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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

Review ESSAY

Ordinary People and Everyday Life. Edited by James B. Gardner and George Rollie Adams. (Nashville, Tennessee: The American Association for State and Local History, 1983.)

From time to time, American historians reexamine their craft. *Ordinary People and Everyday Life* reveals that, once again, they are engaged in the healthy tendency to guard against any fixed and final mode of studying, researching, and interpreting the past. This volume, the end product of a series of five seminars on historical scholarship sponsored by the American Association for State and Local History in 1980 and 1981, contains the reflections of several prominent historians whose collective efforts capture the latest drift of historical interests and research.

The "new social history," as the latest chapter in American historiography is called, focuses on the lives of people who traditionally have been overlooked by historical investigators. Traditional historical emphasis on institutional history, the history of ideas, and major political and economic events has yielded to emphasis on "the human side of history."

The new history sets its sights on the exploration, description, and analysis of ordinary people — their beliefs, values, behaviors, activities, and artifacts. It attempts to provide a panoramic view of the lives of the "masses," the "common folk," and the "inarticulate," and show how they infused their lives with meaning and responded and adapted to various changes in their environment. It seeks to write the history of the nation "from the bottom up," and from the perspective and experience of the multitudes of people whose lives have remained obscure to us because the scholarship of "elitist" historians was, consciously or unconsciously, limited in scope, content, and perspective.

The inevitable result of the new direction in history is to dramatically enlarge the terrain investigated by historians. The study of the social and cultural lives of children, youths, the elderly, women, workers, blacks, ethnics, urban dwellers, and farmers is yielding a new rich, varied, and dynamic view of America's past. One now finds historical queries and investigations pertaining to demographic behavior, social mobility, the formation of ghettoes, ethnic farming practices, evangelicalism, political behavior, child rearing practices, leisure-time activities, and sex roles and relationships, to mention but a few of the desparate and seemingly infinite number of themes and topics spawned by the new social history.

An inexhaustible fund of data nestled away in a variety of sources holds the record of ordinary people and ordinary lives. Manuscript census schedules, city directories, police records, tax ledgers, wills, diaries, vital statistics, precinct registration records, credit rating reports, and organization membership rosters are eagerly sought by the new breed of historians. Included in the vast array of source materials used to reconstruct the lives and experiences of ordinary people are material artifacts. Clearly, the daily routines and activities of people working, eating, sleeping, playing, traveling, dressing, socializing, advertising, and communicating take tangible expression in the form of material artifacts, which, in the hands of skillful individuals, can be used to mirror the lives of ordinary people.

The new interest and activities of the historians, fueled by a continuing effort to bridge the gap between history and the family of social scientists, has produced a history which is increasingly interdisciplinary, quantitative, and theoretical. Further, because the new social history is more oriented toward a behavioral approach and to processes and trends rather than to events, ideas, or biographies, the new historiography splashes across traditional historical time frames such as "the Age of Jackson," "the Civil War Era," or the New Deal. The workplace, recreation and entertainment, sex roles, sexual behavior, family life, socialization practices, deviance, migration patterns, assimilation of immigrants, political behavior,

social class structure, manners, morals, political behavior, diets, clothing, tools, architecture, industrialization, and urbanization each have their own history which transcends traditional historical periodizations.

While the explorations into the new social history can be traced to the nineteenth century, it was only in the last two decades that a discernible thrust in that direction surfaced. The new interest in ordinary people and ordinary lives can be traced to foreign influences, particularly to French social historians of the *Annales* tradition, which made its subject matter the history of values, attitudes, and behavior (mentalities), and to English historiography, most notably the influence of E. P Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1964). Another influence was the political turbulence of the 1960's — a period that spawned a variety of social movements, particularly among Blacks, women, and the poor. The period of radical protest reminded the nation that the gates of opportunity remained closed for many who were "voiceless" in political and economic structures dominated by "elites." It was a period, too, when counter-culture values forced many to ponder about basic American values, behaviors, and institutions and to question the relevancy of history.

A glance at some of the essays contained in *Ordinary People and Everyday Life* reveals how our views of the past have been challenged, modified, or enriched. For example, we are informed by Howard N. Rabinowitz, in "Race, Ethnicity, and Cultural Pluralism in American History," that racial, immigrant, and ethnic groups were not simply chameleons — dependent and helpless in their new environments. Their cultural uniqueness did not simply "melt" away. Often portrayed as uprooted, marginal, alienated, disorganized, and oppressed, such groups, as the new literature reveals, were active agents in shaping and controlling their own lives. Phenomena such as chain migrations, group settlements, and even reverse discrimination among immigrants, for example, raise questions concerning the extent to which improvements were assimilated. Whether one is writing about Italians or southern Blacks, the

new researchers of race, ethnicity, and immigration have raised the importance of continuity of cultures, institutions, and communities in understanding the experiences and responses of ordinary people as they confronted new environments and impersonal faces.

In "Workers and Work in America: The New Labor History," David Brody reminds us that workers were also bearers of culture who brought a mix of values, beliefs, and customs to the workplace. The study of the cultural traditions of workers and workers' interactions with larger, impersonal forces of technology, industrialization, and evolving business structures and practices provide a richer and deeper appreciation of the history of the working class.

Labor history has expanded beyond institutional histories, which described and analyzed labor unions and their politics, philosophies, strategies, and relationship to the law. Such topics tended to ignore the rich and broader social and cultural backdrop against which workers labored and lived. Indeed, to study evangelical religion among the Lynn shoemakers, the craft traditions of the Danbury hatters, or the role of ethnic groups in the local politics of the Knights of Labor yields a different understanding and profile of workers in America than that generated by the examination of the proceedings, structure, and philosophy of the American labor movement.

Kathleen Neils Conzen's "The New Urban History: Defining the Field," reveals the expansive reach of the new historians as they touch every facet of urbanization and urban existence. Public health, transportation, communication, schools, churches, city councils, police, suburbs, public health, social control, social structure, social mobility, racial and ethnic communities, and their consequences for ordinary urban residents fall within the broader horizons of the new social historians. Whether they are busily seeking to measure the degree of social mobility among American workers, questioning whether racial ghettoes had their origins in prejudice or in the rural origins of their inhabitants, assessing the impact of the

factory system on artisan culture, or tracing the policy evolution of urban institutions, historians have broadened the study of urban history to explain life within urban settings.

Ordinary People and Everyday Life is a comprehensive summary of the new field of social history and its status. Definitional and methodological problems still plague the field, but there is little doubt that the greater use of the analytical tools of the various social sciences applied to social and cultural materials of the past is producing intellectual ferment in the profession. The tendency of the new social historians, however, is to treat a small slice of history in depth, particularly at the community level. This, along with the broad range of subject matter investigated by historians, may so "Balkanize" the field of history that one may wonder what the fragments of research will mean in a larger sense.

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Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England. By Hal S. Barron. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1984. Pp. xiii, 184. Cloth. $24.95.)

Hal Barron's history of nineteenth-century Chelsea, Vermont, is a welcome addition to a small but rapidly growing body of work on the "new" rural history. *Those Who Stayed Behind* should have the same impact on historians of nineteenth-century American that the works of Philip J. Greven and Kenneth A. Lockridge on Andover and Dedham, Massachusetts, had on colonial historians. All three use detailed studies of local history to assist in answering questions on regional development.

Barron asks several important questions: Was the rapid nineteenth-century change in farm production and the commercialization of agriculture accompanied by a revolution in rural social relationships? Do the well-defined urban patterns of change and continuity have parallels in rural communities, and how did change in rural areas affect the nation?

The story of Chelsea is one of a rural community moving through a series of stages. Between its founding in the 1780s and the end of the settlement phase in 1820, population growth was very rapid. By the 1840s the population had stabilized, and the decades thereafter show a gradual decline to the end of the century. Traditionally New England historians have described this latter period as one of "decline and decay." Barron disagrees. Instead of economic and social stagnation, he sees "stabilization." For example, he finds no decline in real estate values or in the number of farms. By 1850 Chelsea had all the "normal" characteristics of an older agrarian community that had reached its maximum capacity for economic expansion within its limited geographic boundaries. Socially, this stabilization of economic growth contributed to a more tranquil, homogeneous community.

Thus Barron finds no social revolution accompanying the revolution in farm production and agricultural commercialization. Chelsea displayed a remarkably strong sense of continuity of older values and social institutions. There are few if any parallels between urban patterns of rapid growth and Chelsea's older agrarian pattern of stabilization. Indeed, from the perspective of Chelsea, late nineteenth-century American history would be characterized by homogenization and social tranquility, a dramatic contrast to the more common view of instability and rapid change.

What can Barron's history of Chelsea, Vermont, tell someone interested in Maine's history? Did Maine's older agrarian communities experience similar economic stabilization and social continuity? I suspect that Barron would say "yes." I, on the other hand, must suspend judgment pending similar studies of Maine agrarian communities. Barron's attempt to persuade the reader that Chelsea is "typical" of many older New

England agrarian communities leaves me unconvinced. There are too many potential differences stemming from northern New England's terrain, soils, climates, ethnic settlement patterns, and agricultural innovations to extrapolate the history of an entire geographic region from one case study. The value of Barron's book for Maine historians is that it provides a benchmark by which to measure future studies of Maine agrarian communities and provides an admirable example of how to study and write local history. I strongly recommend that those interested in the rural and agrarian history of Maine and New England include *Those Who Stayed Behind* on their reading lists.

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JUST RELEASED:

revised edition of John E. Frost's

MAINE GENEALOGY: A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL GUIDE

published by the Maine Historical Society
485 Congress Street, Portland, Maine 04111

This new (1985) edition of Frost's 1977 bibliographical guide contains major additions gathered at the end of each section. The updates enable the reader to review efficiently the most important advances in the field since 1977.