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Review of Ezra Greenspan, *George Palmer Putnam* (2000) and *The House of Putnam* (2002)

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Homestead, Melissa J., "Review of Ezra Greenspan, *George Palmer Putnam* (2000) and *The House of Putnam* (2002)" (2003). *Faculty Publications -- Department of English*. 75.

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GEORGE PALMER PUTNAM: REPRESENTATIVE AMERICAN PUBLISHER. By Ezra Greenspan. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2000. xviii + 510 pp. \$45.

THE HOUSE OF PUTNAM, 1837–1872: A DOCUMENTARY VOLUME. Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 254. Edited by Ezra Greenspan. Detroit: Brucoli Clark Layman/The Gale Group, 2002. xxviii + 420 pp. \$175.

Ezra Greenspan's biography of nineteenth-century American publisher George Palmer Putnam should be of great interest to many scholars of nineteenth-century American literature, whether or not they specialize in publishing history. Among the American authors and literary figures who made significant appearances in Putnam's personal and professional life and thus in this biography were: William Cullen Bryant, James and Susan Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, Margaret Fuller, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Russell Lowell, Sophia Peabody and Nathaniel Hawthorne, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Caroline Kirkland, William Gilmore Simms, James Hall, John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry David Thoreau, and Susan and Anna Warner.

The book's subtitle, "Representative American Publisher," implies an exclusive focus on Putnam's professional life, but Greenspan spends considerable space on Putnam's family life. This broader focus makes the book quite long, but it is appropriate for a man who often mixed public and private, business and family, even naming two of his sons after the authors with whom he had the longest and most profitable relationships ("Irving" for Washington Irving and "Taylor" for Bayard Taylor). The inclusion of his family life is also crucial to understanding his sense of mission as a publisher, which Greenspan persuasively argues was inseparable from his "secular, middle-class, nationalistic taste and values" (215).

Greenspan uses a liberal dose of superlatives to describe various aspects of Putnam's career, as in the following passage from the introduction:

[H]e was leader of the American publishing industry during the formative period in which it became an industry and primary organizer of its New York Book Publishers' Association. He was also founder of the house of G. P. Putnam and Company, operator of *Putnam's Monthly*, authorized publisher to the New York Crystal Palace, publisher to many of the leading authors of his time and patron generally to the idea and practice of American authorship, pioneer American in the transatlantic book trade, leading proponent of international copyright and prime mover behind the formation of the International Copyright Association, and founding and honorary superintendent of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Furthermore, he had a literary stature unmatched by any other publisher of his time as the author of travelogues, reminiscences, journalistic correspondence, reference works, and statistical compilations and as the unofficial annalist of the American publishing industry. All in all, as publisher, author, editor, trade organizer, and copyright advocate, Putnam was as involved as any other nineteenth-century literary professional in the emergence of modern publishing in the United States and in the institutionalization of its print culture. (xiii–xiv)

Although some of these superlatives certainly overreach, labeling Putnam as “representative” does not and accords with Greenspan’s analysis of Putnam’s own world view as a member of the American Victorian middle class, a class that tended to universalize its own interests and imagine itself as fully representing the nation. That is, Greenspan recreates Putnam’s own optimistic, whiggish view of himself, his view of the American publishing industry, and his place in it while acknowledging Putnam’s class-bound myopia.

A full recounting of Putnam’s life in the world of print is not possible here, but let me mention a few highlights of particular interest to literary scholars. The depth and variety of Putnam’s dealings in transatlantic, and particularly Anglo-American, print culture fully deserves superlatives. While Putnam was a *publisher* in the modern sense of the word, early and throughout his career he engaged extensively in import and export of works already printed. In the absence of international copyright, reprinting was certainly an important part of the publishing trade in both America and England, but it was a revelation to me to find out the extent of trade in books (both new and old), especially to stock library collections, a vigorous trade that went both ways. Reprinted editions are one indication of transatlantic literary influence, but Putnam’s business highlights the importance of library book purchases to transatlanticism. On the question of reprinting and international copyright, portions of this biography represent the best analysis of trade practices since James Barnes’s *Authors, Publishers, and Politicians: The Quest for an Anglo-American Copyright Agreement 1815–1854* (1974). Putnam was one of the earliest publishers publicly to advocate the cause of international copyright, and he continued his advocacy for decades with little result. In the absence of legislative reform, however, Putnam could ill afford to be a purist in his business dealings, and Greenspan documents both his attempts to stake out a moral high ground in his relations with British authors and publishers and his participation in business as usual. Greenspan’s analysis of Putnam’s relationship with Thomas Carlyle, mediated by Emerson, is a useful companion to Barnes’s analysis of the relationship between the Carey and Lea firm and Walter Scott.

By including Putnam’s family life, particularly his highly traditional relationship with his wife, Victorine, and his vexed relationship with his eldest daughter, Mary (later Mary Putnam Jacobi, one of the most distinguished female physicians of the late century), Greenspan is able to present a nuanced reading of Putnam’s relations with women authors he published, particularly Sedgwick and Susan Warner. Putnam worked happily and extensively with women professional authors while strictly observing the tenets of separate spheres ideology with his wife. While doing his utmost to commercialize women authors’ literary productions, he felt personal sympathy with them as proper “true women” and valued their achievement of rich family lives above their literary works. He achieved this odd synthesis in part by establishing family-based friendships with women authors, but such family engagements were also part of his repertoire with male authors. Greenspan’s analyses of Putnam’s relations with Irving and Taylor are the most extensive, befitting the length and profitability of the two authors’ publishing relations with Putnam. Those interested in travel literature will find Greenspan’s analysis of Putnam’s relationship with Taylor illuminating (Taylor published his poetry with Ticknor and Fields). Those interested in canon formation will profit from Greenspan’s persuasive case for Putnam’s publishing and promotion strategies as the basis of Irving’s establish-

ment as the first “classic” American author. Greenspan’s accounts of Wiley and Putnam’s Library of American Books and *Putnam’s Magazine* (in both its successful first and failed second incarnations) provide excellent case studies of American literary nationalism in action.

Subsequent to the publication of Greenspan’s Putnam biography, the Gale Group published a *Dictionary of Literary Biography* documentary volume on “The House of Putnam,” edited by Greenspan. Coupled together, the biography and documentary volume represent a rare opportunity to read one scholar’s narrative interpretation of a publisher’s life, as well as many of the primary documents from which he derived that narrative. While the biography is organized primarily chronologically, the documentary volume arranges materials in several different ways. It begins with a biographical sketch of Putnam and a “Historical Overview of the House of Putnam” (“House” here encompassing several different partnerships into which Putnam entered over the course of nearly forty years). A section of “Selected Correspondence” includes selections from Putnam’s correspondence with James Lenox, Asa Gray, James Fenimore Cooper, Harper and Brothers, and Ticknor and Fields. Remaining sections present documents relevant to “Executives and Editors Associated with the House of Putnam,” “Putnam Authors” (Poe, Andrew Jackson Downing, Kirkland, Melville, William Gilmore Simms, Carlyle, Irving, the Coopers, Sedgwick, John Pendleton Kennedy, Taylor, Asa Gray, Putnam himself, Henry Tuckerman, Susan Warner, and Fredrika Bremer), “Notable Putnam Publications” (including works by some of the above authors, and works by George Catlin, Hawthorne, Fuller, Taylor, John Ruskin, Lowell, Francis Parkman, Austen Henry Lanyard, and Richard Burton), “Putnam Series,” and “Putnam Magazines.” The volume concludes with “George Palmer Putnam’s Writings on the Profession of Publishing,” “George Palmer Putnam’s Public Statements,” and “Nineteenth-Century Assessments of Putnam and His Company.” Combining excerpts from published materials with transcriptions of manuscripts, Greenspan has liberally illustrated the volume with black-and-white reproductions of engravings of authors and other personalities, manuscript materials, advertisements, book title pages, and additional documents, and he has fully introduced and scrupulously documented all sources. The volume will prove a reliable and timesaving source for other scholars. However, it is a resource easy to miss if your university library, like mine and many others, does not create full individual cataloging records for *Dictionary of Literary Biography* volumes. Although I regularly consult the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* for brief biographical, critical, and bibliographical overviews of unfamiliar writers, I first stumbled across the “House of Putnam” volume entirely by accident; I was both delighted and appalled to discover a similar three-volume set on the House of Scribner, the existence of which my library’s catalog gave not a hint.

I would like to say that Greenspan’s work is a model for modern scholarship in publishing history, but it presents an example that may be difficult to follow. Its scholarly rigor is certainly a welcome antidote to hagiographic nineteenth- and early twentieth-century memoirs or to mid-twentieth-century house biographies (such as Eugene Exman’s *The House of Harper* [1967]) that, while not overtly hagiographic, were published under the imprint of modern corporate descendents and thus tend to accentuate the positive. However, I suspect that few nineteenth-century publishers and their businesses are as well documented as Putnam, and even the documentation for Putnam’s publishing activities is not complete. No cost books survive,

as they do for Carey and Hart or Ticknor and Fields, and the lack of cost books may account, in part, for the fact that Greenspan's book is more personality-driven than Michael Winship's excellent analysis of the Ticknor and Fields literary publishing business, *American Literary Publishing in the Mid-Nineteenth Century: The Business of Ticknor and Fields* (1995). Many publishers' lives and careers remain documented only by those unreliable memoirs, with all traces of their archives missing. What, for instance, happened to the papers of James C. Derby, whose *Fifty Years among Authors, Books, and Publishers* (1884) remains a key—and highly problematic—source for nineteenth-century literary and book history? We can only hope that undiscovered manuscript troves will find their way to libraries, and, in the meantime, we can enjoy the product of Greenspan's labors and make more well-informed surmises about other publishers based on his exemplary scholarship.

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