

On Doing Local History: Reflections on What Local Historians Do, Why, and What it Means, by Carol Kammen. Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1988. 184 pp. Notes, bibliography. \$14.95 paper.

History from Below: How to Uncover and Tell the Story of Your Community, Association, or Union, by Jeremy Brecher. New Haven, CT: Commonwealth Pamphlets/Advocate Press, 1986. ix, 54 pp. Illustrations, appendixes, bibliography. \$8.00 paper.

REVIEWED BY TOM AUGÉ, CENTER FOR DUBUQUE HISTORY

So you want to write a history of your community. Take heart, you can do it. History is not an esoteric discipline that requires years of rigorous, arcane study. History is for everyone. If you have difficulty getting started, the two books under review will help you, especially Carol Kammen's *On Doing Local History*. She writes in a clear, engaging style with numerous examples and anecdotes, taken mostly from her local area of upper New York. She also provides excellent bibliographical references in the text and in the endnotes after each chapter.

The precise definition of local history and the correct nomenclature of its practitioner have yet to be worked out. To describe local historians as amateurs while academic historians receive the title of professionals will not do. Carol Kammen is a nonacademic, local historian, yet she is clearly a professional. Perhaps we should not worry too much over precise definitions since historical writing is rife with ambiguity.

Local history does possess an attribute not usually found in more general studies. Local historians often have a close, personal connection with the subject under study. It is their community, their ancestors, their church, their organization about which they write. Kammen acknowledges this, if only implicitly. Thus her discussion of the historical records available to the local historian stresses personal sources: memoirs, diaries, and letters. Such sources are not always reliable since they provide only one person's view of what happened. Still, if used critically, as Kammen demands, such records add to the personal element that dominates local history. A question raised by Kammen illustrates further the personal tie between the local historian and the community about which he or she writes. Should the historian name the ancestor of present members of the community who engaged in some disgraceful activity? Kammen's answer is no, not so much because of delicacy of feelings but because it might be viewed as a violation of a trust, causing local sources of information to dry up.

The bias of the historian often gets in the way of truth. This danger threatens the local historian with what Kammen describes as "boosterism," the tendency to exaggerate the significance of events in the community's past; or perhaps local historians, in their desire to make their stories interesting, paint the picture in too lucid colors. Kammen warns against "boosterism," but the present competition for tourist's dollars insures that such faults will continue.

Another useful suggestion by Kammen is that the neophyte local historian not attempt too much. She recommends that local historians limit themselves to specific subjects that can be published in a local newspaper or magazine. Kammen herself writes a column for a local newspaper.

The second book, Jeremy Brecher's *History from Below* is of lesser length, scope, and value. Although Brecher proceeds from a false premise, his work has some value. His thesis that history has been written only about the rich and powerful is out of date. To support his argument, Brecher quotes at length from a book published in 1947, hardly a reliable source for the state of historical writing in 1990, when urban and social history have become an important part of the scene.

As is the case with many local historians, the recent past is Brecher's concern. As a consequence, he discusses at some length how to do oral history interviews with persons who were present when the event under study occurred. He also encourages local historians, as does Kammen, to present their stories in some other form than writing. Slide shows, photographic exhibits, and workshops are among the possibilities Brecher suggests.

Local history possesses an intrinsic interest for those who have a personal connection with it. But such history is of value in another way. Kammen advises those who would practice such an art to begin by reading widely in national and regional history so that they can provide a meaningful interpretation of the information they have gleaned. Unfortunately, history, local or otherwise, does not arrange itself into some orderly, coherent pattern. Historians, by selection and emphasis, must provide meaning to the data they have uncovered. A knowledge of national history will permit local historians to interpret their work within this framework. Local history, if done in this fashion, can be a testing ground of interpretations made on the national level. The smooth, grand facade of national history when examined up close by local historians may prove to be a mosaic of individual, variegated pieces.

Whatever its value, the opportunity to do local history is there for anyone who wishes to attempt it. Whatever the level of success, doing

local history is an interesting and meaningful experience. And, as Kammen concludes, "Enjoy!"

Imagining the Past: East Hampton Histories, by T. H. Breen. Photographs by Tony Kelly. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1989. xiv, 306 pp. Photographs, note on sources, bibliography, index. \$19.95 cloth, \$13.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY MYRON A. MARTY, DRAKE UNIVERSITY

Quite by chance, T. H. Breen, a professor of history at Northwestern University, set out to write a history of the Mulford Farmstead at East Hampton, Long Island, a centuries-old town one hundred miles east of Manhattan. Were *Imagining the Past* only the story of the Mulford Farmstead, it would be of marginal interest, at best, for readers of the *Annals of Iowa*, but as "an exploration of how the members of a community came to imagine themselves in the flow of time," (xiii) the book offers insight, suspense, and practical lessons for local historians whatever their locale. By imagining the past of East Hampton, Breen invites his readers to think about other imagined communities—an irresistible invitation, made the more so by his engaging treatment of this remote town.

The land of Long Island is precious—not only high-priced, but valued also for its natural beauty, history, and traditions. Consequently, it is at the center of unending contests among longtime residents, newcomers with a genuine or contrived sense of history, and developers. A genuine commitment to preserving the historical identity of their community prompted the East Hampton Historical Society, supported by a grant from the New York Institute for the Humanities, to appoint Breen "resident humanist," commissioning him to write a history of the Mulford Farm, a site at the heart of East Hampton's past. Soon after he arrived in East Hampton, Breen was seized by a sense of urgency, for he discovered that the land and a way of life East Hampton holds dear are at stake as the town's history unfolds. He calls his first chapter, "Meanings in Time." "On one level," he writes, "I describe a general search for meanings in time, a reflective, interpretive process. On another, however, I am concerned with meanings *just* in time or in the *nick* of time, meanings revealed before it is too late" (12). *Imagining the Past* is therefore a search for meanings in the past that hold meanings yet today. Breen is not a neutral researcher or a detached analyst. He takes sides, discreetly, and he is an actor in the drama that holds readers in suspense.

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