

REVIEWS

Finding a New Midwestern History

Edited by Jon K. Lauck, Gleaves Whitney, and Joseph Hogan

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The mid-1970s saw a considerable emphasis on so-called “new” styles of researching and writing in the discipline of history—the “new social history,” the “new urban history,” and so forth. I even used the term “new local history” in the title of my first professional publication (which appeared in this journal). Now, forty-five years later, comes an attempt to find—or at least to posit the existence of—a “new midwestern history.” The validity of that claim may be open to debate, but unquestionably the past few years have seen efforts to revive a once-flourishing, but recently evanescent, field. The Midwestern History Association (MHA) was established in 2014, and the first issue of *Middle West Review* appeared at about the same time. Jon Lauck, co-editor of *Finding a New Midwestern History*, has published two recent books dealing with (as one of

them is titled) *The Lost Region*. And since 2015, the MHA has organized an annual conference at Grand Valley State University in Michigan. In short, the Midwest has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention during the past half-decade or so.

Finding a New Midwestern History consists of twenty-one chapters based on talks presented at that first MHA conference. The editors have divided the book into six parts of three to four chapters each. The groupings seem idiosyncratic, but that fact no doubt results from the broad range of topics being treated. The book’s stated purpose is “to give life to a moribund field of study, to promote a diversity of viewpoints within this field, and to generally give legitimacy to the serious study of a large region of the United States that has been neglected by scholars” (p. xii).

Michael Steiner's opening chapter traces the "birth" of the Midwest as we know it to the decade of the 1890s, when "a remarkably varied group of self-conscious midwesterners began using the term Middle West and fashioned distinctive images of their emerging region" (p. 7). This group included such luminaries as architect Frank Lloyd Wright, writer Hamlin Garland, and historian Frederick Jackson Turner. (Fun fact #1: Garland gave a talk on "Local Color in Fiction" at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, just two days after Turner had enunciated his famous "frontier thesis" from the same platform.)

Gleaves Whitney discusses the reflection of three of the nation's founders (Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams) in the midwestern landscape. Gregory Rose, who has written extensively on the demographic history of midwestern states, reviews the settlement patterns in the Old Northwest by the middle of the nineteenth century. His chapter meshes nicely with Nicole Etcheson's cogent discussion of the Civil War's impact on lower midwestern states (e.g., Indiana) that had been heavily settled by migrants from the Upland South. Other chapters focus on civic life (especially voluntary associations such as lodges); on the effects of the African American Great Migration on midwestern cities; on the region's increasingly endangered small towns;

and on religion, music, and sports. (Fun fact #2: High school teams in Mitchell, South Dakota, home of the famous Corn Palace, are known as the Kernels.) Jon Teafor, well known for his books on the urban Midwest, argues that midwestern metropolises have some common characteristics that "differentiate them from the principal cities in other American regions" and thus, the study of "genus *Urbanusmidwesternus* can yield rich findings for historians" (p. 211).

Given the genesis of the volume, it is unsurprising that the whole is not greater than the sum of its parts. Put another way: the book's chapters reflect disparate interests that just happened to come together at an academic conference. That they do not cohere to form an overarching theme or an integrated whole is to be expected, although that reality undermines the title's implication that a "new midwestern history" will be "found" in these pages. Most readers, I suspect, will scan the table of contents for topics of interest rather than reading the book cover to cover. Still, this is a valuable contribution to a reenergized field of study. Students of midwestern history will need to be familiar with it, and the region's academic and public libraries will want to add it to their collections.

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