

9-2020

Oliver Wendell Holmes: A Life in War, Law, and Ideas

William P. LaPiana

of Vatican sources as well as archives of North American communities.

The most compelling aspect of *A Saint of Our Own*, which builds on Cummings's first monograph, *New Women of the Old Faith* (2009), is her treatment of gender and power. Using Elizabeth Seton's cause as a central example, the author highlights the role of Catholic sisters in the process of saint making and its limits (before 1983, canonization required women to work through a male proxy). Elevating Seton took a cooperative effort between women's religious orders that Cummings shows to be a forerunner to struggles over women's leadership and "larger-scale efforts of U.S. Catholic sisters to reach beyond their own congregational boundaries" in mid-twentieth-century America (p. 150).

In these and many other ways, *A Saint of Our Own* takes readers on a fascinating ride through more than one hundred years of U.S. Catholicism—from airplanes to *aggiornamento*. By the book's end, some readers may wonder how the laity treated these new American saints after the excitement of canonization celebrations died down. Who visits the National Shrine of St. John Neumann, and what do they do while they are there? Who prays to St. Elizabeth Ann Seton or carries her image? Can a global church embrace a global roster of saints? But Cummings never promises a history of popular devotion. Instead, she has written an important new history of Americans in Rome, and Rome's influence in America, expanding the possibilities for studying American Catholic identity. Cummings's epilogue, which catalogs a host of recent contenders for sainthood—including Augustus Tolton, born enslaved, and recognized as the nation's first black priest, and Mychal Judge, official New York City Fire Department chaplain (in the service of which he was killed on September 11, 2001) and "unofficial chaplain" (p. 239) to gay New Yorkers—offers tantalizing possibilities for future research.

Monica L. Mercado
Colgate University
Hamilton, New York

doi: 10.1093/jahist/jaaa220

Oliver Wendell Holmes: A Life in War, Law, and Ideas. By Stephen Budiansky. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019. xii, 579 pp. \$29.95.)

Stephen Budiansky has written a superb biography of Oliver Wendell Holmes for general readers that also gives food for thought for those already familiar with the large corpus of "Holmesiana." Both groups will find a gracefully written narrative full of well-chosen detail from the large body of primary sources that appears in seventy pages of notes and bibliography. While the latter group will find much of that detail familiar—such as the young Holmes never letting the green bag containing his work on James Kent's *Commentaries on American Law* (4 vols., first published in 1826) out of his sight—other details are, if not new, then certainly thought provoking. The fifty-four pages devoted to Holmes's military service give readers a frighteningly immediate experience of the horrors of the Civil War and surprisingly fresh support to the well-known belief that Holmes's experience of war was responsible for so much of what he became. Similarly, the book offers an insightful discussion of Holmes's father, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., and the intellectual world of antebellum Boston. Drawing in part on the work of Daniel Walker Howe, Budiansky strikingly illustrates the influence of Unitarianism on Holmes by placing side by side his judicial writing and the words of the Unitarian divine and Harvard University professor Francis Bowen.

Another well-accepted aspect of Holmes's thought is his emphasis on understanding law as the expression of the "felt necessities" of the time. Budiansky's discussion of Holmes's work as a trial judge during his tenure on the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court makes excellent use of the work of the jurist and author Hillier B. Zobel. It shows how Holmes's experience presiding over trials dealing with every aspect of the interaction of law and life gave him an understanding of both he otherwise never would have had. This point is all the more striking given Holmes's truly luxurious material life, which is described in great detail.

And experience made for change. We all know that Holmes was neither an abolitionist

nor particularly concerned with the injustices of the regime of Jim Crow that followed the failure of Reconstruction. The abomination of lynching and mob rule, however, brought him to a much more vigorous enforcement of due process through the use of federal habeas corpus. Holmes, Budiansky notes, had no doubt of the racism behind the challenge to the rule of law. In private correspondence, the judge wrote about a lack of concern on the part of those who so vigorously defended political radicals with the “thousand-fold worse” acts of racial violence committed against southern blacks (p. 427). “This world cares more for red than for black,” Holmes wrote (p. 428).

Budiansky admires his subject. He is candid in his criticism of the critics, especially academics, but the book is light years away from hagiography. In the end, he finds the greatness of Holmes in “his skeptical humility”—a quality of ever-greater relevance to our times (p. 461).

William P. LaPiana
New York Law School
New York, New York

doi: 10.1093/jahist/jaaa247

On the Heels of Ignorance: Psychiatry and the Politics of Not Knowing. By Owen Whooley. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. xiv, 296 pp. Cloth, \$90.00. Paper, \$30.00.)

“Why do we have psychiatry?” inquires the sociologist Owen Whooley—not a question he asks as prelude to yet another “antipsychiatry screed,” but, he avers, rather “as a serious puzzle in need of explanation” (p. 5). All professions worry over the legitimacy of their authority, Whooley observes, but in this regard psychiatry exists in a class by itself. “Ignorance is *the* consistent driving force behind the history of American psychiatry,” he writes (p. 9, emphasis in original). Or, as Whooley declares in another generalizing passage, psychiatry suffers “at root” from repetition compulsion, “asserting its authority on the basis of its expertise, all the while knowing that such claims are built on the shakiest of intellectual foundations” (*ibid.*). This brings Whooley to his framing query: If psychiatry in the United

States has survived, and (for quite a time after World War II) even managed remarkably to thrive, by what mechanisms has this survival been made possible?

In answering this question, Whooley’s five chapters arc from the birth of psychiatry in the 1840s to the present day. The first chapter examines the rise of the asylum, following calls by reformers (e.g., Dorothea Dix) to establish humane and therapeutic facilities for the insane. Once these institutions were established, however, asylum superintendents contrived grossly inflated cure rates; these and other problems caused the asylum system to fall into disrepair and disrepute. The second chapter addresses the rise in the early twentieth century of the movement known as psychobiology—whose aims were articulated principally by the psychiatrist Adolf Meyer. “To domesticate ignorance,” Whooley writes of psychobiology, “reformers would seek to reboot the profession, and in the process, wipe the slate clean” (p. 93). Yet psychobiology proved too eclectic a movement for its own good, and soon it also foundered and failed. The third chapter explores the rise of psychoanalysis in the wake of World War II. Whooley sarcastically notes that “the true power of the psychoanalytic paradigm derived from its obscurantism and relative imperviousness to outsiders” (p. 128). This paradigm as well collapsed due to an inability “to demonstrate objective, quantifiable evidence of efficacy” (*ibid.*). The fourth chapter (on the rise and fall of community psychiatry in the 1960s and 1970s) and the final chapter (on the hyped promises of the 1980 third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III) and the “failed DSM-5 revisions”) chart a similar path as psychiatry continues—in Whooley’s view—its (still-fruitless) quest to maintain “a veneer of mastery” (pp. 25–26, 175).

Whooley’s book trash compacts the history of psychiatry to fit a prefab form: “Crisis, reinvention, crisis, reinvention, crisis, reinvention, on and on and on” (p. 20). It tends to minimize political context. Blink and miss that eviscerating cuts to social services under Ronald Reagan condemned countless mentally ill persons either to homelessness or to prisons. The book’s conclusions are platitudinous: