

Book Reviews

Ordinary People and Everyday Life: Perspectives on the New Social History, edited by James B. Gardner and George Rollie Adams. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1983, viii, 215 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliographies, index. \$16.00 cloth.

Material Culture Studies in America, edited by Thomas J. Schlereth. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1982. xvi, 419 pp. Tables, notes, bibliographical essay, index. \$16.00 paper.

When the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) was organized in 1940, professional historians tended to regard "ordinary people and everyday life" as the realm of amateurs and history buffs, occasionally interesting but hardly worthy of serious scholarly pursuit. Within the past three decades, however, with an increasing awareness of the pluralism of American society, the history profession has begun to realize that an understanding of the past must include more than great men, politics, and economics. One result has been the increased attention to social history, a development Peter Stearns characterizes in his essay in *Ordinary People* as "the most dramatic development in American historical research over the past two decades" (3). *Ordinary People* and *Material Culture Studies* confirm the excellent work that is now available in the field.

Ordinary People is a collection of nine essays that were originally presented at an AASLH seminar on social history. The collection begins with Stearns's overview of important dimensions of the discipline and his definition of what is "new" about the "new social history." The next seven essays by prominent historians explore recent works in various fields of social history: ethnicity, women, the city, agriculture, families, labor, and politics. In his essay on politics, for example, Samuel P. Hays illustrates how political historians have begun to use detailed knowledge of families, neighborhoods, and ethnic traditions to analyze voting patterns, and how a knowledge of the perspectives of various subgroups within the culture informs analyses of their political behavior. At the conclusion of each of these seven essays, the authors provide an annotated bibliography of significant works in that field. A quick review of the publication dates of citations indicates how relatively new the "new social history" is. Because many of the articles are

so recent, these bibliographies provide easy access to many innovative works that have not yet found their way into standard anthologies. In the final essay in the collection, "Things Unspoken: Learning Social History from Artifacts," Barbara C. Carson and Cary Carson discuss the importance of material culture, the study of artifacts themselves. They provide a six-part catechism for interpreting a historical site: (1) What was this place? (2) What activities occurred here? (3) Who performed them? (4) How did these people work together to make things happen? (5) How have people's circumstances and relationships with one another changed? (6) Why has the change occurred? Illustrated with examples from various museums, the essay is an excellent primer to the study of artifacts and historical sites.

Material Culture Studies in America is also a collection of essays, compiled and edited by Thomas J. Schlereth, who teaches American studies at the University of Notre Dame. Schlereth, author of *Artifacts and the American Past* (1980), is a distinguished scholar in the field of material culture, and this anthology verifies his familiarity with recent literature. In fact, the first of the five sections of the book is an impressive bibliographical essay by Schlereth entitled "Material Culture Studies in America, 1876-1976," in which he traces definitions of the field, significant trends, and landmark works.

The following two sections of the book include essays on the theory of the study of material culture and curatorial methodology. For serious students of the subject or for classroom use, the essays offer a useful comparison of perspectives, but the casual reader will probably find little of interest in most of this material.

Part four is an eclectic reader on popular American culture, past and present. Covering such widely diverse subjects as tombstones, household appliances, service stations, and Victorian hall furnishings, these essays illustrate how a knowledge of *things* enhances an understanding of the culture that produced them. In "The Meaning of Artifacts: Hall Furnishings in Victorian America," for example, Kenneth Ames explores the social significance of various items in the entryways of upper middle-class homes. It was in the hall that the Victorian visitor made his or her first impression of the household; what the family wanted the visitor to assume about them was reflected in their furnishings. Schlereth apologizes for the absence of illustrations, which many of the essays included in their original publication. In many cases the articles do suffer because of their absence. However, as examples of the potential material culture studies offer, the collection is stimulating and informative.

In a short introduction to each essay, Schlereth briefly analyzes the author's subject and approach and relates the work to other essays

Book Reviews

on the subject or to works that employ a similar methodology. In addition, he sometimes suggests questions that the work raises for historians in other areas of specialization. Through these introductions, Schlereth provides a disciplined approach to what might otherwise have been an interesting but unrelated collection of articles. The final part of the book is a bibliography of useful works in the field.

Ordinary People is a useful reference guide to the field of social history. As a survey of recent trends in historical studies, though, it will necessarily become a dated work within a decade. Because it includes a large section of historical monographs, *Material Culture* will have a more lasting appeal. Nevertheless, both works clearly demonstrate that the study of "ordinary people and everyday life" has much to contribute to our understanding of the American experience.

LIVING HISTORY FARMS

TOM MORAIN

Gentlemen on the Prairie, by Curtis Harnack. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1985. viii, 254 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$16.95 cloth.

Charlotte Erickson's seminal book *Invisible Immigrants* (1972) indicates that the American rural frontier of the 1800s attracted naive middle-class Britons who were unprepared and unsuited for farming. Curtis Harnack's well-written case study of the Le Mars colony in northwestern Iowa for younger sons of upper-class British families extends Erickson's finding into the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Harnack, who was raised on a farm near the site of the old colony, is a specialist in American studies and author of several fiction and nonfiction works. In *Gentlemen on the Prairie* he uses new information he has gathered over the last thirty years in the United States and United Kingdom and synthesizes much of the extant literature about the topic.

In 1877 William B. Close, joined by his brothers Frederick and James and later by other partners, began investing in raw land in Iowa and Minnesota; the firm also was land sales agent for railroads in the district. In an effort to attract British and other settlers, the Closes rented out and sold ready-made farms with minimal improvements and arranged for young recruits to board locally as apprentice farmers ("pupils"). By the mid-1880s the land sales and colony were thriving, but by then word had spread back to Britain that the work was too hard for the young alien dudes and that American land ownership did not carry the high status that prevailed in the home islands. Meanwhile, the young settlers brought to Iowa their clothing, servants, diet and drinking habits, and sports. Unaware of the Turner thesis that the fron-

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