

Keepers of Our Past: Local Historical Writing in the United States, 1820s-1930s, by David J. Russo. Contributions in American History 129. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988. xiii, 282 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY DAVID E. KYVIG, UNIVERSITY OF AKRON

David J. Russo established his credentials as a thoughtful observer of historians' work on localized topics with an earlier book, *Families and Communities: A New Look at American History* (1974). In that volume, he focused on the contemporary state of historical research and writing. Russo contended that, by devoting their attention to grassroots topics, modern scholars could better illuminate the variety of American life. Communities and families, he argued, offered the best perspective for understanding the diversity and particularity of the American experience. Now in *Keepers of Our Past*, Russo explores an earlier era of historical writing. He summarizes the ways nineteenth-century nonacademic historians, amateurs, and commercial entrepreneurs dealt with a localized past. The nineteenth century stirred both a vast effort to collect and record local information and a narrow, parochial, antiquarian use of such material. Russo finds further confirmation of his earlier argument that family and community history deserves a different approach as well as more serious and careful attention than it has generally received.

Russo defines local history rather restrictively as town or city history. Thus he passes over prerevolutionary historiography largely without comment because, he argues, it focused on entire colonies, not local communities. He does not make clear why William Bradford's history of Plymouth or other classic Puritan accounts of colonial development do not fit his definition of local history. Russo sees American local historical activity — records collecting, historical society founding, and writing — as emerging in the immediate postrevolutionary years. During the same time efforts to come to terms with American nationhood, character, and identity were also beginning.

Russo concentrates on book-length community histories that appeared in substantial numbers in New England, especially Massachusetts, beginning in the 1820s. Although quite varied in their approach, almost all of the fifty-seven antebellum works he examined were descriptive accounts focusing on topography, physical description, and formal civic and religious developments. Long-standing community residents, usually members of the elite, prepared most such volumes. They were neither experienced writers nor followers of any common model. As nonanalytical recordings of selected information about a community's past, their works were purely antiquarian. They repre-

sented antiquarianism at its finest, Russo argues, because of their generally high regard for factual accuracy. But even the best early nineteenth-century local historian, John F. Watson of Philadelphia, provided no more than "a vast sprawling compendium of information."

After the Civil War, local historical writing diversified and flourished. Particularly in the towns of New England, but elsewhere throughout the country as well, enthusiasts continued to pursue the antebellum antiquarian approach. Emerging large cities spawned historians whose methods resembled town historians, but who were forced to deal with the greater complexity of the metropolis. While town histories enjoyed only limited, local circulation, these newer city histories attracted a broader audience. A few individuals went beyond the study of a single community to undertake histories of several localities. Russo sees these "repeaters" as starting to move at least some local historians away from an exclusive preoccupation with their own nearby world.

The most striking change, in an immediate sense, was the emergence of local history as a lucrative commercial venture. Commercial histories, produced by a few national firms, became widespread. Sold by advanced subscription and compiled by traveling professionals, they featured the biographies and family or business histories of subscribers. Derisively referred to as "mug books" and appropriately criticized for lack of balance and objectivity, these works did, Russo argues, bring together much information that would otherwise have been lost. They provide a reasonably useful picture of the upper levels of the local social structure, that is, those who could afford to subscribe and were inclined to be included. Urban historical encyclopedias were similar in character though larger in scale. Like earlier writing on local topics, commercial histories tended to treat each community in isolation, concentrate on progress, and avoid substantial analysis, especially of a critical nature. They epitomized, and helped tarnish, local history as history "of the successful, by the successful, for the successful."

History's late nineteenth-century evolution as an academic field, the development of a widely accepted methodology, and the formation of practitioners' associations had profound consequences for local history. At first, amateur local historians and scholarly professionals cooperated, but before long academics conveyed a sense that local history's vision was too narrow and its method too uncritical to be taken seriously. Academics wished to emphasize national development, transcendent patterns, universal experiences. Russo sees the 1930s as the decade when local history was finally supplanted by nationally focused history. Scholars of historiography might argue that the transition came earlier in the century, if not before. They would, however, no doubt agree with Russo that local history remained in low repute until the

scholarly reconsiderations of the 1960s led to the emergence of the new social history with its fusion of sophisticated methodology and locally focused investigations. In recent years, the interweaving of local and national studies that Russo has been advocating may finally be occurring.

Russo has raised, directly or indirectly, some worthwhile questions for historians of every circumstance. Why do scholars, amateur researchers, readers, and museum goers choose to focus on the topics they do? How do our individual circumstances, our relationships to our topics, and our means of communicating with others who share our interests shape our efforts? What has conditioned us to consider some topics important and others less so? How do we evaluate or make use of other historical approaches? Should we be content to be antiquarians, satisfied to heap up information about the past that has nostalgic, patriotic, or progress-affirming value? Or should we regard history as an analytical tool of broad application for the illumination of contemporary situations and choices, a tool that is only as good as it is thorough, critical, and sophisticated? While sharper definitions and more detailed analysis of individual nineteenth-century works would further stimulate discussion of these issues, David Russo has performed a service for all historians, and local historians in particular, by examining an era of great enthusiasm for local history in the United States.

America Becomes Urban: The Development of U.S. Cities and Towns, 1780-1980, by Eric H. Monkkenon. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. xvi, 332 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$25.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY LAWRENCE H. LARSEN, UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-KANSAS CITY

Eric H. Monkkenon's new book, *America Becomes Urban*, deals directly with the period 1780 to 1980, but traces the development of the American city to a complicated nonideological process that extends back thousands of years to ancient Mesopotamia. Very little in the book touches directly on Iowa. Monkkenon, a professor of history at the University of California, Los Angeles, has written extensively about the American urban police. He believes that the only way to understand the present condition of cities in the United States is to look at their historical antecedents. Unlike many urban affairs scholars, Monkkenon stresses the importance of the practical technical legal problems associated with city building. "From their corporate status cities derive a surprising array of powers. They can borrow and lend, build and destroy, expand and contract, appear and disappear. They are not inevitable physical manifestations of vague economic and social and geographical forces, but creatures — in law 'persons' — endowed by legislation with the power to act" (xii).

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