

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.

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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.

The drama surrounds Breen's quest, aided by local characters and professional archeologists, for the site of the long-gone Mulford Warehouse. En route to that point, Breen encounters an array of local figures whose perspectives he values. Among them are the commercial fishermen—the Baymen—whose livelihood is most threatened by the encroachment of growing populations, new economic interests, and the concomitant disregard for the treasured environment. Local historians as contemporary as the town librarian and the editor of the town newspaper and as distant as the Reverend Lyman Beecher, who served as minister in East Hampton nearly two hundred years ago, and John Lyon Gardiner, Beecher's parishioner and the author of *Notes and Observations on the Town of East Hampton*, published in 1798, also shape his views. Through these encounters Breen gained a grasp of the local mythology. "In the beginning, East Hampton was an extraordinarily beautiful place inhabited by diligent, God-fearing families. The settlers created a democratic, essentially self-sufficient, society, and, unlike pioneers in other parts of colonial America, they treated the Indians generously and honestly. A pastoral community had endured virtually unchanged for more than two hundred years, and it was only with the coming of 'outsiders,' however defined, that East Hampton belatedly and begrudgingly entered a threatening new age of development" (56–57).

Breen faced the challenge of dispelling the myth and at the same time discovering the authentic past of East Hampton. All the while he knew that would be impossible, for however diligent and honest we are in recreating the past, it is at best an imagined past. Therein lies the most important lesson of this book for local historians: the objective past, if there ever was such a thing, is long gone. Just as poets and novelists miss facts while conveying truths, historians miss truths as they assemble facts. So it will always be.

And yet there is excitement and delight in pressing on, as Breen does in his pursuit of the imagined past of East Hampton. He explores the place of Indians and blacks in East Hampton's history. He reviews court cases to gain a sense of the issues that shaped its character. He probes the economic aspirations of the settlers who came to East Hampton in the 1660s. He examines with admirable patience and diligence the place of the whale in East Hampton's economic development.

Breen's pursuit leads him to Samuel Mulford, a central figure in the seventeenth-century history of East Hampton, and a suspenseful search for Mulford's warehouse. The search for the warehouse drew him into an East Hampton drama, for its probable location turned out to be on land marked for residential development. In the end, the

town reached an uneasy compromise with the developer, but more contests over land are surely predictable. And why not—for have not contests over development been waged since East Hampton's founding? The present simply connects the past with the future.

That is no doubt why Breen concludes *Imagining the Past* with a tale of his conversation with a real estate developer whose slogan was "Share Our Traditions." What does this mean? To the developer, it means that he really wants "to share with other outsiders like himself what he has discovered in East Hampton" (294). To Breen it is the irony of East Hampton captured in three words. What the developer is selling, as Breen sees it, is not so much a tradition as the appearance of a tradition. "An empty heritage has been transformed into a commodity, and for mobile Americans cut off from a past that can provide them with a secure historical identity, the roadside invitation to share someone else's tradition no doubt stirs residual longings. And in all probability the appearance of tradition is easier to accept than is an actual tradition that raises awkward questions about historical exploitation and future development" (294-95).

Imagining the Past is a perceptive, engrossing account of a past that has been replayed in one form or another in many places. T. H. Breen's well-told East Hampton story alerts us to clues to challenges we face as we write the histories of our own communities.

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