

been a fuller and more useful introduction to the novel, one must refer back to the seventeen pages devoted to the book in Karcher's study, *The First Woman in the Republic*.

Nelson's introduction to *A Romance of the Republic* is the more disappointing because the novel is so interesting. As a historical romance first published in 1867 and written against the background of Andrew Johnson's controversial implementation of his reconstruction programme, the novel looks back to the struggle over slavery while the wounds of war were still fresh, and the bitterness of its aftermath palpable. The novel pays tribute to a number of leading abolitionists, only some of whom are identified by name, while capturing the antagonisms and hypocrisies which the crusade for abolition elicited in the North as well as the South. Janus-like, the novel looks to the future as much as to the past. Its plot centres on the fate of two octoroon slave sisters and their children, suggesting that racial prejudices and notions of identity based on racial distinctions are inappropriate and nonsensical, and that miscegenation is not merely harmless, but provides positive benefits. Child acknowledges a national obligation to ensure that the freed slaves be given the opportunities necessary to use their undeveloped capabilities and to enjoy their rights as citizens. Unfortunately, as Nelson and Karcher point out, the racial and gender politics implicit in the literary conventions Child uses negate some of the force of her arguments. This too demonstrates that *A Romance of the Republic* is a revealing novel of its time.

The publication of *A Romance of the Republic* and of *A Lydia Maria Child Reader* give us little excuse to continue ignoring such an interesting, accomplished, and important nineteenth-century writer.

Manchester Metropolitan University

CYNTHIA S. HAMILTON

Mary P. Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif., and London: University of California Press, 1997, \$27.50). Pp. 383. ISBN 0 520 20441 7.

Professor Ryan's ambitious and innovative study of public consciousness and behaviour in nineteenth-century urban America succeeds in providing a multifaceted portrait of the industrialising, multicultural city as the cradle of American democracy. Such a view was once anathema to generations of scholars and Americans weaned on the doctrine of American exceptionalism and sustained by antithetical notions that the New England towns and Western communities were the font of modern democratic institutions. Ryan's case studies – San Francisco, New York, and New Orleans – were the most European of American settlements during the colonial period, and by the onset of the Civil War were “rapidly growing, soon industrialized, garishly diversified cities.” Ryan's preoccupation is with discovering the “dispersed and elusive habitats of the people,” of reconstructing “public culture” in spatial, social, and political dimensions. The narrative, which begins with the democratisation of political society in the early part of the Jacksonian era, weaves intricate, elegant patterns of an often turbulent public life. For Ryan, democracy is best studied through

local history rather than national politics or institutions, that is to say by “eavesdropping,” like Tocqueville, on what Americans thought of each other and by analysing matters of public record on which all sections of society might conceivably evince an opinion – if not participate in – such as parades, associations, and civic ceremonies, or election campaigns, crowd action, and disagreements on the use of municipal space.

Ryan’s selective use of evidence inevitably raises a number of wider questions about the extent to which disorderly municipal politics and antagonistic relations among ethno-cultural groups made Americans more ready to accept and endure a destructive civil war. The “civic wars” that Ryan describes and explores did not subside until the 1880s. Before then, rival social and ethnic groups had competed for influence in all three cities, finding openings for self-expression in feisty public congregations. The spectre of “King Mob” descending on public office, which so appalled Jackson’s detractors when he was inaugurated president, was more prevalent in San Francisco than in New Orleans or New York; but, in all three cases, a similar pattern emerges of political violence, Nativism, increasing racial and ethnic segregation, and vigilantism (including the lynching of corrupt officials in San Francisco.) Inertia on the part of the municipal authorities to control crowd action or eradicate corruption is a prevalent theme; in 1857, for example, New York was the scene of a frightening and bizarre stand-off between two rival groups of police, one appointed by the Republican state governor at Albany, the other by the city mayor, which presaged the armed conflict that was to follow and hinted at New Yorkers’ predilection for settling disputes violently, as during the draft riots of 1863.

Public life and politics, writes Ryan, was and is neither pristine nor sanitised. Contention rather than consensus and pragmatism rather than principles are what fed and feeds American democracy. “If democracy thrives on the public airing of differences, even to the point of disorder, it wilts in an atmosphere of coercion and withdrawal from conflict.” In the post-Civil War period, Ryan argues, public life was less exuberant and fractious, and, ultimately, less democratic: what emerged in larger cities was a new order of politics, where social, political, and ethnic groups were visibly less tolerant of each other, and more belligerently racist. We might, in the end, know so much more about the nature of American democracy, warts and all, by following Ryan’s lead.

University of Stirling

COLIN NICOLSON

Robin Grey, *The Complicity of Imagination: The American Renaissance, Contests of Authority, and Seventeenth-Century English Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, £37.50). Pp. 294. ISBN 0 521 495385.

The writers of the American Renaissance, declares Robin Grey, “were sufficient in their own agency, confident in their own powers, and deeply enough read in [seventeenth-century English literature] to revise those earlier cultural artifacts for their own distinctive aesthetic, social, and sometimes political purposes.” Grey dismisses as too narrow those studies of early modern England and mid nineteenth-century America – by Miller, Winters, Chase, Bercovitch and others – that approach their subject in terms of a single social, cultural, or political