



Idle Threats: Men and the Limits of Productivity in Nineteenth Century America (America and the Long 19th Century)

Andrew Lyndon Knighton

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The 19th century witnessed an explosion of writing about unproductivity, with the exploits of various idlers, loafers, and “gentlemen of refinement” capturing the imagination of a country that was deeply ambivalent about its work ethic. *Idle Threats* documents this American obsession with unproductivity and its potentials, while offering an explanation of the profound significance of idle practices for literary and cultural production.

While this fascination with unproductivity memorably defined literary characters from Rip Van Winkle to Bartleby to George Hurstwood, it also reverberated deeply through the entire culture, both as a seductive ideal and as a potentially corrosive threat to upright, industrious American men. Drawing on an impressive array of archival material and multifaceted literary and cultural sources, *Idle Threats* connects the question of unproductivity to other discourses concerning manhood, the value of art, the allure of the frontier, the usefulness of knowledge, the meaning of individuality, and the experience of time, space, and history. Andrew Lyndon Knighton offers a new way of thinking about the largely unacknowledged “productivity of the unproductive,” revealing the incalculable and sometimes surprising ways in which American modernity transformed the relationship between subjects and that which is most intimate to them: their own activity.

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