

A REVIEW OF *B. F. Skinner and Behaviorism in American Culture* EDITED BY LAURENCE D. SMITH AND WILLIAM R. WOODWARD (1996, Associated University Presses, Cranbury, NJ, ISBN 0-934223-40-8, 348 pp.)

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B.F. Skinner and Behaviorism in American Culture by Smith and Woodward is the third book-length treatment of the contributions of the world's foremost behaviorist to have appeared since Skinner's death in 1989. Preceded by the biographical works of Bjork (1993) and Weiner (1996), the present volume is not exactly a biography. Avoiding the extremes of hagiography and iconoclasm, it is a balanced overview of the antecedents and consequences of Skinner's life, primarily focused on his professional contributions, with a sprinkling of more personal elements.

The 13 chapters are divided into four sections, "Skinner as Social Philosopher," "Skinner as Scientist," "Skinner's Personal World," and "The Diversification and Extension of Behaviorism." The first of these deals with Skinner's cultural and philosophical precursors; the second with the development and maturation of Skinner as a psychologist; the third a rare peek at Skinner the human being, as husband, father, and faculty member; and the fourth a series of appraisals of a few of Skinner's intellectual contributions (e.g., programmed instruction, the cumulative record, citation patterns pertaining to Skinner's work). Rhonda Bjork wrote a most interesting chapter on the life of Yvonne Blue Skinner, the psychologist's wife, while his daughter Julie Vargas and son-in-law E. A. Vargas prepared a chapter on the origins of programmed instruction. The chapter subtitled "The Skinners' Approach to Parenting" was competently prepared by Elizabeth Jordan, a historian of psychology. The same topic addressed by Dr. Julie Vargas would no doubt be equally interesting, if not more so.

Of course, we have a wealth of first hand accounts of Skinner's own life and work in the form of his autobiography and numerous articles, chapters, and books. Independent appraisals conducted after the demise of a towering

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figure like Skinner, however, avoid the Scylla of self-promotion and the Charybdis of sycophancy and may possess the virtue of objectivity to a greater extent than self-evaluations. It is clear from these essays that Skinner was a modest man with much to be immodest about. The author of best-selling popular books, of (arguably) the most significant conceptual advances in the history of psychology, of numerous technical inventions, the author of a steady flow of first rate publications that remain highly cited to this day (see Thyer, 1991), teacher of dozens of graduate students who comprise some of the major figures in American psychology, Skinner the human being lived fairly simply, walked to work, possessed few affectations, and was always receptive to meeting others.

When I was a graduate teaching assistant at the University of Michigan in the late 1970's I taught a class in "behavior modification." When my students returned from a week-long break, one young man regaled me with his visit to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Finding himself in the vicinity of Skinner's home, he knocked on the door to find himself greeted by the man himself, fresh out of the pages of our text. Courteously welcomed, he introduced himself and expressed his interest in meeting Skinner. He soon found himself seated in the living room chatting amiably with Skinner, enjoying refreshments, and being encouraged to pursue his studies in psychology. He left, to return to Ann Arbor and my class, with a wonderful anecdote to regale us with and a second-hand role model of professional and personal demeanor that influences me to this day.

Like many academic books outside of psychology, the present work employs a footnote style of referencing and citation that is much less convenient than that of the more familiar APA-style, but this is a minor blemish on a thoroughly enjoyable retrospective on the life and contributions of B.F. Skinner.

REFERENCES

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