

Book Reviews

Views and Viewmakers of Urban America: Lithographs of Towns and Cities in the United States and Canada, Notes on the Artists and Publishers, and a Union Catalog of Their Work, 1825-1925, by John W. Reps. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984. xvi, 570 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$89.50 cloth.

John W. Reps is familiar to anyone interested in the history of cities, especially the rising towns of the American West. The lithographs he reproduces in *Views and Viewmakers of Urban America* have a magnetic appeal for almost everyone, regardless of one's knowledge of urban history or of the city depicted. The beautiful, soft colors of lithography—captured here on the dust jacket and in thirteen dazzling color plates at the opening of the volume—please the eye from a distance, and one cannot resist pulling closer to examine the intricate detail of urban life as it was depicted by the viewmakers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century—before the aerial photographer displaced them.

The bulk of this thick, large-format book (pages 221 to 546) is a union catalog of nearly 4,500 lithographic urban views (of an estimated 5,000 done of 2,400 places), organized by state and place with details on the date, print size, artist, printer, and location of each view. This alone is a valuable reference tool for local historians. Reps invites additions and corrections to his catalog, but it appears already thorough, based on my own limited familiarity with the views done for a few cities. There are, for example, seventy-one entries for Iowa alone. These include several of major Iowa cities, but there are also entries for towns of such disparate sizes as Keokuk, Ottumwa, and Maquoketa. Pride and ambition, not size or fame, were the prerequisites for these lithographic views.

Another part of this volume deals with the viewmakers, the itinerant artists who traveled from place to place sketching towns, working up advance subscription lists, and marketing the finished lithographs. This biographical encyclopedia has entries for fifty-one artists, including summaries of their careers and tabular data on the views we know they produced. The names will not be familiar even to those thoroughly acquainted with North American art history. "Serious artists," Reps explains, "regarded urban scenes as harsh, ugly, and unnatural," and disdained lithography as a form of cheap, mass-produced commercial art. As a result urban views became the trade of men who "drew cities to make money, not to satisfy their artistic impulses" (65). Reps has located an admirable amount of scattered information on these often obscure figures, but I suspect today, as in the nineteenth century, more will be interested in the views than in the artists who rendered them.

The most intriguing part of *Views and Viewmakers of Urban America* is a series of essays on the making and selling of urban views. Reps covers every aspect of his subject: aesthetic qualities, lithographic techniques, marketing, public response, and the usefulness of urban views to the study of history. The major viewmakers were peripatetic commercial artists in the business of selling flattering community portraits to the proud residents and boosters of towns and cities across North America. Their work had special appeal for the emerging towns of the West. In each town the artist worked up preliminary ground-level sketches of particular buildings and other physical features of the community and its environs. The trick was then to construct a bird's-eye view from "an imaginary viewpoint high in the air" (3). With this composite sketch in hand, the artist then sold prints in advance and distributed them when the lithographer (usually operating as a separate business) had the final prints ready.

For a price, businessmen could have their establishments embellished in the general view or in close-up vignettes that often bordered the view. The business could also receive identification in the key at the bottom of the view. Similarly, proud residents could ensure their mansions appeared to best advantage by subscribing generously before the lithographer made the print. Accuracy both gained and lost in the interplay between art and consumer appeal. William Strickland, the famed architect, drew a plan of Cairo, Illinois, for land speculator Darius Holbrook that rendered a frequently flooded, vacant mud flat into a prosperous metropolis. In England Holbrook, "unburdened by any sense of business ethics," used the Cairo view to draw one million dollars from gullible investors. Reps draws another example from Maquoketa, Iowa, where an ambitious resident paid to have the handsome mansion he planned to build included in a vignette, but then ran out of money before the home was more than a hole in the ground and a pile of stones (69). We must interpret all urban views, Reps concludes, "as flattering, carefully posed, and retouched portraits rather than as completely candid portraits of reality" (70). Still, in most cases, anyone who has studied the views of familiar cities cannot help but be amazed at the remarkable detail and accuracy these artists managed to convey.

Reps shows just how valuable these views can be as historical documents. In a series of Columbia, South Carolina views, he highlights first the commercial, then the industrial, governmental, and other land uses of the city. In the process, the whole logic of the nineteenth-century urban form comes vividly alive in a manner no one-dimensional map can convey. Reps urges his readers to use similar techniques in slide or video shows to dramatize the patterns

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of history that these urban views can yield to the imaginative historian. With this book as a guide, many will surely follow his suggestion. It is a unique reference tool, an informative overview of a long ignored popular art form, and a feast for the eyes of any who enjoy gazing at yesterday's towns and cities from imaginary viewpoints in the historical air.

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We Belong to the Land: Memories of a Midwesterner, by Beulah Meier Pelton. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1984. 211 pp. Illustrations. \$16.95 cloth.

Life is a journey no matter how far or near we travel from home, and the course of our travel necessarily becomes complicated as we continually search for that place called "home." We of the Midwest, in particular, long for a homeplace as we move over the land, and the farm continues to be our symbol of home. Today as we drive the roads out of town the old farm buildings (many now vacant, with corn rows pressing against the decaying foundations) remind us of a mythological past when all settlers were at home. Although the myth of the homeplace is a real one—grounded in a deep longing of the heart—our Midwest ancestors were also travelers. More often than not, the homeplace was a dream which movement constantly disrupted.

Beulah Meier Pelton has traveled this road. Her grandparents came to Iowa, along the bottomlands of the Missouri River, in the middle of the last century. She spent her childhood on the farm her father and mother bought from her grandfather, located in northeastern Iowa. The family experienced a few years of prosperity during and after World War I, but with the severe depression that hit farmers in 1922, and with too many debts, the family lost the farm. After meeting with the banker, her father walked wearily into the house, his shoulders bent, tears streaming down his face, and said, "Well, it's all over now. It's all gone—the farm, the livestock, everything." For the family, if the land was gone, as the daughter tells us, "We had no home."

We Belong to the Land is the account of three generations of Iowa farmers, as the daughter/granddaughter, Beulah, born in 1914 and removed at an early age from the homeplace, tells it. She "had a damnable childhood from the very first day we left the farm." Her father found work in the small town of Westgate. With a succession of other jobs, the family moved from one place to another in

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