

Generations: An American Family. By John Egerton. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983. Pp. 263. End maps, illustrations. \$19.50.)

In recent years the familiar genre of autobiography has merged with the subject of family history and the technique of oral history to produce such notable books as Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976) and Theodore Rosengarten's *All God's Dangers* (1974). Joining that select company of vivid historical portraits is *Generations*, an important achievement in social history, human memory, and narrative power. John Egerton set out to locate and portray a representative middle-class family whose collective biography might be "a metaphor of America" (p. 15). Patience and persistence were amply rewarded when he discovered centenarian Burnam Ledford and his wife Addie of Lancaster, Kentucky. During the next six years he probed and reconstructed seven generations of this "quintessentially American" family (p. 4). He studied courthouse records and cemetery gravestones. He explored various family sites. Most of all he talked and listened. Burnam and Addie narrated extensive oral histories of their seventy-five-year marriage, their forebears, and their progeny. One hundred hours of recorded interviews enabled Egerton to prepare a family biography spanning the national history of the United States.

To epitomize mainstream America with one family is an effective literary device but a preposterous gesture of population sampling. Egerton actually offers not so much a microscopic glimpse of all America as a prismatic view of one layer.

Generations contains some remarkable insights and revelations. There is the familiar theme of continuity and change. There also are the centrifugal and centripetal forces operating on successive generations. Dispersing the family socially and geographically are such influences as marriage and career mobility. Drawing them together are such equally powerful magnets as their Kentucky homestead, the state university, and family reunions. Literally and figuratively at center stage in this family drama are Burnam and Addie. Their memories and sense of history bridge the distant past and the present. Born in 1876, Burnam could reflect sadly on the death of President John F. Kennedy by personally recalling the assassinations not only of William McKinley but even of James A. Garfield. Burnam's memory proved remarkably consistent, detailed, and accurate, making him a reliable oral chronicler of his time.

Burnam Ledford carried a century of historical experience in his head. His death in 1983 obliterated that personal link with a deep and distinctive slice of the American past. Thanks to Eger-

ton's luck in finding the Ledfords, perseverance in studying them, and skill in narrating their seven-generation story, readers have an absorbing and illuminating family history.

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Their Number Become Thinned: Native American Population Dynamics in Eastern North America. By Henry F. Dobyns; including an essay with William R. Swagerty as coauthor. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, in cooperation with the Newberry Library Center for the History of the American Indian, 1983. Pp. 378. Notes, tables, maps, figures, bibliography, index. \$29.95.)

In *Their Number Become Thinned* Henry F. Dobyns attempts to identify the "major dynamics of population trends" for native North America and to analyze, as an "illustrative" example, the demographic history of the Timucuan chiefdoms of Florida (p. 4). Dobyns's theme is the depopulation of native North America by exotic diseases to which Indian peoples had no immunity. His account of the impact of these epidemics is not only lucid it is also suggestive in its examination of the relationship between demographic and social change.

The meat of this book, however, and the part sure to inspire controversy, is Dobyns's attempt to establish the original size of the populations these diseases ravaged. He initially calculates a figure of eighteen million people for the North American continent, but his most original work is done in the case study of the Timucuans. Dobyns proceeds methodically. First he assesses the carrying capacity of the land at a given level of technology. He then turns to estimates made by Europeans of warrior strength, village size, and the number of people living in each house. On the basis of his data he makes several estimates of population in the mid-sixteenth century. Finally, Dobyns determines what epidemics had already swept over the Timucuans by this date and uses the death rates such epidemics had inflicted elsewhere to calculate backwards to pre-epidemic populations. He suggests that 722,000 people lived in the Timucuan chiefdoms in 1517. The highest current estimate is 20,000. Such figures suggest the boldness of Dobyns's revisionism.

This book is a major work of scholarship, one that is both methodical and ingenious, but its large conclusions often flow from sparse evidence. To share Dobyns's conclusions readers will have to share his assumptions. Dobyns, for instance, works from the basic Malthusian premise of cultural materialism: population