



## The “Miracle Worker” and the Transcendentalist

Annie Sullivan, Franklin Sanborn, and the Education of Helen Keller

David Wagner

*“A remarkable account of the clash over the education of Helen Keller. Weaving together the personal stories of Harvard-educated Franklin Sanborn with that of poorhouse immigrant Annie Sullivan, and the multi-handicapped Helen Keller, he places their lives within the larger histories of reform, social change, and social conflict. Wagner not only provides a compelling account of battles over the treatment of disabilities, he embeds them in the changing world of Yankees and immigrants, of Boston Brahmins and Irish paupers, of radicals, progressives and politicians. Wagner’s mastery of reform efforts on behalf of the poor and disabled make this book as informative as it is engrossing.”*

—Richard D. Brown, University of Connecticut

*“Many books have been written about Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan Macy, but none to my knowledge have focused on the role that class, ethnicity, gender and disability played in the lives of these famous women. By closely examining the politics and gender issues of the late 19th century and early 20th, Wagner forcefully reminds us of how atypical their lives were and how they transcended expectations of what women could accomplish and the lives they could lead.”*

—Helen Selsdon, American Federation of the Blind

*“Realistic, honest, and straightforward, The ‘Miracle Worker’ and the Transcendentalist is a ‘must have’ addition to the collections of all types of libraries.”*

—Kim Charlson, Director,

Braille & Talking Book Library, Perkins School for the Blind

Up to the present, Helen Keller and her famous teacher, Annie Sullivan, have consistently appeared near the top of lists of best-known American women. But few Americans know much about the history of how Anne Sullivan, once a pauper in a large Massachusetts poorhouse, came to her

role as the “miracle worker” who taught the deaf and blind Helen Keller. Nor do most people know how controversial the education of Helen Keller by Annie Sullivan was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Leading philanthropists, for example, attacked both Sullivan and Keller for more than twenty years.

Portraying the contrasting lives of Sullivan and Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, a prominent transcendentalist and abolitionist, and the founder of many national organizations during the era, this book sheds new light on the ethnic, religious, and class tensions that haunted the notoriety of Sullivan and the gender and disability expectations that affected the public reception of both Sullivan and Keller. The book places into historical context the Anglo-Saxon reformers exemplified by Sanborn who, on the one hand, saved Sullivan from the poorhouse, but who ultimately could not accept Sullivan’s hero status. While highlighting the story of Sullivan, Keller, and Sanborn, Wagner also seeks to shed light on the Gilded Age and Progressive-Era America, in which battles over class, ethnicity, gender, and disability were fought by both genteel—and more belligerent—means.

**David Wagner** is Professor of Sociology and Social Work at the University of Southern Maine. His recent book, *The Poorhouse: America’s Forgotten Institution* was reviewed by the *Journal of American History* and *American Historical Review*. He is the author of many other books, including *Ordinary People: In and Out of Poverty in the Gilded Age* (Paradigm 2008).

184 pp., 6 x 9

Paperback Available May 2012: 978-1-59451-937-6, \$29.95

Hardcover Available Now: 978-1-59451-936-9, \$100.00

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