

# Note from the Editor

Since I began planning this issue in 2010, it has caused moral disquiet. As the three authors will attest, I have at times taken this out on them in the form of fussy and erratic editing, mixed with bouts of nagging over tasks that they have already done. Each article presents a vivid story of people inflicting misery upon one another or on creatures with whom humans have long felt a kinship for which the animals did not ask. These stories contain abundant decrepitude, delusion, loss, loneliness, neglect, abuse, and brutality, but not much promise of redemption. That was why I grouped them together.

The issue allows me to exercise one of my own hobby horses, at least by indirection. The American public has a frustrating penchant for turning the past into a morality play, but so (I tell myself in contrary moods) do professional historians. Earnest people, we project that earnestness onto the past. We seek lessons that we can use, which means that we make the dreary experiences of the people we write about mean something. As a profession, we are not good at bleak, pointless suffering. The source of my moral qualms should now be evident: in making this petulant point, I am also using people's misery for a purpose. A fundamental assumption of modern historiography is that life is bigger and deeper than our ability to recount and interpret it. By remaining cognizant of that truism, we take some of the moral sting out of what we do and can even, within limits, allow ourselves some earnestness.

The authors will attest that much of my fussiness and nagging revolved around the interpretive aspects of their essays. Interpretation is basic to the enterprise of professional history writing. It situates us within the profession and its intellectual agendas, and it provides both the scaffolding and animating force for the stories that we recount. Still, when does the necessity of interpretation limit as opposed to expand our empathies and imagination? The people in this issue suffered enough in life. Should we inflict on them the posthumous indignity of serving as material for interpretation? Historians are responsible for ensuring that a first principle of modern ethics is applied to the dead as well as the living: treat people not as *means* but as *ends in themselves*. With a slight expansion of the imagination, this extends to the circus elephants in Amy Wood's article, whom we dragged into our society for amusement and instruction. Each of the authors wrestles in her own way with this imperative.

Wendy Gamber and Melanie Gustafson recount tales whose squalidness illustrates the imperative of respectability among women in the Gilded Age. To some degree, the notion of female respectability generated the protagonists' misdeeds and misery. As Gamber explains, Nancy Clem, who almost certainly arranged the grotesque murder of a partner in a convoluted confidence scheme and the partner's wife, was able to operate remarkably close to the center of genteel Indianapolis society because of that society's loose structure in the immediate post-Civil War years. Adept at creating the image of respectability, Clem was able to use this image to escape punishment for her probable crime. Freed after five inconclusive trials, she found herself in a more elaborate city with "fewer opportunities for self-fashioning," as Gamber writes. Freedom was surely its own compensation, but her fate was marginality and sourness and the scrutiny that led to a prison term for an unrelated crime—some justice perhaps for her victims.

Harriet Hubbard Ayer, also a troubled and troubling late-Victorian woman, operated on the edge of high society in New York and not middle-class society in the Midwest. Having endured more than her share of horror, grief, betrayal, and abandonment, Ayer sought wealth and independence as an entrepreneur in cosmetics, patent medicines, and bric-a-brac. One understands why she pursued these businesses in a less-than-scrupulous way that added to their deserved poor reputation. Her fashionable, trans-Atlantic milieu was also remarkably fluid. This gave opportunity to people at least as manipulative as she but less unsettled in mind and health; they sought advantage in her name and vulnerabilities. Gustafson perceptively notes that Ayer's two daughters were the most important witnesses of their mother's flaws, losses, and successes. They carried the spirit of Victorian ethics—and not just its appearance—well into the twentieth century. They never fully revealed what they saw, knew, and thought. As they might have intended, the discretion evident in the surviving record limits our ability to interpret this once-famous woman.

Horror and people's impulse to make sense of suffering were—as Wood recounts—at the heart of a wave of staged elephant executions between the 1880s and 1920s. The particular way that westerners anthropomorphized elephants made them vulnerable to cruel spectacles that ritualized people's mixed feelings over social order, crime, and responsibility. That some elephants trampled or attacked keepers or went on rampages in crowds was, to be sure, the inevitable result of the uses to which Americans put these powerful animals and the unsuitable environment into which

elephants were inserted. The ritualized execution of an elephant hinged on the premise that something more was at stake than a mere failure to account adequately for behavior patterns that elephants had evolved in Africa or Asia. Offstage and indeed obscured in these rituals were the deaths and injuries of the keepers and bystanders that led to decisions to put an elephant to death. All participants in the spectacle—organizers, the public, reporters, and photographers—engaged, therefore, in an act of dehumanizing interpretation. To some degree, we must do the same to them. But, through awareness of the ambiguity of this act, we rise above the sordid aspects of interpretation.

Alan Lessoff