

Iowa History Reader

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Book Reviews

Notice: Reviews of the cowinners of the 1996 Benjamin Shambaugh Award for the most significant book on Iowa history published during 1995—*To Go Free: A Treasury of Iowa's Legal Heritage*, by Richard, Lord Acton and Patricia Nassif Acton, and *Smith Wildman Brookhart: Iowa's Renegade Republican*, by George William McDaniel—appear on pages 301–303 and 330–331 below.

Iowa History Reader, edited by Marvin Bergman. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1996. xvii, 449 pp. Bibliographical essays, notes, index. \$26.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY WALLACE HETTLE, UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

Some historians today hold state history in low regard. That estimation of the importance of historical inquiry on the state level is unfortunate and wrong-headed. Disdain for state history is based on a misunderstanding of United States history: although focus on the present would lead one to believe that the United States is a relatively unified nation, for much of our past, the state, rather than the nation, represented the central focus of politics. Moreover, generalizations about American social and cultural history, to name just two fields, are risky unless grounded in the kind of intensive research that can be done only on the state and local level. Indeed, the sweeping historical syntheses of American history that receive much attention and prestige are only as good as the state and local investigations upon which they are built. High enrollment across the country in state history courses and continuing public interest indicate a widespread popular awareness that states are unique entities with their own individual histories.

State historical societies and journals have a special role to play in keeping alive the history of individual states as distinct areas of study. Today's state historians, whether in Iowa or Massachusetts, have no place for antiquarianism, the study of minute details of the past for their own sake. Instead, good state-level history is influenced by broad trends in American historiography, from labor to women's history, and allows the testing of hypotheses in a variety

of settings. The best state history transforms American historiography: the intensive examination that the narrow canvas allows often generates new interpretations that make us rethink entire historical fields of inquiry.

With the backing of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Marvin Bergman has compiled the *Iowa History Reader*, a collection of exemplary essays on Iowa history from the last thirty years that should serve not only as a useful scholarly resource, but as a rejoinder to critics who would overlook the importance of state-level historical inquiry. This collection contains seventeen essays taken from journals and book-length publications that analyze many of the crucial topics American historians have tackled in the past thirty years. Newer fields such as labor, women's, and social history are represented along with new interpretations in more traditional specializations such as political and agricultural history. Distinguished historians such as Dorothy Schwieder, Allan Bogue, Glenda Riley, Shelton Stromquist, and Richard Jensen are represented here as well as promising younger historians of the state.

The *Iowa History Reader* resembles a "greatest hits" album: Bergman has been free to choose book chapters and the best articles on Iowa from a variety of journals, including the *Annals of Iowa*. As he notes, narrowing the selection to a book-length format provided some difficulty. He chose essays that covered ground chronologically from the frontier experiences to the abortion struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, but scholarly excellence and originality also governed the selection process. Anyone familiar with Iowa historiography will notice praiseworthy articles that are absent and topics that are missing, but that is inevitable.

Also noticeable is the absence, as Bergman notes, of work on "famous Iowans." It is true that some who fall into this category, such as Herbert Hoover and John Lewis, pursued their life's work outside the state and should perhaps be omitted. But important figures such as "Uncle Henry" Wallace, Grant Wood, Harold Hughes, and Carrie Chapman Catt are also missing. The inclusion of these colorful characters would have made the book more exciting for general readers, but clearly the priority here is on topnotch scholarship. Undoubtedly, this book will sell to some Iowa history buffs, but as the use of footnotes rather than endnotes signals, this is a book primarily for people who like to read serious scholarly work.

Because of space limitations, this book cannot be comprehensive. However, the bibliographical notes that follow each of the essays are an excellent feature of the work and help to compensate for its lack

of comprehensiveness. These brief notes refer to material that will enrich readers' understanding of the essays, and make a more complete understanding of the given topic available to those with access to a good library. In these notes, the editor shows a good command of the scholarly resources available on a variety of topics, and provides citations both to Iowa historiography and work on other states that put the essays here in context. An interested student of Iowa and American history unfamiliar with the broader literature on topics from Populism to Iowa's modern agricultural structure will find a useful guide in these brief notes. Bergman has clearly done his homework, as his citations range from a variety of contemporary journals to important but forgotten pioneering work of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Citing the "best" essays in the book would be pointless, for readers with divergent interests will no doubt have their own favorites. For me, Robert Dykstra's essay, "Iowans and the Politics of Race, 1857-1880," best points out some of the potential virtues of state history evident throughout this collection. Drawing on rigorous analysis of voting returns and broader work on the formation and development of the Republican Party in Iowa, Dykstra constructs an intriguing formulation about the impact of the Civil War era on racial attitudes in the Hawkeye state. The historian uses quantitative evidence to argue persuasively that many Iowans changed their minds on the question of black suffrage in the state during the 1860s and 1870s. That concrete analysis of Iowa politics is useful for Civil War historians, but the author uses his insight to make us rethink a far larger question: the dynamics of racial change across American history. Moving from his work on Iowa, and engaging historiography on racism and slavery in a global context, the author persuasively leads his reader to the conclusion that white racism was neither inherent nor innate in either capitalism, western civilization, or Christianity. Whether one agrees with the conclusion or not, one must concede that historical questions are rarely broader or more politically important. This essay shows the value of rigorous work that moves from specific state history to the general questions that preoccupy all historians.

Many of the essays in this book use Iowa history as a springboard to questions that should concern historians of Iowa, the Midwest, and the United States. All of the essays in the book make genuine contributions to their respective fields. The *Iowa History Reader* should be welcomed as proof that in Iowa, at least, state history is alive and well.

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