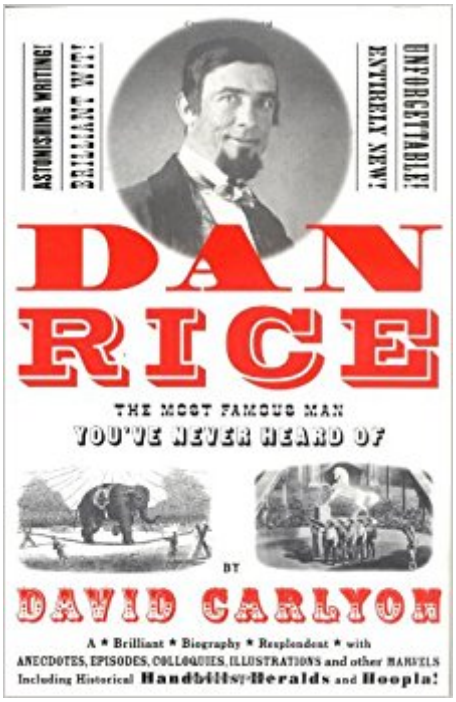
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Dan Rice: The Most Famous Man You've Never Heard Of



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Synopsis

This brilliant, richly illustrated biography of a 19th century performer introduces readers to the most famous American they've never heard of, while exploring the history of entertainment and the cult of celebrity. Circus clown and presidential candidate: A 21st century punch line, that conjunction made perfect sense to the mid-19th century, in the person of Dan Rice. A runaway at 13, Rice was a pig presenter, strongman, lecturer, comic singer, blackface clown, before joining the dazzling world of circus. Creating Dan Rice's Great Show, and labeling himself the Great American Humorist, he spoke out on issues of the day until he become one of the most famous men in America. So what happened? Why did Dan Rice disappear? Why have so few people ever heard of him? Propelled by a vague urge of "refinement"-which mostly meant quiet audiences-American amusements began to stratify in the mid-19th century. The raucous antebellum jumble of performers and audiences and forms split along a new performance hierarchy of high and low. Circus, though still vastly popular, became seen as essentially lowbrow, good only for children, simple jokes, and nostalgia. In that changed world, Rice's aggressive humor became an embarrassment, and his robust connection with a noisy, participatory audience became seen as a civic threat. David Carlyon weaves a remarkably rich portrait of turbulent times that raised one ambitious, creative man to glorious heights and then, embarrassed by its enthusiasm, buried him in sentimentality and finally oblivion.

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Customer Reviews

Except in the works of political commentators, clowns and presidents hardly ever inhabit the same

body. But Dan Rice perhaps the premiere clown and showman of 19th-century America was also a presidential candidate. This wonderfully appealing and constantly fascinating biography is not only a perceptive examination of Rice's life and times, but a serious and deeply researched look at the complex intersections among popular culture and politics, and the birth of a unique American character in the years before and after the Civil War. Born in 1823, Rice joined, as a dancer and jockey at the age of 13, the transitory, not very respectable world of traveling shows, and ran a "learned pig" routine in small towns (the pig could tell time and ascertain the character of audience members). He eventually made a name doing "nigero singing and dancing" blackface and by the 1850s became a major producer of popular circus events. By 1864 he was running for public office and ran for president in 1868. Carlyon, who has been a clown, actor, director and playwright and holds a Ph.D. in theater as well as a law degree from Berkeley, places Rice firmly in the spectacle of 19th-century popular culture. Covering such diverse topics as the Astor Place riots (which were caused by rival performances of Shakespeare), the birth of the clown as an American type who commented on politics, the sexualization of popular entertainment, the appropriation of African-American culture for white audiences, the regendering of popular culture after women's suffrage and many others, Carlyon has produced a masterful work of cultural and theater criticism that advances the literature as well as it entertains. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

Dan Rice, a 19th-century American circus entertainer, was one of the country's first nationally known humorists. He climbed from poverty to wealth and celebrity, leaving New York and finding success in the Midwest and South. First-time author Carlyon has fashioned the first scholarly account of Rice, which is both a biography and a historical account of circus life in the 1800s. A former clown with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus who also holds a Ph.D. in theater, Carlyon brings a unique perspective to the task. He organizes the book chronologically, recounting in detail Rice's successes, failures, struggles, and adventures. At times, Carlyon's fascination with his subject overshadows his critical eye, and the generalist may be overwhelmed. Still, this is a well-researched and informative study that will delight connoisseurs of American theater and entertainment. Recommended for larger public libraries, academic libraries, and specialized Americana collections. David Potash, Baruch Coll., New YorkCopyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

David Carlyon's Dan Rice: The Most Famous Man You've Never Heard Of is a difficult book to rate.

On the one hand, it doesn't succeed as a biography in that its subject, Dan Rice, never quite comes into focus. But on the other hand, the book provides a highly valuable insight into the times Dan Rice lived in, from the years leading up to the Civil War, the Civil War itself, and the decades following the Civil War. Carlyon does an excellent job of showing the problems circuses and entertainers faced in these tumultuous years and, significantly, how the very nature of entertainment and audiences changed dramatically over this period."As America grew, its business and pleasure became less direct. The new business vehicle, the corporation, after all, is a theory -- an abstract 'corpus' or body - endowed with limited liability to take the financial risk of business from the shoulders of real, unabstract people. (Some believed that corporations were immoral for eliminating personal responsibility.) The site of work was a similar abstraction. Where workers had formerly engaged in a task together, functions were increasingly scattered among far-flung venues, places and times. Suppliers, buyers, laborers, managers, and financiers might operate in different places, unknown to each other personally. The same shift was taking place in performance. Its work had once been done over the footlights, the antebellum performance created jointly by the performer and the audience, that paradoxically intimate community of strangers. No one mastered that connection better than Rice. But the site was changing. With audiences less engaged, a new creature, the director, rehearsed and announced the meanings of plays before performance, while critics judged afterwards whether it worked -- and benefactors gave a final, financial benediction. Quieter, less engaged audiences were also less secure in their tastes, so they deferred to those experts. Reputations that had flourished in the daily interplay with audiences increasingly depended on what would be called marketing (which employed techniques borrowed from circus). The fact that Rice placed himself daily before the people for their judgement mattered less now than Barnum's publicity machine."With regard to Dan Rice the man, the book is informative, very well illustrated, and yet frustratingly inadequate. Carlyon does tell you almost everything there is to know in terms of the events of Dan Rice's life - the who's, what's, when's and where's of the man; it is in the why's and how's that it falls short. The core problem is that for a man who made his fame as a clown, humorist and circus man, the book fails to show why he was so popular, i.e. what it was about him that made his brand of humor stand head and shoulders above all others. That in essence is where the book as biography falls short: we are _told_ a great deal about Dan Rice, but only rarely are we _shown_ what made Dan Rice who he was. The book could have used more glimpses of Rice's humor such as this one:"Rice settled an account with a three-dollar bill, but the money was returned with the message: 'This note is counterfeit, please send another.' Replying a few months later, Rice apologized for the delay, saying he had been unable till now to find another counterfeit three-dollar

bill, but he hoped the one he now enclosed would suit, professing at the same time his inability to discover what the objection was to the other, which he thought as good a counterfeit as he ever saw."What Carlyon does extremely well, however, is to bring to life the cultural and political environment of the times and how both affected the realm of public entertainment, particularly in the pre-civil war years as divisions between North and South became sharper and more hostile. Being popular in the South could make one suspect in the North and vice versa. Carlyon also, in the course of laying out the ups and downs of Rice's career (of which there were many), the particular difficulties of circuses as a business and the unique risks involved (Rice lost a star horse to pneumonia after a foolish swimming dare, a trained rhino to a river crossing, an entire troup of horses to a fire, and other calamities). Not to mention the possibilities of physical violence. Of particular interest was the section dealing with the the Astor Place Riot of 1849 where over twenty people were killed when a mob besieged the Astor Place Opera House in New York City because they didn't like the lead actor's interpretation of MacBeth!Overall, I would have to say that the definitive biography of Dan Rice remains to be written. But as a reference to the problems of entertainers in general and circuses in particular during the times, and the dramatic changes in public attitudes that took place regarding entertainment and audience behavior, this book is very much worth reading.

Bernie Rhodenbarr is a great character and Block's writing is seamless and fun. There is never a dull moment with Bernie and one learns lots of history and culture when reading these books.

The book is full of interesting details and sidelines, yet it also allows the reader to glean broader patterns of social history.

This is a quality biography (academically), well researched and reliable, but also enjoyable to read. Its listed at 500+ pages but the text portion is 416, with a picture about every 4th page, so it's really in the 350+ range of actual text. I think the fact that Rice was an in-person spontaneous crowd entertainer of magnetic charisma, before audio/visual and scripts; it's difficult to really grasp what made him so great without seeing him in person. Reading his dialog transcripts are flat, painfully so, you had to have been there in person. I wish Carlyon had taken more artistic efforts to convey what a circus was like, what Dan was like, more time is spent on controversy and conflict with his professional peers than what actually made him so appealing. There are occasional hints of what sound like fascinating episodes in his life that never get developed. It often feels like Carlyon spent

months pouring over newspaper microfiche collections, following Dan's life through the newspaper controversies (which may very well be the only way) - but as Carlyon says, Rice knew that controversy sells! One of the strengths of the book is its examination of the changing zeitgeist of America in the 19th century - this is important to understand why an entertainer is a star one decade, and yesterdays news the next, even though nothing had changed - as Dan said one day to the crowd: "What did I do wrong?", Carlyon, through the story of Rice, does a good job of conveying the changing character and nature of America between the 1840s and 1880s. This is also vital work for any student of Mark Twain or fan of Huckleberry Finn.

Dan Rice: The Most Famous Man You've Never Heard Of is the fascinating and informative biography of a circus man whose fame became so great (seen as he was by more Americans of the time than just about anyone else) that at one point he ran for presidency of the United States. This compelling and superbly presented biography traces the life of Dan Rice, his rise in the public eye and the reasons behind his eventual descent into total obscurity. An amazing cultural history of America in the mid-eighteenth century as well as a close personal look at one flamboyant man who struggled through the roiling times, Dan Rice: The Most Famous Man You've Never Heard of is a biography especially recommended to circus buffs, as well as students of 19th century American life, culture, and politics!

Indispensable for any fan of circus or clowning andimportant and highly intriguing for anyone interestedin the evolution of American popular entertainment,DAN RICE: THE MOST FAMOUS MAN YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OFis an exemplary biography.Culled from an unbelievable amount of research, this isthe story of the rise and fall of one of the acknowledgedmasters and true geniuses of American circus comedy. Itcuts through the mythology and humbug to give you the farmore interesting story of a man who embodied his era androse to a level of national prominence that few comedians(let alone circus clowns) ever come close to.Even if you have never heard of Dan Rice, you will find thisbook an absolutely fascinating read from start to finish.If you love the American circus and it's clowns, this bookis a little slice of heaven. -- EXCELSIOR!

Just as the clever subtitle says, not many people know who Dan Rice is. What a shame! I was one of those new to Dan Rice but Carlyon (himself a modern day Dan Rice) does an excellent job of bring this public figure to life and makes you realize the major role he played in the entertainment, political, and social canvas of the 19th century.

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