Book Reviews


“The rise of social history has been the most dramatic development in American historical research over the past two decades” (p. 3). That declaration—the opening sentence of the first chapter—provides the rationale for this most recent volume from the American Association for State and Local History. The nine essays collected here are based on presentations the authors made in 1980-1981 to a series of AASLH seminars on current historical scholarship. The editors explain that their goal is “to present various perspectives on what the new social history is all about and where it seems to be going” (p. vii). Among the book’s targeted audiences the principal one seems to be “museum and historical agency professionals who are responsible for conducting research and for designing and implementing interpretive programs” (pp. vii-viii).

The first chapter—Peter Stearns’s “overview” of the new social history—is followed by topical chapters dealing with race and ethnicity (by Howard Rabinowitz); women’s history (Elizabeth Pleck); urban history (Kathleen Conzen); rural history (Robert Swierenga); family history (Maris Vinovskis); labor history (David Brody); politics (Samuel Hays); and material culture (Barbara and Cary Carson). The essays are of uniformly high quality and the accompanying notes and suggestions for additional reading provide a helpful (though by no means exhaustive) guide to important publications in the various fields under review.

Different readers will approach this book with different purposes, and many will probably choose to read only the chapter(s) relevant to their own problems or projects. Persons who read the volume straight through should be prepared for some repetition, since several authors besides Stearns try their hands at defining the new social history. While all the essays have much to recommend them, those examining ethnic, urban, rural, and labor history are perhaps the most effective in accomplishing the editors’ intention for the book.

The Carsons’ discussion of “Learning Social History from Artifacts” merits special mention. Their observation that recent work
by social historians has “invested... with new meaning” the “vast array of everyday artifacts that bulk large in museum and historical society collections” (pp. 190-91) is a provocative notion with far-reaching implications. Their treatment of the “psychology of learning by looking” should be required reading for historical society and museum personnel responsible for planning exhibits, interpretive programs, and tours. And academic social historians will profit from consideration of the argument that they “can do worse than make common cause with students of material culture” (pp. 184, 183).

This carefully edited and thoughtful collection of essays is highly recommended for public and academic libraries, as well as for all organizations that have an historical dimension in their programming.

Indiana Historical Bureau, Indianapolis  Robert G. Barrows


Wooton patent desks are the masterpieces of Indiana’s nineteenth-century furniture industry. Connoisseurs of Victorian furniture admire the handsome Wooton cabinetry and are fascinated by the intricate internal arrangement of drawers and pigeonholes. Designed originally for commercial use, Wooton desks were found in the offices of such Gilded Age notables as Ulysses Grant, Jay Gould, and John D. Rockefeller. This book, actually a catalog for an exhibit produced jointly by the Oakland (California) Museum and the Indiana State Museum, contains a series of essays that interpret Wooton desks as important examples of Victorian material culture.

In the introduction, Kenneth Ames links the Wooton desk with the Victorians’ predilection for order. Ames says that the desks helped to modernize the businessman by providing “a place for everything.” In “The Office in the 19th Century,” Page Talbott analyzes changes in spatial arrangement and furnishings that accompanied the transformation of countinghouses into offices. In this context, the Wooton desk is seen as one in a series of technological innovations that the Victorian businessman used to impose order on the workplace and to cope with the complexity of industrialization.

In a curatorial interpretation, Deborah Cooper documents the physical changes and variations in the Wooton desk as it evolved.