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Review of *Myths America Lives By* By Richard T. Hughes

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BOOK REVIEWS

Myths America Lives By. By Richard T. Hughes. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003. xv + 203 pp. Notes, index. \$29.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Scholars of American culture can resist anything except temptation, and the ultimate temptation is to write a jeremiad. Like New England divines, suckled in a creed outworn, calling for reform from pulpits tenured and unnoticed, the contemporary academic observer of American life, as a matter of professional privilege, redrafts his raw material into a social gospel. Its formal features are fundamentalism and selective evidence. Its mood is unironic. It has one ending: decline and fall.

Richard T. Hughes's *Myths America Lives By* suggests that the United States has both created and been created by six national, and in some cases pre-national, myths. These include the myth of the Chosen Nation, of Nature's Nation, of the Christian Nation, of the Millennial Nation, of the Capitalist Nation, and of the Innocent Nation. Each of these is a doomed proposition, should readers wonder. Hughes has selected them for their done-for character.

The riposte to each myth is furnished by a representative African American or Native American, whose superficially-presented discontent at white male ideas about America is meant to "critique" national failings. (Frederick Douglass never sounded so dull in his career as he does when he's obliged to "critique" the "absolutized" myth of the Christian Nation.) And despite centuries of censorious comment by the marginalized, it was only recently that America awoke from its myth-nap:

"these myths stood virtually unchallenged from the Revolution to the 1960s." Evidently the prevailing myth since 1968 is Multicultural Guilt-Ridden Enfranchising-the-Marginalized Nation.

Never mind that the term "myth" is wildly misapplied throughout this text and that the average Athenian in the ancient world could better explain the difference between myth and lie. (Hughes does not mean *myth*; he means what even Northrup Frye, father of North American myth criticism and absent from the index to this book, would have called modestly a *mode*. Frye reserved *mythoi* for primal plots, not fugue states of those plots.) Hughes's six myths fold neatly into the jeremiad's pressure to narrate history in one way, toward one finale of 1960s "challenges." Historical context, or even textual sources, for where each myth came from are uneven; in most cases, Hughes's analysis is superseded by the past, namely by old-fashioned Americanist scholarship such as Perry Miller's or Vernon Partridge's, or even D. H. Lawrence's.

The topic of this book is really the Protestant imagination. It was Miller who first claimed that Puritanism was possibly tormented, but he was at least droll about it. Hughes recurs briefly to Reinhold Niebuhr's sense of the irony of American history, as another reminder of the side-splitting aspects of national original sin, but only in order to enlist it in his un-funny religious road rage.

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