



BOOK REVIEWS

MADELEINE B. STERN, *Heads and Headlines: The Phrenological Fowlers*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971, xx + 348 pp. \$8.95.

The importance of the contributions made by phrenology to the study of human behavior is slowly becoming recognized by contemporary historians. To the typical behavioral scientist, however, the names of Franz Joseph Gall and Johann Christoph Spurzheim are the most frequent, if not the only, names which come to mind when thinking about phrenology's history, and then only in connection with its origins. While possessing this minimal, albeit integral, understanding of that "quaint 19th century notion," there exists in the minds of most a vast void regarding the events which transpired subsequent to those beginnings. Madeleine Stern's *Heads and Headlines: The Phrenological Fowlers* fills a good part of that void by providing the first authoritative account of the most prolific and well-known phrenological writers and publishers in the history of the movement.

When Gall died in Paris in 1828, Spurzheim, who had become the popularizer of the new doctrine of the mind, inherited the mantle of phrenological fame. Moved to extend his influence to America, he fulfilled a resolve to visit here in 1832 by arriving early in August of that year. After lecturing in Boston, he met an untimely death there on November 10th, almost twelve weeks after his arrival.¹ Phrenology had been known in America at least since around 1822; however, it was at the time of Spurzheim's visit, and as a direct result of it, that what came to be known as "practical phrenology," determining characters for a fee (the type of phrenology—or "bumpology"—which persists in the minds of most to this day), had its beginnings. Gall and Spurzheim were anatomists and physiologists—their doctrines, functional. Gallian and Spurzheimian phrenology in the reformatory hands of Americans eager for the novel, however, was to be turned uniquely, almost beyond recognition, certainly beyond the anatomical, into an all encompassing system designed to improve mankind physically, morally, socially, and culturally. The "phrenological Fowlers" were, for the most part, responsible for this metamorphosis.

Stern begins her account with the debate at Amherst College where the future Unitarian minister, Henry Ward Beecher, after having been assigned the position of disputant on the negative on the question "Is Phrenology entitled to the name of science?", found that he was unable to fulfill his assigned task, and, after a two week postponement, delivered a rousing speech, not against, but in favor of the new doctrines. After the debate Beecher gave his phrenological works to his classmate Orson Squire Fowler, and "the name of Fowler and phrenology then and there became wedded." O. S. Fowler, the "upstate New Yorker whose life would be shaped by Spurzheim's message" was but one member of a family—a veritable phrenological and reformatory dynasty—which would "soar to eminence on the wings of Spurz-

¹A detailed account of Spurzheim's tour of America is given by this reviewer in "The American Tour of Dr. Spurzheim" was published in the April, 1972 issue of the *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*.

heim's ideas." The influence of this family on the lives of 19th century Americans is ably portrayed by the author. Their influence became so far reaching, one learns from this volume, that it is difficult to imagine any 19th century sentient man or woman unaware of their existence.

The Fowler family's influence began with O. S. Fowler establishing himself as an "itinerant practical phrenologist." As the author tells us, "Armed with a simple chart . . . and a conviction that with his new science he could solve the riddle of the Sphinx, Orson Squire Fowler cleared forty dollars [at his first lectures on phrenology in Brattleboro, Vermont] and began his professional career." Soon he was joined by his brother Lorenzo Niles Fowler and the two began a tour of the country examining heads for fees, lecturing, and otherwise "enlightening" the people regarding the new truths. From Philadelphia in 1838 they launched, with modest beginnings, a publishing house and a journal which were to last into the 20th century, in addition to beginning their careers as authors of phrenological and related tracts. By 1842 they had moved to New York and it was from this city that their philosophy was to be spread throughout the world. They became over the years, for example, the chief supporters of the temperance movement, various medical reform movements (e.g., the "water-cure" ["hydropathy"]), vegetarianism, sex education, communal societies, and originated—in anticipation (?) of current women's liberation—the anti-tight-lacing reforms, a movement designed to free women from the "hour glass" constraints of too-tight corseting. Prison reform and reform in the treatment of the mentally ill were also uppermost in their list of interests. In 1844 Lorenzo Fowler married Lydia Folger of Nantucket, a genealogical relation of Benjamin Franklin. As one of the most interesting and "colorful" members of the Fowler family publishing firm, according to the author, she became the second female physician in the United States and the medical profession's first female professor. In 1853, as presiding officer of the Woman's Grand Temperance Demonstration she became the first woman to deliver a public speech from the stage of Metropolitan Hall in New York—sharing the stage with Horace Greeley, Susan B. Anthony, and Amelia Bloomer.

The author traces the growth of the Fowler enterprises throughout the 19th century, and in doing so, admirably portrays the advancement of phrenological thought—although it was not her intention to include an analysis of phrenological systems or their variation throughout the period. The Fowler firm, increasing the breadth of its interests, spreading its influence abroad to England, was to touch the lives of Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Horace Mann, and Samuel Gridley Howe to name a few. G. Stanley Hall even found time to be phrenologically analysed at the firm's New York office. Orson Fowler as architect provided the inspiration for "octagonal homes," creating somewhat of a sensation in the building trade. Mesmerism was picked up and a series of books appeared under the Fowler insignia as their "Library of Mesmerism and Psychology." Edward Payson Fowler, a younger brother of Orson's by his father's second marriage, after delving in spiritualism in his youth, became the "first American translator" of three important works on the brain, viz., Charcot's *Lectures on Localization in Diseases of the Brain* (1878), Richet's *Physiology and Histology of the Cerebral Convulsions* (1879), and Moriz Benedikt's *Anatomical Studies Upon Brains of Criminals* (1881). Another half brother founded a social community in New

Jersey, a half sister became a practising "homeopathic" physician, and, in 1863 three Fowlers founded the New York Medical College for Women. In the 1870's, to the chagrin of the more delicate members of Victorian society, Orson Fowler became a firm supporter of sex education and gave advice openly, clearly in advance of his time, on all the subtleties of connubial bliss.

The publishing house managed to survive the vicissitudes of the 19th century and was able to continue precariously until early in the 20th. The phrenological journal which had begun publication in 1838, after having been altered in format and title throughout the many years of its existence, published its last issue in January, 1911. The Phrenological Institute which had been founded to train phrenologists continued to graduate students "until at least the 1920's." Jessie Allen Fowler, Lorenzo Fowler's daughter, was able to keep the Fowler form of phrenology alive until 1932, a full one hundred years after Spurzheim's visit. In that year with her death the dynasty came to an end.

Although "practical phrenology" was anathema to many 19th century scientists, it "seemed" to work and the average man was able to comprehend it. Stern has given us in this beautifully written volume an excellent picture of the scope and breadth of influence that the phrenological movement had in her account of its most well-known adherents. Any psychological bibliophile or bibliophage who has interests in 19th century Americana, will get a vivid picture through this volume of an era during which a doctrine, later to be discarded as pseudoscientific, based on a "psychology" of the "mind," permeated the thoughts and the lives of perhaps three generations. While psychology as a "science" was struggling into existence, the average man, as yet unaware of that struggle, sought and obtained seemingly workable advice and insight into his nature through those simplistic, although erroneous, phrenological tenets. This, Madeleine Stern's most recent opus, adds admirably to the growing literature on the history of this movement. It provides for the historian an account of the happenings "back home," so to speak, when the early behavioral scientists, perhaps unaware of those happenings, were slowly developing interests outside the traditional interests of the scientific community.

Ms. Stern, who has written many scholarly articles and books on 19th century American publishing history, literature, Americana, and biography (e.g., *The Life of Margaret Fuller* [New York, 1942]; & *Purple Passage: The Life of Mrs. Frank Leslie* [Norman, 1953]) was most certainly equal to the task she undertook in writing *Heads and Headlines*. In this volume of 348 pages, 63 pages are devoted to detailed documentation which provides for the reader a more than adequate indication of the scholarship involved in piecing together a biographical-historical account of an important period (c. 1832-1932) in the history of the behavioral sciences.

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