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#### Recommended Citation

Robert C. Bannister. (1999). "Sumner, William Graham". *American National Biography*. Volume 21, 147-149. DOI: 10.1093/anb/9780198606697.article.1400611  
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# Sumner, William Graham

(30 October 1840–12 April 1910)

Robert C. Bannister

<https://doi.org/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.article.1400611>

**Published in print:** 1999

**Published online:** February 2000

**Sumner, William Graham** (30 October 1840–12 April 1910), economist and sociologist, was born in Paterson, New Jersey, the son of Thomas Sumner, an English artisan who emigrated from Lancashire in 1836, and Sarah Graham. When Sumner was eight, his mother died, leaving him and two siblings in the care of a stepmother whose preference for parsimony over affection left a legacy in William's renowned personal austerity. Although not formally educated, his father championed free trade and temperance but was otherwise contemptuous of what his son later termed the "gospel of gush." After a lifetime of seeking his fortune without success, Thomas Sumner died in 1881 almost as poor as when he arrived, a model for the "forgotten man" of one of Sumner's best-known essays.

After graduating from Hartford's public high school, Sumner attended Yale University on funds saved by his frugal grandmother and graduated in 1863. There he mastered the prescribed curriculum of classics, science, and philosophy while enjoying the extracurricular world of eating clubs, the debating society, and finally Skull and Bones. In Bones, he met several lifelong friends through whose efforts he obtained money for a Civil War draft substitute and overseas study, eventual support for his appointment to the Yale faculty, and, three decades later, funds for a European sabbatical.

From 1863 to 1866 Sumner prepared for the Episcopalian clergy at Geneva, Göttingen, and Oxford before returning to Yale as a classics tutor (1866–1869). For a time, his religious views were in flux. After having converted temporarily from his parents' Anglicanism to Congregationalism, he dabbled briefly with the rationalism of German Higher Criticism before being returned to Anglicanism by his studies at Oxford and the appeals of his American friends. Ordained as an Episcopalian priest in July 1869, he served briefly as editor of the *Living Church*, entering Anglican church politics, which were at the time torn by High and Low Church factions, the first stressing dogma and tradition, the second, evangelical conversion. Sumner embraced a moderate Broad Church position, more open to reason and science. As minister of the Church of the Redeemer in Morristown, New Jersey (1870–1872), he struggled in weekly sermons with the conflicts of religion and science, tradition and progress, voicing two contradictory impulses that resurfaced in one form or other in his later work: an instinctive commitment to individual freedom coupled with a sense that history and social institutions provide a necessary check on the "progress" that was rapidly transforming his world.

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In September 1872 Sumner returned to Yale as professor of political economy, where he joined the reformist “Young Yale” movement, opposing traditional classroom recitation and supporting increased alumni representation on the Yale Corporation. During the seventies, he participated in politics, serving as New Haven alderman (1873–1876) and, in the fall of 1877, on the electoral commission to investigate fraud in New Orleans during the 1876 presidential election. Profoundly disillusioned by both experiences, he later confined his political activities to a long and distinguished tenure on the Connecticut State Board of Education (1882–1910).

Meanwhile, Sumner established a reputation as a champion of laissez-faire liberal capitalism. In *A History of American Currency* (1874) and related articles, he defended a sound currency against those who supported the monetarization of silver. In 1878 he turned his attention to labor unrest, producing the first of many essays on labor and strikes that appeared in the *Independent*, the *Forum*, and other leading journals over the next two decades. Ambivalent toward these instruments of industrial warfare, he viewed labor unions as harmful monopolies while conceding that they provided workers useful information and built morale. Although strikes usually failed, they also served to test prevailing wage levels. In *Protectionism: The -ism that Teaches that Waste Makes Wealth* (1885) and in *Lectures on the History of Protection* (1877, repr. 1886, 1888), he argued that the tariff, although ostensibly a levy on overseas trade, is actually a tax to benefit some Americans over others. By the late 1880s, disturbed by the power of the new “trusts,” Sumner shifted his attack to the emerging “plutocracy,” a concept that expressed both his middle-class fear of industrial combination and his dislike of vulgar wealth.

During the early 1880s Sumner gained national attention when Yale president Noah Porter objected to his use of Herbert Spencer’s *Study of Sociology* (1873) as a textbook, as Porter considered the author to be both atheistic and unscientific. This battle for academic freedom Sumner won following wide publicity. In 1883 he published *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other*, a vigorous attack on mounting calls for state action to regulate the economy and to alleviate social problems. Together, these developments contributed to his later reputation as the age’s leading “social Darwinist,” who misappropriated the rhetoric of biology to defend a social “natural selection” in a callous “struggle for existence.” In reality, these charges distorted Sumner’s position and underestimated the complexity of his quest to find a substitute for history and tradition in science.

Sumner’s literary productivity declined somewhat in the nineties, following a near-collapse in health and a two-year stay in Europe recovering. On 16 January 1899, he delivered perhaps his most often reprinted speech, “The Conquest of the United States by Spain,” warning that the United States in annexing new territories would be adopting the very values it criticized in its opponent.

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In *Folkways* (1906) Sumner secured his reputation as one of the leading American sociologists of his generation, in the process contributing the terms “folkways” and “mores” to the national lexicon. As individuals attempt to satisfy basic needs, he argued, societies develop folkways as the best methods of achieving their ends. Folkways gain moral sanction as mores through a process of comparison and reflection. “Good” and “bad” have no meaning outside of them. Since those mores that command the support of the most powerful groups survive, “[n]othing but might has ever made right, and ... nothing but might makes right now.”

But, Sumner hastened to add, there is an important difference between a “posterior” and an “anterior” view of the matter. Although “might makes right” when events are viewed after the fact, consideration of the rightness of an action before it is taken in no way depends on the amount of force that may be brought to bear. Science, applied to the study of history (the sociologists’ laboratory) provides principles to be applied in advance of an action (anterior) by demonstrating the superiority of one set of values over others. Invoking science as a bulwark to tradition, Sumner turned the tables on reformers who employed it to challenge older values, addressing again the issue of tradition versus progress with which he had wrestled throughout his career.

As a teacher Sumner enjoyed the acclaim of generations of Yale undergraduates. However, his sociological legacy as measured in graduate students was modest, in part because of Yale’s failure to support sociology adequately, in part because his chief disciple Albert G. Keller focused his energies on an excessively faithful elaboration of his mentor’s principles (published posthumously as *The Science of Society* [1927]), rather than on the expansion of graduate training. Among Sumner’s graduate students, the most successful also repudiated his rigid devotion to *laissez-faire*, for example, Henry Pratt Fairchild, an avowed socialist best known for *The Melting Pot Mistake* (1926), and Frederick E. Lumley, who advocated increased “social controls.” Sumner’s call for a more objective sociology nonetheless found a sympathetic hearing from a number of sociologists later prominent in the 1920s, including Robert E. Park, William F. Ogburn, F. Stuart Chapin, and Luther L. Bernard.

For all his academic fame, Sumner jealously guarded his private life. In 1871 he married Jeannie Elliott, the daughter of a New York merchant, with whom he had three sons (one died in infancy). He rarely spoke of his wife and left little testimony concerning his marriage, but he celebrated the monogamous family in his later writings as a bulwark of morality and civilized values. Although he suffered a debilitating stroke in 1907, his sense of personal responsibility and his lifelong devotion to duty never wavered. Elected president of the American Sociological Society for 1910–1911, he collapsed after braving a snowstorm in New York to deliver the presidential address in December 1909 and died several months later in New Haven.

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Sumner's voluminous papers are in the Historical Manuscripts and Archives of the Sterling Library and the Beineke Rare Book Library, both at Yale. The most important biographical studies are Harris E. Starr, *William Graham Sumner* (1925); Donald C. Bellomy, *The Moulding of an Iconoclast: William Graham Sumner, 1840–1885* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard, 1980); and Bruce Curtis, *William Graham Sumner* (1981), which contains a selected bibliography of Sumner's works. Albert G. Keller, *Reminiscences (Mainly Personal) of William Graham Sumner* (1933), provides an informal portrait by his leading disciple. Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944), presents the classic view of Sumner's social Darwinism. This interpretation is challenged in Robert C. Bannister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth* (1979). For Sumner's religious views, see Merwin A. Sheketoff, *William Graham Sumner: Social Christian 1869–1872* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard, 1961). Sumner's place in the history of American sociology is assessed in Roscoe C. Hinkle, *Founding Theory of American Sociology* (1980), and Bannister, *Sociology and Scientism* (1987).

Two collections of Sumner's works are Stow Persons, ed., *Social Darwinism: Selected Essays of William Graham Sumner* (1963), and Bannister, ed., *On Liberty, Society, and Politics: The Essential Essays of William Graham Sumner* (1992). Obituaries are in *World's Work* 20 (1910): 13290–92, the *Nation* 90 (1910): 394, and the *Yale Review* 19 (1910): 1–12.

### See also

Porter, Noah (1811-1892), minister, college professor and president, and philosopher

Park, Robert Ezra (1864-1944), sociologist and student of cities and race relations

Ogburn, William Fielding (1886-1959), sociologist

Chapin, Francis Stuart (1888-1974), sociologist

Bernard, Luther Lee (1881-1951), sociologist

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