

*Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life*, by David Glassberg. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001. xvii, 269 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$50.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

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In the past twenty years, historians increasingly voiced concerns about the general public's lack of historical knowledge and appreciation of the past. Some focused on the history taught in the nation's primary and secondary schools, battling over history standards. Others bemoaned the existence of a "historicidal" culture that fostered a disregard for history and a bland or distorted presentation of the past (see Michael Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* [1996]). The century ended with discussions of Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen's *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (1998), which suggested that academic presentations of history failed to spark the public's imagination and that the apparent enthusiasm for the past often favored experience over content and local and family connections over national context.

David Glassberg's study continues this conversation but frames it differently. Rather than attacking the public for ignorance or castigating an out-of-touch professoriat, Glassberg suggests that Americans interact with the past on a daily basis. They place occurrences in sequence, look to the past for explanation, and commemorate people and events. The public's fascination with historical topics in the public media as well as high visitation figures at history museums and historic parks further suggest the allure that the past holds for the public. After identifying and analyzing the qualities associated with this interest in history, Glassberg argues that people possess a "sense of history" that informs their identity. At its most elementary level, this sense of history is a dynamic interaction between the private and the public past and memory that combines location with the evocation of feeling. National history, its content and context, are not jettisoned; rather, it is understood within the context of the local and familial.

Although politics, popular culture, and place are perhaps not the only qualities defining the public's sense of history, Glassberg focuses on them as central to the encounters Americans have with the past. He examines how Americans have developed and understood a sense of history, how they have passed this sense to succeeding generations, and how its meanings have changed over time. His chapters represent vignettes detailing this sense at particular times and places. With Glassberg as our guide, we visit a community war memorial, enjoy a

parade celebrating a city's past, reflect on the presentation of the past on television, explore local identification and significance, and grapple with issues related to community definition, character, and history.

Glassberg concludes with a summary of the ways Americans have interacted with history in the twentieth century as well as with some reflections on the relationship between the popular sense of history and the historical profession. What has been important to citizens as they have confronted the past over the course of the twentieth century? Underlying much of their activity is the importance of place and memory, sets of beliefs about the past that inform our understanding of the present. As dynamic entities, places combine with memory to create a canvas upon which the public defines as well as contemplates history. Regardless of the emphasis on local and personal elements of the past in creating this canvas, Glassberg finds that the concern with the small picture actually represents one way the public connects with larger national stories, the resulting tension between the small and large community highlighting the ties that bind the two together.

This study is most satisfying when it discusses the ways Americans have developed and demonstrated a sense of history. It offers far less in its discussion of the relationship between the popular use and pursuit of the past and the historical profession. Glassberg's hope that "understanding how Americans have approached the past will place a new generation of historians in a better position than their professional forebears to reach the public with their ideas" (210) is commendable. Yet two decades of angst about the gap between the history pursued in the academy and that engaged in by the public has created few points of intersection in the parallel universes the two groups inhabit. Until historians' training—their departmental environment and academic mentors—suggests that participating in the larger public as citizens as well as historians is the norm rather than the exception and that the public looks to history to help understand central issues in the American experience, little will change. For like-minded historians, Glassberg's excursion into the public's engagement with the past should stimulate more exploration into the ways the past informs our present and future. For the public interested in history, *Sense of History* will deepen an appreciation of how time and place shape the ways we address important questions in our lives.

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