

Rebellion Against Victorianism: The Impetus for Cultural Change in 1920s America

Stanley Coben



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Rebellion Against Victorianism: The Impetus for Cultural Change in 1920s America Stanley Coben The 1920s in America was a decade of rebellion, reform, and reaction as traditional Victorian values came under attack from all sides. Black leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey, feminists like Alice Paul, politicians like Robert La Follette, and social scientists like Franz Boas and Margaret Mead all assaulted fundamental inequalities inherited from the nineteenth century. A host of scientific breakthroughs eroded the foundations of the older world view, and cultural innovations like jazz challenged the nineteenth-century morality of most middle class Americans and also provoked spirited defenses of tradition by extremists like the Ku Klux Klan.

In this wide-ranging and vividly written book, Stanley Coben introduces a new hypothesis about the reasons for the tumultuous cultural changes during the 1920s. He begins with the Victorian concept of "character," the word which assured Americans of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that men were men, women were wives and mothers, and homes were sanctuaries. (Harriet Beecher Stowe and her sister Catherine wrote that "She who is the mother and housekeeper in a large family is the sovereign of an empire.") Coben doesn't spare us the seamy underside of the Victorian ideal either, such as the racism revealed by the Oxford professor who declared to an approving American audience in 1882 that "the best remedy for whatever is amiss in America would be if every Irishman should kill a negro and be hanged for it." Nor does he hesitate to describe the failures of those who rebelled against tradition, like the early supporters of the Equal Rights Amendment, or the farmer-labor-progressive presidential coalition of 1924. Rebellion Against Victorianism is particularly enlightening on cultural matters, showing how artforms of the '20s--like jazz or the novels of Ernest Hemingway and Sinclair Lewis--were part of the rebellion. The book includes a fascinating chapter-length discussion of the Ku Klux Klan which reveals that the Klan in the 1920s was in no way a Southern, fringe group--in fact, the K.K.K. had more members in Connecticut than in Mississippi. The Klan's defense of Victorian "character" spoke to millions of Americans who found themselves shaken up by the cultural revolution going on around them.

In illuminating the events and personalities of this water-shed decade, Coben draws with equal confidence from the realms of culture and politics, science and society. His book brings an alternative perspective to the impetus for change in American life, demonstrating that many of the contradictions which inspired the rebellion against Victorianism still exist today. The results are sometimes startling, but always intriguing.

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