

*Wallace Nutting and the Invention of Old America*, Thomas Andrew Denenberg (New Haven: Yale University Press) 2003.

Reviewed by Jessie McCulley

*Wallace Nutting and the Invention of Old America* is a biography of sorts, not of Nutting himself, but of his business. In Nutting's case this is particularly appropriate since the man and his name became an industry which lives on in the many sentimental photographs and products still to be found in American homes and antique shops. As the title suggests, Thomas Andrew Denenberg's book examines Nutting's creation, through a number of interconnected business ventures and product lines, of a mythic and highly consumable "Old America" in the early twentieth century. Denenberg argues that Nutting's idealized view of the past was a product of his age, but also that his vision profoundly shaped and continues to shape middle class culture. One of the main themes of the book is the way in which Nutting and the business he created embodied a paradoxical mix of anti-modern and modern values.

Wallace Nutting's anti-modern ideology is nicely summed up by the quote the book opens with: "Whatever is new, is bad". Denenberg argues that Nutting's beliefs and personal struggles reflected contemporary middle class discomfort with an era of rapid and unsettling social change. A Congregational minister who left the church because of bad nerves, Nutting sought solace in pursuits typical of the middle class in his era, such as country living and amateur photography. Nutting's sentimental photographs of landscapes and old houses with young women in period costume soon became a business, to be followed by other ventures such as the manufacture of reproduction American furniture and a chain of house museums. Uniting all of Nutting's products was his anti-modern vision of "Old America"—a simpler, in all respects better, time and place. Nutting conveyed this message through his products, his advertising and in his speeches and lectures. Nutting not only sentimentalized and idealized his Old America, he imbued it with a moral superiority and a conservative system of values that appealed to a middle class longing for a more virtuous past.

While Wallace Nutting preached the virtues of a simpler age, his business practices were surprisingly modern. Nutting employed assembly-line production methods for some of his product lines and owned several small factories. Nutting's manufacturing was always on a relatively small scale, but his most modern innovations came in the construction, distribution and marketing of his Old America. Trading on his image as a Yankee minister and foreshadowing figures like Martha Stewart, Nutting built a personality-based business which appealed to the growing consumer culture of the middle class. A superb marketer, Nutting built a reputation as a connoisseur and authority on American furniture through his own collecting and the publication of several guides. Then he created reproductions of the same pieces he had trained his audience to value. Nutting's interconnected product lines and museum houses advertised one another and created fully realized prescriptions for modes of decoration and consumption—Nutting photographs showed Nutting museum houses filled with Nutting furniture. Nutting's consumers were taught to idealize an Old America that could be recaptured by acquiring symbolic Nutting products. This "therapeutic consumerism" proved increasingly powerful for a society moving away from religion and other forms of moral authority.

The observation that Wallace Nutting embraced modern marketing methods and middle class consumer culture to promote an anti-modern ideology is an interesting one, but one that is made too often and with too much judgment in Denenberg's book. Because Nutting carefully controlled his own image and papers, he is hard to understand, but at times this reader was left wanting more background information about the man and his life. The most interesting parts of Denenberg's book examine Nutting as a pioneer. While Wallace Nutting's business was only moderately successful, Denenberg argues that he profoundly shaped the ways in which the middle class conceives of and consumes the past. In Denenberg's words: "By inventing a sentimental past, imbuing it with moral significance, and selling it at every turn, Wallace Nutting made American history available, attractive, and useful for the modern era."