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# East Coast Men Of Conscience

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## EAST COAST MEN OF CONSCIENCE

David M. Tucker: *Mugwumps: Public Moralists of the Gilded Age*. (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1998. Pp. x, 139. \$27.50.)

In this brief, well-paced book, University of Memphis historian David M. Tucker argues that the Mugwumps had a long and rich history and played a vital role in political debate as America's public moralists from 1840 to 1900. Central players included David Wells, E. L. Godkin, William Graham Sumner, Edward Atkinson, Horace White, R. R. Bowker, Charles Eliot Norton, Henry Adams, and Charles Francis Adams Sr. and Jr. They commandeered important newspapers and journals, including, at various points, the *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Evening Post*, *The Nation*, and the *North American Review*. John Stuart Mill was a mentor, and Adam Smith and Richard Cobden were guiding spirits. The term Mugwump itself, meaning "great leader" or "chief" (and derived from Algonquian), was used derisively by Republican regulars for the independents who opposed the presidential ambitions of James G. Blaine and defected to Democratic candidate Grover Cleveland in the election of 1884. Having played a key role in the Cleveland victory, the independents embraced the term, but Tucker uses it much more widely for the elite-educated reformers who cut their teeth on Brown President (and Baptist minister) Francis Wayland's *Elements of Moral Science* (1835). Moral virtue, political independence, antislavery, and free-market capitalism were *de rigueur* for men of conscience in the Northeast by the late antebellum era. Those Tucker identifies as Mugwumps, whether they saw themselves unified or no, were linked after the war by their advocacy of the gold standard, tariff reform and free trade, and civil service reform, all of which were vital, in their minds, to moral virtue. In Tucker's view, they were "a network of public moralists" (p. 124). They lived with the "assurance that came from living in a smaller America when a handful of intellectuals living in Boston and New York could expect to create a new party or to persuade a major party to enact their liberalism" (p. 125). Tucker credits the Mugwumps with paving the way for civil service reform and helping take the money supply out of politics.

Tucker's Mugwumps were spokesmen for republican virtue in an era of greed, pressure for easy credit, the spoils system, and later, imperialism. He identifies them as liberals. Tucker does not address the scholarly literature on liberal and republican traditions in American politics, on the survival of republicanism in the nineteenth century, or on competing strains of liberal thought in this era, though this would have helped situate Mugwump thought. Tucker is more interested in rescuing the Mugwumps from recent "stylish" interpretations (in which the Mugwumps become modernizers, professionals and bureaucrats), as well from an older era of historians who alternately cast Mugwumps as reacting against their own loss of status (Richard Hofstadter, Ari Hoogenboom) or as expansionists little different from their imperialist opponents (William A. Williams). Downplayed in Tucker's rescue effort are the interests that stood to gain from Mugwump ideals, and the forged alliances (occasionally mentioned in passing) the Mugwumps would make in pursuit of their goals for economy and polity.

Chapters are primarily organized according to Mugwump themes, with several focused on particular presidential election struggles where independents organized defection. While the approach tends to characterize Mugwumps as of one mind on an issue when individuals are often shown to differ (e.g., silver money, free trade), Tucker does well with characterizations of the thought and writing of specific figures in this network. He is sensitive to the transition from religious to secular and scientific bases for Mugwump arguments about public morality. He relates the abandonment of their free trade position by the newer economists and the new American Economics Association as "unsafe in politics and unsound in morals" (p. 95) and the abandonment of Mugwump opposition to bayonets, colonies, and territorial expansion by Roosevelt Republicans at the turn of the century. A final chapter on Mugwumpery puts the movement in some perspective and provocatively notes a kinship between Mugwumpery and 1960s radicalism.

Tucker's sympathies are very clearly with his public moralists. Protectionists were self-interested, and backers of easy credit and inflation were greedy; on the other hand, Mugwumps were cast as the true guardians of the public good. Apologia sometimes interferes with analysis. Tucker goes to great lengths to argue that the Mugwumps were not acting out of self-interest or political ambition, and that they even sometimes acted against self-interest as "avoidance of self-interest distinguished Victorian men" (p. 75). In this sense, Tucker creates a melodrama of good and evil; while all others acted selfishly, only the Mugwump elites really knew what the public good required, and sometimes got disillusioned about democracy when their political and economic causes failed. While the extent of spoils and corruption in Gilded Age politics is clear, it is also clear that contending voices, often identified by section as well as class, thought their economic causes and political choices *were* in the best interests of the nation. We generally hear the language only on one side of the battles over money, tariff, ending Reconstruction, and civil service reform. We are not encouraged to think that these were complex issues, that there were competing visions of the public good, or that government policies had different consequences for different sections and interests. In William Greider's *Secrets of the Temple* and in Marvin Meyers's *Jacksonian Persuasion*, by contrast, competing stakes in nineteenth-century struggles over banking and credit are much more richly drawn. Tucker's Mugwumps are opposed to Republican radicals and ready to abandon Reconstruction after the Civil War amendments, wishing local government restored in the South because they "did not want to destroy any Southern white sense of responsibility for local preservation of order" (p. 48). As believers in republican virtue, they trusted to the habits of the people rather than the goodness of laws. Tucker may show us the internal logic and consistency of the Mugwumps' political positions and why they believed these were moral stands, but is this the same as identifying Mugwumps as good public moralists with regard to the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments in the Gilded Age? This would at least warrant discussion. The Mugwumps had a certain vision of manhood and citizenship that put them at odds with the working classes and eventually at odds with Teddy Roosevelt. Visions of manhood, morality, and citizenship in this era were

contested visions, but readers will not sense the tensions and competing claims. The sectional base of the Mugwump appeal warrants exploration. Anne Norton's *Alternative Americas* is highly suggestive in this regard. And some of the good government reforms championed by Mugwumps had the effect of demobilizing the electorate. To establish a claim that Mugwumps knew what constituted the public good requires greater attention to these tensions.

It would have been desirable had Tucker explained better what happened to Mugwump strength on the civil service reform issue in the period 1881-84 so that Republicans disdained to court reformers in the 1884 election. And more generally, with what did reform influence vary? Nevertheless, Tucker's book is helpful in tracing the Mugwumps' intellectual and moral heritage as well as their legacy.

—Carol Nackenoff

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### A NONTHREATENING LEADER

Bruce Gilley: *Tiger on the Brink: Jiang Zemin and China's New Elite*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. \$29.95.)

This first attempt by a Westerner of a biography of Jiang Zemin is well justified since the world knows so little of the man who was so suddenly thrust to the pinnacle of power. Jiang also represents the "core" of the "third generation" of the People's Republic of China leaders, and a biography of him sheds light on China's new crop of elite as well.

The book proceeds in a chronological order, starting from Jiang's birth in Yangzhou in 1926 and ending with his official state visit to the United States in 1997. Such an organization is well suited to trace the progression of Jiang's personal and career growth, although the narrative sometimes becomes too descriptive or detailed. Helpfully, the author does not just give us a wealth of rare information but is also careful to show how the different stages of Jiang's life and experience interact. Thus Jiang's adoption into an uncle's family did not just make him an adopted son of a Communist martyr killed by the Nationalists; it also partly explains why he makes remarks like "Back in the 1940s, if you got caught by the Nationalists, all you could do was wait to be executed," whereas "Now we're being very lenient" toward protesters (p. 151). His elementary and middle school education in the 1930s gave him a solid foundation in traditional education, especially music and literature, which is responsible for his openness to Western music and arts on the one hand and his recent championing of Chinese traditional culture on the other. At Jiaotong University during the 1940s under the Japanese occupation, he turned to the modern, technical field of engineering. Although he took a low profile as a student activist against the Nationalist government, these formative years sowed a deep seed of nationalism in him that was to become active and accentuated in the 1990s. And after a brief stint as a factory engineer in the last years of the Nationalists, Jiang's new life began with the People's Republic of China.