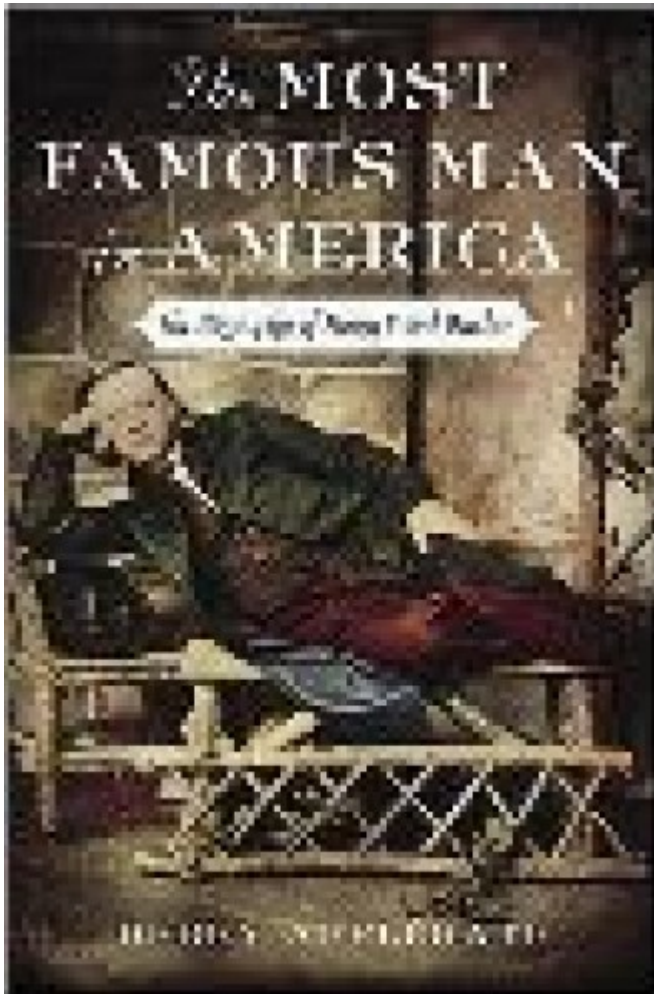


Bellwether preacher

By [Andrew Henry Stern](#) in the [October 17, 2006](#) issue

In Review



The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher

DebApplegate
Doubleday

There is something very familiar about *The Most Famous Man in America*. It is a portrait of a charismatic leader, a brilliant but troubled man who reached the pinnacle of fame only to land in a sexual imbroglio. Its theme could fit any number of contemporary public figures. But this is not the story of a president, televangelist or athlete. It is the story of a minister, the scion of one of the first families of American religion, who became the most prominent preacher of the mid-19th century. Debby Applegate, who holds a Ph.D. in American studies from Yale, is well qualified to tell the story of Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887), having spent nearly two decades researching and writing on her subject. Not only is she intimately acquainted with a wealth of primary sources, she writes in a fluid, captivating style that allows readers to feel that they know Beecher almost as well as she does.

Applegate's work falls roughly into three sections. The first covers Beecher's New England upbringing, his struggles with the Calvinism of his ancestors and the beginning of his ministry on the western frontier. The second follows him to Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, where his fame as a preacher and public figure reached its apex and where he made his greatest forays into politics, particularly in the antislavery cause. The third section takes up the event that brought Beecher publicity of a less welcome kind—his trial for adultery with a parishioner.

This tripartite organization makes the overall narrative disjointed, with Beecher fading to the background as ever more characters crowd onstage and the work becomes a survey of 19th-century history. But this structure also has its merits: Applegate engages the complexity of Beecher's life and times, situating him in his historical context. She deftly summarizes the emergence of New York as the nation's economic capital, the history of debates over slavery, the emergence of the women's suffrage movement, and countless other currents, all of which shaped the 19th-century U.S. and the course of Beecher's life.

Applegate does not argue that Beecher, in the midst of such tumultuous times, was especially innovative as a preacher, politician or theologian. She notes that as a preacher he borrowed heavily from the camp-meeting style of the frontier Methodists. As a politician he at times infuriated his allies with his caution and moderation. And as a theologian he proclaimed a "Gospel of Love" that would have been anathema to his Calvinist ancestors, with its focus on a personalized experience of God's unconditional love and on the goodness of human nature—a theology that drew heavily from transcendentalism and earlier evangelicalism.

All in all, Beecher did not shape public opinion so much as embody it. As Applegate puts it, “Beecher was a bellwether. If he was saying it, plenty of people were thinking it.” But by boldly articulating what others were only thinking, Beecher gained numerous enemies as well as fame and adulation. His opposition to slavery brought angry mobs to the doors of his church. Among his supporters, some wondered whether a Christian minister had any business raising money to buy rifles for slavery opponents in Kansas.

Beecher’s emphasis on God’s mercy and human freedom led critics to carp that he was replacing the solid, old-time religion with a vapid, good-time religion. Even admirers like Walt Whitman worried that the force of his personality was creating Beecherites, not Christians. But love him or hate him, no one could ignore him.

When he was a youth, few would have pegged Beecher for such celebrity. He stuttered, seemed awkward around strangers and struggled mightily in school. Yet within a few decades he was one of the most popular lecturers, columnists and preachers in the country. His admirers praised his intellect, but the true secret of his success lay in his charisma. Though many who read his editorials and publications hated him, few who met him in person could resist his charms. Beecher also possessed an attribute common to most celebrities: a sense of timing. Whether through instinct or luck, he invariably found himself in the right place at the right moment.

For all his good qualities and accomplishments, Beecher was no saint. He had extravagant tastes—he often carried jewels in his pockets—and used questionable means to finance his lifestyle. He mistreated his family, forgetting his new bride on the journey back from their wedding and neglecting to write his daughter when she gave birth to his first grandchild.

These failings paled in comparison to his sexual indiscretions. In 1874, after years of rumors, a former protégé accused Beecher of adultery. The subsequent trial piqued public interest as no event since Lincoln’s assassination. Suddenly the Gospel of Love took on a new meaning. The sarcastic newspaper headlines practically wrote themselves. The situation seemed bleak, but had Teflon existed in Beecher’s time, his foes might have wondered if he were coated with it: nine of 12 jurors sided with him, his church denounced his accusers and Beecher resumed his work. Of course, no one forgot the trial, but when Beecher died 12 years later, the mourning and the letters of condolence testified that the public loved him as much as ever.

Applegate's work contains a few failings alongside its virtues—hardly surprising for a book of such length and scope. For example, she describes the Calvinism against which Beecher rebelled as full of “grim teachings,” “morbid theology” and “cruel, convoluted logic.” Beecher and his followers might have thought as much, but Applegate's analysis of the shifting theological landscape would have benefited from a more even-handed attempt to understand the traditional faith on its own terms.

More serious questions emerge regarding Applegate's discussion of Beecher's relationship with his famous family. Applegate describes Beecher as a typical middle child who rebelled against his Calvinist father's values while simultaneously struggling to secure his approval. She suggests that he sought female companionship to compensate for the longing resulting from the death of his mother when he was a child. Applegate thus suggests that both his theological shift and his indiscretions may be attributable to his upbringing. Her speculations rest largely on Beecher's own writings—sources often produced years after the fact by a man who, she concedes, tended to remember things in self-serving ways. This intriguing though problematic line of argument largely disappears after the first section.

These reservations aside, Applegate offers a perceptive, engaging and beautifully written account of one of the key figures of American religious history. Although Beecher has not been forgotten by historians—they have produced studies of his preaching and trial, and he appears in most historical surveys—he has not received the level of attention his importance merits. Anyone interested in 19th-century religion, the roots of the theological views dominant in mainstream Protestantism today, or the thorny question of whether and how religious figures should enter the realm of politics owes Applegate a debt of gratitude.