

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).

Monkkonen rejects the proposition that vague forces of technological and economic determinism have shaped modern city building. Instead, he attributes change to local residents vigorously supporting growth-oriented municipal governments. Developments occurred within the context of three eras of American city growth: a premodern era that came to a close between 1790 and 1830, which saw a continuity with European cities; a period of dynamic population and economic growth that lasted from 1870 to 1930, when cities began to work out new modes of providing services in response to urban competition; and finally a post-Great Depression time in which the innovations of the previous period led to new bureaucracies that markedly expanded services. Thousands of small cities appeared on the fringes of older ones, continuing the expansion of new significant smaller places and resulting in the decentralization of the modern metropolis.

Although Monkkonen skirts the issue, capitalistic impulses created the modern American city. The response of local governments, large and small, was related to the decisions of taxpayers and their representatives. In the late eighteenth century city governments frequently limited their roles to regulatory functions, exercising traditional police powers, and watching over economic as well as social behavior. Between 1800 and 1830 state legislatures took away or altered old city charters, restricting marketing monopolies; at the same time they granted new taxing powers, creating all sorts of new possibilities for an expansion of governmental functions. During the early stages of the railroad era, cities underwent a phased expansion, leading, as closed corporations gave way to electoral democracy, to the emerging service city. Taxpayers approved monies to establish professional police and fire departments, in response to both real and perceived threats, and voted for bond issues for transportation improvements, notably for railroad proposals. The competitive nature of urbanization forced places that wanted to succeed to expend tax money for an ever increasing number of functions, against a background of both boosterism and debt. This trend continued during the massive urbanization that followed World War Two.

Change has occurred for practical reasons, not for theoretical ones. The social control thesis that holds that cities were "Capitalist Hells" in which the main goal of the authorities was to oppress the lower classes and to prevent class revolution would appear to have little validity in studying American cities. Indeed, according to Monkkonen, "We learn that our cities are highly flexible, that they have never experienced stasis, that diffuse sprawl and blurred boundaries are their heritages, that a hustling support of private enterprise is a long tradition, and that numerous multiple and small governments have been with us from the

start. We also learn that American taxpayers have always been stingy as we tried to pass on the costs of services to the future through growth, but that we have historically been willing to create the service providing city and to indebt ourselves for infrastructural expansion, which in turn has promoted technological change" (243-44).

Monkkonen's well-researched and well-thought-out study breaks little new ground, all claims to the contrary, in relation to the "old traditional urban history" or "urban history as it was written in the 1960's," where the emphasis has been on using traditional forms of evidence to reach conclusions. However, in terms of the so-called "new urban history," with its reliance on ideology and neo-Marxism to reach mechanistic conclusions about cities, *America Becomes Urban* is startling, calling into question much of what has been written in the 1980s by New Left historians, currently in the ascendancy in urban history. As such, the book makes major contributions by adding to our knowledge of the functions of city governments and by bringing urban history back to its roots in solid historical research rather than off-the-wall particularistic ideological interpretations based on limited evidence.

Threshing in the Midwest, 1820-1940: A Study of Traditional Culture and Technological Change, by J. Sanford Rikoon. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988. ix, 214 pp. Illustrations, tables, charts, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY PATRICK NUNNALLY, COLLEGE OF ST. CATHERINE

J. Sanford Rikoon's *Threshing in the Midwest* is a fine, detailed analysis of the intersection of mechanical and social changes in the Midwest. Rikoon traces the development of threshing from preindustrial flailing and treading practices brought to this area by immigrant farmers up through the introduction of gasoline-powered combines in the mid-twentieth century. Along the way, he attends closely both to the minute details of material life and to the sweeping cultural changes that those details add up to. He skillfully blends diverse types of evidence in his analysis. He uses the conventional documents of social history such as census records along with descriptive works such as diaries and letters, and he deftly incorporates material from many oral history interviews into his overall narrative.

Threshing in the Midwest is a story of broad-based change. When settlers began to populate Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, they employed human and animal muscle power to separate grains from straw in harvesting wheat and oats. Rikoon's description of preindustrial flailing and treading provides exact descriptions of the tools used, the precise

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.