

Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century, by John Bodnar. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992. xiii, 296 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$29.95 cloth.

American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century, by David Glassberg. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990. xvii, 380 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$45.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY TOM MORAIN, LIVING HISTORY FARMS

"Since every way of seeing the world—past and present—excludes hundreds of alternatives from view, the power to define what particular version of history becomes the public history is an awesome power indeed," writes David Glassberg in the opening chapter of his study of American historical pageants (2). As Iowa begins preparations for a celebration of its first 150 years of statehood, these studies by Glassberg and John Bodnar of the way America has commemorated its historical anniversaries take on a particular timeliness.

Of the two, Bodnar's is the more general survey. He traces the evolution of public celebrations from the signing of the Declaration of Independence to the erection of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the nation's capital. The book focuses on the twentieth century, however, and happily for Iowans Bodnar draws many of his examples from the Midwest. In one chapter, he examines the changing emphases in the celebrations among Swedes, Norwegians, Mennonites, and Irish in the face of outside pressures to assimilate to "official" definitions of Americanism. In a similar way, he argues that the role of pioneers in midwestern mythology underwent a metamorphosis from "self-reliant strivers" to "self-sacrificing citizens who would place the common good over individual interests" (136). In both cases, Bodnar argues, historical memory was deliberately manipulated as national needs changed at the expense of local, vernacular attachments. In his final chapters, Bodnar traces the history of the National Park Service and the national commissions established to celebrate the Civil War centennial and the bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence. He interprets the antiwar protests and cultural radicalism of the 1970s as a resurgence of vernacular interests challenging decades of domination by government and "official" culture.

In the prologue, Bodnar uses the debate over the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to introduce the central issues with which he is

concerned. When a committee selected a monument that testified to the grief Americans felt for the losses incurred in the decade of struggle rather than one that glorified the patriotism and the courage of the soldiers, the decision provoked a heated controversy. H. Ross Perot, who had personally funded the design competition, objected to the black marble slabs with the names of American war casualties that only commemorated "the guys that died." Many appealed to President Reagan to override the committee in favor of more patriotic and nationalistic themes. Eventually, a compromise was worked out that added to the slabs with the names of the dead "an American flag," a 'heroic statue' of three soldiers from the Vietnamese conflict, and the inscription 'God Bless America' on the monument itself." Bodnar writes, "The powerful and dominant interests of patriots and nationalists could not let a text composed only by and about ordinary people and ordinary emotions stand alone" (6).

Bodnar's thesis is that government officials, business leaders, and other elites have attempted, often successfully but never entirely so, to redirect commemorative events to serve the interests of the nation, usually at the expense of local subcultures. He maintains, "By the latter part of the twentieth century public memory remains a product of elite manipulation, symbolic interaction, and contested discourse. Leaders continue to use the past to foster patriotism and civic duty, and ordinary people continue to accept, reformulate, and ignore such messages" (20). Increasingly, however, the government itself has become a major player in the struggle to define public memory. "Buttressed by periods of war and economic crises," writes Bodnar, "the political and cultural power of the nation-state grew to a point in the twentieth century when it distorted all expressions of vernacular memory" (41). Bodnar's sympathies are clearly with the vernacular. He views the struggle for control of historical symbolism as a battle between local groups, whose perceptions of events are personal and diverse, and government leaders trying to promote the national interests by manipulating "authentic" responses into "useful" ones.

In a vocabulary reminiscent of the 1970s, Bodnar at times adopts an almost melodramatic formula, pitting the genuine, authentic memories of "ordinary people" against the manipulative interests of "middle-class bureaucrats" and other governmental and business elites attempting "to influence and, therefore, distort the discussion over how the past relates to the present." He writes, "Not surprisingly, since National Park Service programs were administered by middle-class professionals, the link between the traditional

middle-class promotion of progress and patriotism was actually reinforced" (170).

A historian without Bodnar's suspicions might review the same data and come to different conclusions. That the National Park Service acquired only sites that clearly had national significance seems to startle Bodnar. With finite resources, the agency apparently chose to leave sites with local or regional appeal to local supervision. That hardly constitutes the attack on local interests that Bodnar posits. Similarly, while Bodnar's data includes examples of local groups supporting nationalistic or patriotic themes, he is most comfortable when he can cast the struggle as one between national institutions, such as the National Park Service or the Civil War Centennial Commission, and local groups. Patriotism has deep roots in the American population, as evidenced by the controversies surrounding flag burnings, the Pledge of Allegiance, and support for Desert Storm. Indeed, as Bodnar shows, patriotism can be manipulated to partisan advantage precisely because it already has a local resonance. Patriotism is not created by the Washington bureaucracy.

However, Bodnar's insights about the struggle for control of historical symbolism are stimulating. In America, what Bodnar identifies as the "official" or national perspective has in fact had a very decided ethnic cast to it. Particularly before World War II, American elites were (and are) drawn heavily from Anglo-Saxons. The ultimate measure of Anglo-Saxon dominance is that they are rarely even considered an ethnic group; instead, they are the standard against which every test of "Americanism" is measured. The patriotic, nation-building themes Bodnar identifies as "official" history promoted by national agencies once explicitly glorified Anglo-Saxon accomplishments and the institutions they dominated. American history is the story of the westward spread of Anglo-Saxon dominance by means of the national government. Other ethnic traditions have had to define themselves against an Anglo-Saxon background. New England and the other Atlantic states have asserted themselves as the true cradles of the American character; other regions bask only in reflected glory.

What Bodnar identifies as a struggle between national on the one hand and local, ethnic, regional, or vernacular on the other might be better understood as a struggle centering on issues of cultural supremacy, on questions of whose America we venerate. For example, in the 1992 campaign, the Republican right wing tried to assert itself as the defender of traditional American values. It was not a case of national versus local. It was an example of one tradi-

tion asserting itself as the standard against which all others must be measured.

How is that struggle relevant to the way Iowans perceive their own history or the celebration of the sesquicentennial? Ask yourself this question: What was going on in Iowa in 1492 or in 1776? If your immediate answer is "Nothing," you have probably bought into the traditional Anglo-Saxon premise that the official history of any region begins with the arrival of Anglo-Saxons; everything else is pre-history. That premise is the crux of the current debate between those promoting multiculturalism in the school curriculum and those who want students to use Western Civilization/American history as the measure of progress.

David Glassberg's study of the rise and fall in popularity of historical pageants through the early twentieth century is both a political and intellectual history. He locates the appeal of pageantry as part of the "progressive impulse" of the era, "the belief that history could be made into a dramatic public ritual through which the residents of a town, by acting out the right version of their past, could bring about some kind of future social and political transformation" (4). Like Bodnar, he describes historical commemorations of the nineteenth century to show what was new about the pageants of the early twentieth century. Pageants were usually outdoor dramas with costumed casts of hundreds that told the story of the founding and development of the nation or the community. Their popularity peaked during the Progressive Era, from the turn of the century to World War I.

According to Glassberg, three groups aggressively promoted pageants. The first were hereditary societies like the Daughters of the American Revolution who used them as a way to "preserve Anglo-American supremacy in American life." A second group included educators, social workers, and recreation leaders who saw in pageantry an opportunity to involve young and old in uplifting activities. Dramatists were a third group to embrace pageants. The pageant offered a different dramatic medium than the theater, with different potentials and challenges. Like the educators, however, dramatists saw the art of the pageant as a way to uplift public taste and to cultivate higher standards than previous historical celebrations had provided. Unlike the first two groups, it was the medium, and not the historical content, that most concerned the dramatists.

Glassberg details several outstanding historical pageants, including New England community dramas and the 1904 St. Louis centennial commemoration of the Louisiana Purchase. In the pageant, Glassberg writes, the "place is the hero," the plot involves the

creation and triumph of the community. History, properly understood and taught, could lead the community in an orderly way to a prosperous and stable future, according to pageant proponents. Orderly progress, a staple of Progressive thought, was a conscious goal of pageant promoters. During World War I, however, the zeal began to fade. When it was time to entertain the troops in camp, lighter entertainments were thought more appropriate than serious pageants with their themes of sacrifice, patriotism, and duty. After the war, pageants took on more and more aspects of entertainment. The conviction that the pageant was a tool for cultural uplift faded.

Glassberg does an excellent job of relating the pageant movement to the larger intellectual and political currents of the time. He uses the pageants as a window into the deeper convictions of the Progressive movement. He shows how faith in pageants to effect a spiritual transformation of the community reflected a deeper faith in the promise of progress in all aspects of American life. If the artistic aspirations of the pageants today seem quaint, so does that faith in the inevitability of human progress.

Bodnar and Glassberg survey how America has viewed its history in public commemorations. In another fifty years, historians will be using Iowa's celebration of its sesquicentennial as an insight into the values and aspirations of Iowans at the end of the twentieth century. It would be interesting to know how they will judge us.

Public History Readings, edited by Phyllis K. Leffler and Joseph Brent. Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Co., 1992. xiv, 535 pp. Notes, bibliographies. \$39.50 cloth.

REVIEWED BY REBECCA CONARD, WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY

Public History Readings is the companion volume to *Public and Academic History: A Philosophy and Paradigm*, also authored by Phyllis K. Leffler and Joseph Brent and published by Krieger in 1990. *Public History Readings* will make little sense to a reader who is not familiar with its predecessor. Some comments about *Public and Academic History* are therefore in order.

Public and Academic History, a slim book of 97 pages, put to rest any lingering questions about whether public history constitutes a different type of historical inquiry. In the final analysis, it doesn't. However, relatively recent interest in public history, and the accompanying growth of graduate programs, has stimulated a reexamination of the nature of history as a discipline and the place of public history within the discipline as a whole. Leffler and Brent

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