

Remembering Ahanagan: Storytelling in a Family's Past, by Richard White. New York: Hill and Wang, 1998. 303 pp. Illustrations, map, genealogical chart. \$24.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY MYRON A. MARTY, DRAKE UNIVERSITY

It is tempting to blur distinctions between memory and history, even to use the terms interchangeably. We speak, for example, of history as the collective memory of a people. We draw on people's memories, on the stories they tell, and we call their words "oral histories." Memoirs and autobiographies rely heavily, sometimes exclusively, on memories, and we think of them as works of history.

In *Remembering Ahanagan*, Richard White, a professor of history at the University of Washington, offers a corrective. The stories he gathers and examines, most of them told by his mother and her Irish kinfolk, are fascinating. So are the new ones he constructs by melding her stories with the findings of his research. The book's principal merit, however, lies in the author's astute musings on the interplay between his mother's stories and his findings rooted in historical documents. Memories, he says, make unexamined, dangerous claims. They are living things from the past, "vessels that float on the seas of the past," but they can be sunk or redirected by dead, unremembered things preserved on paper. As memories live on, he demonstrates by examples, they encounter history—"a dead thing brought to new life . . . fragments of the past dead and gone, resurrected by historians." Consequently, like Frankenstein's monster, history "threatens our versions of ourselves." "I live," writes White, "in this junkyard of the past. I haul pieces into the present, and there they confront my mother's memories" (21).

Sara White's stories recall her childhood as Sarah Walsh in Ireland. Many draw, in turn, on stories she has heard, stories passed from generation to generation. There are stories of conflicts between the Irish and the British, of ghosts and fairies, of good times and bad, of kinfolk, friends, and foes. Some of her stories recall her experiences as a sixteen-year-old immigrant and her acclimation to life in Chicago. Few, though, tell of her marriage to Harry White, a Harvard graduate whom she met when he was in the army during World War II. Even the untold stories of her life with this son of Russian Jewish immigrants, Richard White infers, tell stories.

The author calls his mother "a creator, maintainer, and repairer of relationships, . . . the sum of her relations." Her stories, he says, "are about people she knew, about places she has lived, about the relations she established with the world" (16). To make sense of her stories, he traveled with her in 1994 to her homeland, there to meet the people

she had left behind, see the places she described, and hear from others stories like those he had heard from her. To understand his mother and her stories, he had to grasp the local mythologies, master the landscape, and examine Irish culture from critical perspectives. To authenticate or question her stories, he compared them with stories he heard from others and checked them against facts and chronologies discovered in archival records.

Richard White could not do all this without telling stories himself, as he creates both history and memories. These stories, too, are fascinating, although at times they require the reader to swim upstream in a flow of names and relationships that require a familiarity not easily conveyed on a printed page. Every now and then, however, he offers insights that reward readers' efforts. For example, reflecting on stories he has heard, he admits that he had been slow to understand that in memories "the past is a set of ruins, of ghosts on the roads, of paths worn across the field by feet long dead. The exact order of the creation of these things, or even who created them, does not much matter. What matters is how all these remnants relate to one another in the present." Even so, he sides with history, for "history is most interested in what makes no immediate sense because this is what most clearly distinguishes the past from the present" (49).

If the abundance of unfamiliar names and places in the stories of Sara's Irish past is difficult to manage, the Chicago years pose even more difficulties. The author's thesis is well established early in the book, so it may be natural for readers' interest to flag, as mine did, in the latter parts. More detailed genealogical charts and an index would have been helpful. So would editorial trimming of the redundancies that seemed to increase in frequency as the book progressed.

Nonetheless, the lessons White teaches about the distinctions between memory and history are taught well. The integrity of the discipline of history requires that they be learned.

Salt Lantern: Traces of an American Family, by William Towner Morgan. American Land and Life Series. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997. xx, 173 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, appendixes, index. \$29.95 cloth, \$15.95 paper.

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In his foreword to *Salt Lantern*, Wayne Franklin comments on the importance of attending to one's memories, and he describes William

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