



The Invention of Celebrity

Antoine Lilti

Lynn Jeffress, Translator

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Lilti's project illustrates commonalities in human fixations, even across gaps of centuries.

The concept of celebrity is not a recent phenomenon, as Antoine Lilti shows in *The Invention of Celebrity*, a merry dance through the annals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Delving into the lives of luminaries such as Lord Byron and Voltaire, Lilti lays out an impressive and informative landscape of celebrity culture that predates the age of the Internet and blockbuster films. He challenges those who bemoan modern society's worship of celebrities and offers a historian's perspective on the origins of the spectacle.

Though the book acknowledges that historians are often blamed for retroactively seeking answers and evidence that may not exist in the past, he successfully defends his engrossing contribution to the conversation surrounding celebrity.

The work separates the concept of celebrity from that of glory—which is usually granted posthumously—and reputation. Celebrity, Lilti argues, is dependent upon the public's interest in people not for their work, but for their personal lives.

Romanticism in particular is shown to have cultivated the idea that a person's works should primarily give pleasure to the audience, and as long as that is accomplished, objective artistic standards need not be as weighty. The wider public, rather than an individual personality, became the arbiter of culture.

In keeping with the idea that celebrity did not spring up suddenly in the last few decades, Lilti notes occasions on which a market for celebrity merchandise grew around individuals such as Benjamin Franklin. Engravings of portraits can be found not only on walls but on cups. Similarly, fanatics existed long before fan sites and forums, and they were attracted to the gossip found in newspapers and in conversation.

A scholarly yet accessible project, *The Invention of Celebrity* illustrates commonalities in human fixations, even across gaps of centuries, and beckons its audience to step outside the narrow confines of contemporary spaces and times.

MEAGAN LOGSDON (July/August 2017)

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