *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. 281p., 23 ill. ISBN 9780812247084. US \$55.00.

Michael C. Cohen's *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America* is a fascinating and full account of the relationships between poems and readers between the 1790s and early 1900s. Dedicated to a "lived history of literary writing in the United States," Cohen investigates the "variety of social relations that poems made possible," both materially and theoretically (1). His six substantial chapters (and an introduction) move through history, from itinerate balladmongers (chapter 1); abolitionist verse (chapter 2), poems about contraband slaves (chapter 3); the mid-century desire to collect supposedly authentic oral ballads (chapter 4); how the postbellum country reimagined J. G. Whittier as a national poet by forgetting his abolitionist verse (chapter 5); and finally, the Fisk Singers and the racial politics of slave songs and black minstrelsy. (John Greenleaf Whittier and his poems crop up repeatedly and serve as a sort of through-line in the book.)

Throughout *The Social Lives of Poems* Cohen thinks not just about the formal features of these poems but also about how "poems facilitated actions, like reading, writing, reciting, copying, inscribing, scissoring, exchanging, or circulating, that positioned people within densely complex webs of relation" (6-7). His book, then, portrays multiple communities being formed through the exchange and use of "popular" (i.e. used by the people) verse of all different sorts. Sometimes such exchange means that poems were not even read (and certainly not close-read) and their non-reading had cultural import, as in, for example, American Anti-Slavery Society mailings sent to the South and burned upon arrival in riots that helped precipitate the "gag rule" against anti-slavery petitions in Congress. In taking this tack, Cohen's book joins the work of, among others, Mary Loeffelholz and Joan Shelley Rubin, who have written about how U.S. poems were read and received, as well as Meredith McGill, Ellen Gruber Garvey, and Leah Price, who have worked on the circulation and use of the written word in the nineteenth century.

Cohen's interest in non-reading ironically relates to my one small complaint about this dense, long volume. Cohen leaves most all of his many off-set quotations hanging off the end of paragraphs and thereby frustrates any readerly attempt to skim the quotations and skip to the analysis. These nineteenth-century poems may not have been read in their day, but Cohen wants to ensure his readers *read* each excerpt.

In pulling together this rich archive of nineteenth-century poems, Cohen's book does a great



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service. I could not but be fascinated by the “Melancholy Shipwreck” ballad from 1807, its work as a news report, and its wonderful header of black coffins (shown in an image). So too, the beautiful manuscript book made by John Greenleaf Whittier’s friends – and Cohen’s astute treatment of how this group of friends used poems – was wonderful. And, notably, there are no fewer than 23 images within *The Social Lives of Poems*, five of this remarkable Whittier manuscript book. Ultimately, this excellent volume will be of interest to anyone who wants to think more about the circulation, reception, and creation either of poetry or of literature in the nineteenth century. The book is a smart, readable, worthwhile, and helpful addition to on-going studies of the history of reading.

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