

Richards's third case study is the competition between the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) for the right to represent the nation's schoolteachers. Richardson argues persuasively that both organizations to a degree drew on anti-union ideas to appeal to teachers. However, Richards's acknowledgment that the NEA by the mid-1980s "would come to openly embrace the 'union' label" (155) and was proud to assert that it conducted more strikes than the AFT undermines his thesis that the period was one dominated by anti-union culture.

Jarring to this reader were Richards's contention that "the very idea of unionism . . . embodied a masculine ideology" (83), the use of the term "workingman" (179) to refer to all workers, and the assertion that the NEA's condemnation of AFT racism constituted using "the race issue" and "the racist image of organized labor" rather than substantive criticism (171-72).

Virtual America: Sleepwalking through Paradise, by John Opie. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. xviii, 260 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth.

Reviewer Gregory Summers is associate professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He is the author of *Consuming Nature: Environmentalism in the Fox River Valley, 1850-1950* (2006).

In the growing age of virtual reality, many commentators have offered critiques of the American preference for the imagined world of video games, chat rooms, and "Second Life" avatars over the actual world of real-life people and places. These new digital technologies, embraced largely by the youngest generations of Americans, have been blamed for everything from rising violence and childhood obesity to the breakdown of the family. And yet, because few such critics have bothered to look back at the long tradition of imagined realities in American history, their complaints often ring hollow and somewhat cranky.

In *Virtual America*, John Opie offers a rare exception to this rule: a study of "how we Americans have historically dreamed about creating a better life in daily ordinary existence" that takes virtual reality seriously but also offers a substantive critique of the sense of placelessness it has created (xii). Opie is well qualified to write on the topic. An emeritus professor of history at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, he has been a longtime student of place, region, and environment in American history, authoring books such as *Nature's Nation: An Environmental History of the United States* and *Ogallala: Water for a Dry Land*. Although *Virtual America* is, in Opie's words, "neither a philosophical work nor a

conventional history," it nonetheless persuasively argues that virtual reality is nothing new in the United States (ix). Understanding this history, in turn, lends credibility to the argument that the American penchant for imagined realities has produced some troubling consequences.

Opie begins by noting that virtual reality need not depend on the recent spate of digital technologies. In fact, he argues, the notion might just as easily apply to the numerous "mental images through which we Americans have explained ourselves, our national geography, and our nation, past and present" (ix). Opie classifies these images under three broad headings: "the Engineered America of our built environment, the Consumer America of our passion for material well-being, and the Triumphant America of our conviction that we are the exceptional model for the rest of the world" (xii–xiii). In a series of connected essays that constitute the heart of the book, Opie then explores these layers of imagined reality, each of which stretches far back in the American past. "Europeans," for example, Opie notes, "did not discover America; they invented it" (42), bending the landscapes of the New World they encountered to match their dreams of material wealth, Christian missionary expansion, and individual opportunity. In many ways, these dreams served as "filters [that] shut out alternate views and prevented Europeans from seeing the New World on its own terms" (43). Much the same habit characterized later American attitudes toward their rapidly growing nation, as people sought an authentic American identity in natural wonders such as Niagara Falls and mountainous western landscapes and, at the same time, in the burgeoning creations of modern society such as the Brooklyn Bridge and the nation's smoke-filled industrial cities. Opie points in particular to the nineteenth-century rise of tourism and landscape art as evidence of the American preference for imagined realities. "Americans," he argues, "did not want nature on its own terms" (59). Instead, they preferred a landscape sanitized of Native Americans, dangerous animals, and discomforts of any kind. Likewise, the virtual America on display in the era's world's fairs offered equally sanitized visions of industrial progress. Eventually, the twentieth-century emergence of mass consumerism only exaggerated these kinds of disconnections — both natural and industrial — and led directly to the growing sense of placelessness that characterizes our present "sleepwalking" through the American landscape.

Many of Opie's insights will not be surprising to readers, especially to environmental historians and writers who have long been engaged in detailed critiques of the American relationship to landscape, environment, and place. Yet, in persuasively linking the modern digital technologies of imagined reality to their historical antecedents,

Opie has produced an important book and a new framework for understanding the story, one that is all the more relevant the more virtual our reality becomes.

Jacob's Well: A Case for Rethinking Family History, by Joseph A. Amato. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008. xvi, 279 pp. Illustrations, genealogical chart, notes. \$32.95 cloth.

Reviewer Marjorie L. McLellan is associate professor of history at Wright State University. She is the author of *Six Generations Here: A Farm Family Remembers*.

Reading Joseph Amato's *Jacob's Well*, I realize how rarely I do justice to everyday experience in relation to historical developments and patterns. Amato argues, "Unless we would deny the humanity of our family and the humanistic goal of history, we must not sacrifice families and the individual lives of their members to impersonal laws and generalizations." He describes, for example, the intergenerational experience of first rural and then urban poverty — "they yoked themselves to the perennial condition of the rural poor: never having adequate land or sufficient money until death did them part" — and he imagines the psychological toll of that precarious way of life (135). His research draws on genealogy and local history, along with national and international histories, but he also looks inward to "reconstitute the emotions, sensibilities, motives, beliefs, and metaphors that moved and guided family members" (12).

Cultural historians, sociologists, and folklorists concerned with ethnicity, class, gender, and family will find much to consider here. Of his own grandparents, for example, Amato writes, "Frances and William brought no ethnicity to serve as a social compass and direct them to preferred neighborhoods and churches. Frances's ethnicity, a mixture of English, old American, and Acadian, had long been erased by a succession of migrations, intermarriages, and isolations in the remote countryside" (60). The author circles back to the same characters, the most recent generations, and the individuals who touched his life most directly. At times, his effort to call forth individuals in the round, to evoke their rich personalities and experiences, becomes a bit tedious. On the whole, however, he has brought together the storytelling, characters, contexts, and events in a compelling meditation on the history of the family.

In each chapter, Amato drops a pebble, such as a family photograph, into the stream of memory, and the ripples evoke stories around a theme ranging widely across place — from Sicily and the Canadian Maritimes to rural Wisconsin and then Detroit — and time.