

## Book Notices

*Practicing History: Selected Essays*, by Barbara W. Tuchman. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981. pp. 306, \$16.50 cloth.)

The author is best known for her works, *The Guns of August* (winner of the Pulitzer Prize), *Stilwell and the American Experience in China*, and most recently *A Distant Mirror*. Her present volume of collected essays is a "must" for any historian. The first portion of the work contains Tuchman's ideas about history and how it should be written. The other sections contain actual writings (articles and speeches) which show why she is considered to be a modern-day counterpart to Parkman and Trevelyan. She is a writer first and an historian second (she does not have a graduate degree). Narrative history is her medium—one which is not highly thought of in many academic circles. She disagrees with recent attempts to prefabricate historical systems and is suspicious of making history a science. She claims that history is illogical and there is no inevitability about it. Her purpose in writing is not to instruct but to tell a story. The implications are what the reader takes out of the book. The true test to good writing is to ask the question "Will the reader turn the page?" Historians must distill and be selective. They must know when to stop the research (which Tuchman says is before one is finished, otherwise one will never stop and never finish). Historians must be above all else creative writers. They must keep the story moving and yet explain the background; they must create suspense and sustain interest in a narrative of which the outcome is most often known. "Too often scholarly history is written in terms of ideas rather than acts; it tells what people wrote instead of what they performed." Like Parkman, Tuchman insists that historians must use their imaginations to make their readers "feel the situation." As to the purpose of history itself, she remarks: "Why cannot history be studied and written and read for its own sake, as a record of human behavior, the most fascinating

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subject of all? Insistence on purpose turns the historian into a prophet—and that is another profession." This work deserves the attention of all serious practitioners of the art of history and those with only a casual interest will simply find the book delightful to read.

*The Ambidextrous Historian: Historical Writers and Writing in the American West*, by C. L. Sonnichsen. (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1981. pp. 120, notes, bibliography, index, \$9.95 cloth.)

This book is an absolute delight to read, full of the wit and wisdom of Sonnichsen. The author, currently senior editor of the *Journal of Arizona History* and author of several books about the American Southwest, is not a "professional historian." However, he is well prepared to address the reasons for the current malaise in history and suggest a remedy. Most historians will admit that their discipline is sick. The recent decline in membership of professional historical groups and the lack of interest by the general public are a few symptoms of this illness. Sonnichsen says one of the major reasons for this problem is the way professionally trained historians present their research. He makes a valiant claim for allowing the "grassroots historian" to have the opportunity to write and publish more. He also thinks the professional historian should devote more time to local history. He claims that graduate students in history are taught to follow one commandment—"Be thou Dull!" and what is needed is a return to putting imagination and poetry back into historical writing. "Call no man historian unless he makes you feel." The true historian must be "ambidextrous" and willing to bring varied experience to his work and utilize other disciplines. "What does he know of history who only history knows?" The book contains a delightful chapter in which the author sympathizes with reference librarians and their plight of receiving hundreds of requests from pupils to send all the information they have about a given topic (the spoon-feeding method). He has chapters which give advice for getting your own research published by smaller presses or university presses, since many "eastern publishers are only interested if it will sell in Connecticut." He also exhorts historians to be kind to editors—the necessary evil. The book is full of very sound advice which should be seriously considered by all historians. For a long time, "grassroots historians" have needed a spokesman—now they have one in Sonnichsen.

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