

the importance of local variations in soil type, water table, climate, the economy, and politics in shaping the debate. General readers and specialists interested in agriculture and rural life, politics, activism, the Midwest, and the nature of bureaucracy in contemporary America will be enlightened.

Rethinking Home: A Case for Writing Local History, by Joseph A. Amato. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. xvi, 245 pp. Graphs, maps, notes, index. \$48.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

Reviewer Robert P. Sutton is professor of history at Western Illinois University. He is the author of *Les Icarions: The Utopian Dream in Europe and America* (1994), and *Rivers, Railways, and Roads: A History of Henderson County, Illinois* (1988).

In *Rethinking Home*, Joseph Amato, at times, presents a thoroughly researched, lively analysis of local history, "the stepchild of our profession," in his words. A professor of rural and regional studies at Southwest State University (Minnesota), he brings more than twenty years of experience in teaching and writing about the topic to this study of the uniqueness of the region of southwest Minnesota and how it relates to the world at large. He also hopes to present new, provocative ways of understanding local history. He urges investigators of regional development not just to view it historically, but also to incorporate anthropology, linguistics, and geography, among other disciplines. "Local historians," he writes, "must draw on the works of geologists, agronomists, hydrologists, and other students of the natural and constructed world" (12). Despite such contentions, the author sometimes falls right in line with traditional local historians in writing about towns, banks, businesses, churches, and farms.

Amato first discusses and defines the physical layout of southwest Minnesota, aptly including graphs and maps to show its topography, its location, and its rivers and towns. In his treatment of the region's environment, he touches on contemporary conflicts such as those over large hog confinement operations. His chapter on its economy shows convincingly how it has adapted to market demands. He is on firm ground in using fiction as a source for understanding the region and aptly warns that "local historians must indeed embrace literature, but keep one eye peeled" (142).

These strengths notwithstanding, the monograph does have some weaknesses. Amato is inconsistent in his use of the terms *local* and *regional*; sometimes he has them as synonymous and at other times they are different concepts. His lengthy discussions of some topics, such as the pages on the "unsung muskrat," are interesting but not relevant to

the main themes of the study. And I am not convinced that a historian's sensitivity to sounds—drones of cars, squeaking doors, snorting pigs, chattering squirrels—broadens or enhances one's understanding of the unique history of a particular region. Some chapters just do not stand up. The one on "madness" makes a questionable assertion: "a history without the facts of madness is no history at all" (115).

All in all, however, *Rethinking Home* is an important contribution to the growing literature on local history.

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