

**A Review of Daniel N. Wiener's *B. F. Skinner: Benign Anarchist***

(Allyn & Bacon, 1996, ISBN 0-205-17348-9, 202 pp.)

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Daniel Wiener's biography of Skinner is the second such endeavor, following the volume by Bjork (1993). On the whole, *Benign Anarchist* is a sympathetic treatment of the 20th century's most eminent psychologist. This is not surprising as the author was a student of Skinner's during the latter's initial foray into teaching at the University of Minnesota (1936-1945). Wiener reportedly remained in contact with Skinner for 50 years; during the last three years of Skinner's life he engaged in frequent correspondence and held numerous personal interviews with Skinner in preparation for this biography. In fact Wiener includes a brief endorsement by Skinner of this biographical project. Wiener himself is a clinical and academic psychologist; given his contact and professional training, he would seem to have been admirably prepared to embark on such an autobiographical project.

In common with Bjork (1993), Wiener provides a good introduction to the life of this most interesting human being, a serving of hors d'oeuvres rather than the feast of detail provided in Skinner's three (thick) volumes of autobiography. In this sense, Wiener's book will be more accessible to the average reader who may be intimidated by the formal autobiography.

What does *Benign Anarchist* tell us that can't be found in the three volumes of Skinner's autobiography? Very little. We retrace the familiar ground of Skinner's upbringing in New York and Pennsylvania, something of his parents and grandparents, his relationship with his brother, his precociousness in building things and penchant for boxes, the post-Hamilton College "dark year" (two actually), and eventual enrollment at Harvard. His work as a graduate student is reviewed, along with his trials and tribulations (e.g., Boring), and some of his joys (e.g., Fred Keller). His years as a post-Ph. D. Harvard Fellow were followed by academic appointments at Minnesota (9 years) and Indiana (3 years), culminating in his eventual return in 1948 (to stay) at Harvard. His professional accomplishments are recounted at every stage: major experimental programs, book projects, awards, and significant graduate students he worked with (apparently at some distance in most cases).

Disappointingly, we learn very little of Skinner's home life, beyond the fact that he was devoted to his wife, Eve, and excessively soft-hearted about his two daughters. There is a paucity of personal anecdote and other elements of human

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interest. His death is described in one paragraph, and we are told nothing of where and when he died, or where he is buried.

The book does suffer from a few subtle errors which will likely go unnoticed by any except behavioral cognoscenti. For example, Division 25 of the American Psychological Association (The Experimental Analysis of Behavior), founded in 1964, is mistakenly called the Division of Experimental Psychology (p. 154); Division 25 is said to publish (p. 154) the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* (it doesn't); *JABA* is mistakenly titled the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Analysis* (p. 184); and *eminence grise* of psychoanalysis, Kurt Eissler, is said to be the author (p. 181) of Jeffrey Masson's book *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (he wasn't)! Skinner himself is said (p. 183) to be the author (he wasn't) of a 1981 *American Psychologist* article by Alan Elms, titled "Skinner's Dark Year and *Walden II*." Portions of the book are poorly integrated. Events are described in one chapter and redescribed anew in following ones as if the reader had not been exposed to them before. It gives the reader the sense of the chapters being almost independently composed and assembled into the biography rather than being a consistently written narrative.

Despite the above, I really enjoyed reading *Benign Anarchist*. It is an honest and generally accurate portrayal of Skinner as a scientist, and (to a lesser extent) as a human being. I suspect that most psychologists, and behavior analysts in particular, would be similarly reinforced by reading this book. I look forward to similar volumes prepared by others involved with Skinner's life and work. A collection of essays by former graduate students of Skinner's recounting their experiences would be another fascinating approach.

## REFERENCES

Bjork, D. W. (1993). *B.F. Skinner: A life*. New York: Basic Books.