



THE BEST

AMERICAN

HISTORY

ESSAYS

2007



EDITED BY JACQUELINE JONES FOR
THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN HISTORIANS



The Best American History Essays 2007

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*Edited by
Jacqueline Jones
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—Lee W. Formwalt

Executive Director, Organization of American Historians

Introduction

Jacqueline Jones

For avid readers of history, the historical essay offers all the pleasures of a book, compressed; here, in just thirty pages or so, are the elements that make historical scholarship such a compelling literary genre—a good story, well told and thoroughly researched, a narrative that illuminates the past and, in some cases, inspires fresh ways of looking at the present. Indeed, a case can be made that the history essay compares to a book the same way a short story compares to a novel: The shorter work provides the gratification and intellectual stimulation of the longer one, but the story moves more briskly, and the reader is rewarded more quickly.

And so it is lamentable that most history readers never encounter the very best essays, many of which are published and widely scattered in more than three hundred journals devoted to historical scholarship. The vast majority of these journals are highly specialized and readily available only to members of professional historical organizations and to scholars and students with access to extensive libraries. The purpose of this volume is to gather between two covers ten essays that represent the best in current scholarship, and to bring to a wider audience outstanding works in American history that would otherwise reach only a small audience.

These essays were chosen by a hardworking committee of eight people, all members of the Organization of American Historians, the largest professional organization of historians of the United States. The committee's task was to survey an impressive variety and number of scholarly journals and general interest magazines, and to choose from them a handful of essays notable for their overall excellence and for their accessibility to a wider audience. Committee members included Anthony J. Badger, John M. Belohlavek, Ellen Carol DuBois, Eric Foner, Sharon Harley, M. Ruth Kelly, John Saillant, and Elliott West. The group followed a grueling schedule that spanned five months and culminated in mid-May, when most members faced a crushing end-of-year workload. In the spring of 2006, that workload included not only the usual tasks of grading papers and preparing for commencement exercises, but also the challenge of voting for ten essays out

of a shortlist of thirty-seven nominees. Essays on the shortlist appeared in thirty-one different (for the most part highly specialized) publications, including, among others, *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, *Sport History Review*, *Columbia Journal of Law*, *Journal of Urban History*, *New Political Science*, *Teachers College Record*, and *Journal of Military History*.

Taken together, these ten essays are a testament to the richness and vitality of current scholarship in the field of American history. In theme and time period, they range widely over the vast landscape of the American past, in all its fascinating detail and diversity—from the late eighteenth-century borderlands inhabited by Indians, French, and Spanish to contentious debates over slavery in the Baptist churches of early nineteenth-century Kentucky; to Civil War battlefields with their bloody harvests of corpses; to twentieth-century Midwestern airports evolving from parklands to noisy centers of commercial transportation; and recent debates over any number of historical events and developments, including the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804–1806 and the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century. Of course American history encompasses far more than whatever transpired on American soil; several essays suggest the necessity of transcending national borders—to examine debates over Chinese immigrant workers, or the housekeeping skills of wives of Foreign Service diplomats—if we are to gain an appreciation of American history that is broadly defined. The historians represented in this collection have employed a number of different research methodologies and have examined an array of historical sources, including, to name but a few, legal and literary texts, courtroom testimony, sermons and minutes of church meetings, federal and local government records, Congressional testimony, city recreation commission reports, letters, diaries, oral history testimony, travelers' accounts, newspapers, advertisements, records of commercial transactions, census data, and political speeches. The footnotes of these works tell a story in themselves, and suggest historians' new and creative ways of recapturing the country's past.

Published in nine different journals, these essays also illustrate the excellence of specialized publications. Fittingly, the *Journal of American History*, which publishes in all fields, is represented by two articles in this collection. The other journals include *American Quarterly*, *Journal of the Early Republic*, *American Literary History*, *Southern California Quarterly*, *Technology and Culture*, *Southern Cultures*, *Journal of Southern History*, and *Journal of Women's History*. Most of these journals find their way into the hands only of the dues-paying members of the professional organizations that publish them—for example, the Organization of American Historians (*Journal of American History*), the Southern Historical Association (*Journal of Southern History*), and the American Studies Association (*American Quarterly*). However, like many other articles published in these journals, the ten included here deserve a wide and appreciative readership.

Certainly the art of the historical essay has received far less attention than the art of the short story. The relatively short length of the essay belies the amount of time necessary to perfect it. In many cases, article-length

manuscripts undergo a lengthy process of revision and resubmission to a particular journal, or even, in some instances, to several different journals, before they are accepted for publication. Editors send manuscripts to as many as seven different readers, who in some instances offer wildly contradictory reports to the author. Overall favorable reviews are no guarantee that a manuscript will be accepted; instead, such reviews often contain multiple suggestions for revisions and additional research, prompting intensive rewriting. The whole unwieldy process can consume many months, or even a number of years, from initial submission to final publication. In several essays, either in the first note or in prefatory material to the notes, the author acknowledges the comments and suggestions offered by an array of friends, colleagues, students, conference participants, and anonymous journal readers. Like a book, the history essay, then, is often the product of a grueling regimen and of a broader collective effort than the lone author's name might imply.

These essays explore a variety of topics that range widely over time and space, with some narrowing in on a case study and others taking a more capacious view of the past. At the same time the essays illustrate a number of interlocking themes and overlapping research methodologies revealing of the state of historical scholarship in the early twenty-first century. Several introduce us to relatively new fields, such as the history of the environment and the “new” foreign relations history. Taken individually and as a group, the essays also reveal the creative strategies of historians who are bringing women into stories about the past. A number focus on the problem of slavery and other tangible forms of racial ideologies that transcend a black-white binary. The authors represented here also explore the politics of remembering—how we as a nation memorialize the past and construct stories to illuminate it. Several consider the ways that different groups of Americans have constructed, acknowledged, and honored the notion and the reality of citizenship. Additionally, the essays offer pointed critiques of bland textbook renderings of the past, and of national mythologies that are marketed by enterprising merchandisers and entertainment companies. Readers will find these essays stimulating and provocative, and in some cases disturbing. In other words, these works will evoke a range of emotional and intellectual responses in ways that good literature always does.

In order to provide a more accurate view of the past, recent historians have broadened traditional subfields of history, and opened up new areas of inquiry. For example, scholars working in the traditional field of American diplomatic history tended to focus on international conflicts and high-level negotiations; these writers looked to the decisions made by presidents, prime ministers, and generals to explore America's place in the world. In contrast, scholars working in the field of the “new” foreign relations history look beyond the roles of heads of state and military officials in crafting foreign policy. These historians take a broader perspective that takes into account international labor relations, changing ideas of race and other notions of social difference, and the effects of domestic political and social

developments on the relations between the United States and other countries. For example, in his essay, “Outlawing ‘Coolies’: Race, Nation, and Empire in the Age of Emancipation,” Moon-Ho Jung explores the mid-nineteenth-century debate over the importation of Chinese workers called “coolies,” a largely derogatory term connoting unfree, or enslaved, slave labor.¹ Jung explores a question that increasingly preoccupied landowners all over the world: How best to deploy large labor forces in the sugar, cotton, and rice fields in response to an expanding global market for staple crops? Jung views the United States as part of a larger system of transnational labor migrations in the nineteenth century, and relates this debate to the controversy over slavery in antebellum America, where abolitionists and their adversaries were contemplating a nation—and a world—purged of unfree labor. Thus he shows that the concern over importing large numbers of Chinese workers was not just an American story, but one linked to the wider imperial policies of European powers shaping the Caribbean and Asia throughout this period. In the United States, some slave owners and employers saw these workers as a transitional workforce bridging the institution of slavery and free labor, and hence a group to be welcomed, or feared, depending on one’s perspective. Jung reminds us of the spectrum of labor systems that have shaped American history—not just slavery and free labor at either extreme, but also indentured servitude and apprenticeship in between.

Writing about a completely different topic, Molly M. Wood nonetheless joins with Jung in challenging the traditional view of American foreign relations as a domain inhabited only by powerful men crafting diplomacy in the suites of palaces and the offices of the U.S. State Department. In “Diplomatic Wives: The Politics of Domesticity and the ‘Social Game’ in the U.S. Foreign Service, 1905–1941,” she suggests that the U.S. households established abroad carried great symbolic and practical significance within the realm of diplomatic overtures and negotiations.² The Foreign Service diplomatic corps consisted of husbands and wives who forged partnerships to conduct diplomacy outside formal meetings—at parties and receptions and around the dinner table. Within these informal venues, women as wives and mothers served as highly visible ambassadors of American prosperity as well as agents of formal diplomatic initiatives. Wood also explores the ways that wives’ interaction with native-born servants revealed the American women’s own class and cultural assumptions. And she discusses the hierarchy of age and status among the wives themselves, a hierarchy that encouraged older women to serve as mentors to their young counterparts, instructing them in their daunting responsibilities. At a time when relations with other countries were assuming an ever more critical role in U.S. politics and society, the politics of domesticity was a game, its rules being shaped by highly stylized forms of etiquette that women as well as men were able to—and forced to—master. The women who hoped to “win” this game had to be well trained and well informed; the stakes were high: advancing their husbands’ careers as well as promoting the stipulated foreign policy interests of the United States.

If the new foreign relations history reveals fresh ways of looking at the past, so too does the history of the environment, an emerging field that stresses the social meanings and functions of the natural and built environment. Writing about the complex interplay between technology and the environment, Janet R. Daly Bednarek explores the evolution of the modern airport in her essay “The Flying Machine in the Garden: Parks and Airports, 1918–1938.”³ For the most part, the earliest airports had functions quite different from those of today. At the dawn of air travel, many people saw airports as parkland, as places of recreation. Indeed, cities often paired various forms of leisure—from swimming to horseshoes—with expansive pieces of real estate that also included landing strips. During these early years, people flocked to airports not to travel to distant places, but to relax with their families, enjoy a picnic lunch, and watch the planes. Air races and daredevil stunts and celebrity appearances and other forms of mass entertainment were all part of the function of the early airport. Only later in the century did city parks and recreation departments cede their airports to private companies that specialized in the transportation of people, mail, and goods.

Like many good stories, this one is evocative: while reading it I began to think back to the 1950s and the Sunday afternoons I spent with my parents and two brothers at the New Castle County airport, a small regional airport in northern Delaware. During World War II, my father, a licensed pilot and technical sergeant, had served as Central Fire Control (“top gun”) on a B-29 “Superfortress” bomber. Stationed in the South Pacific on the island of Saipan, he and his crewmates flew thirty missions, most of them over Japanese cities during the last nine months of the war. But a decade later, on any particular Sunday afternoon, he could be found piling his wife and daughter and two sons into the family’s red Ford station wagon and driving twenty minutes or so to the airport. There we would enjoy dinner together and watch the planes land and take off. For my father, the airport had now become a site not of danger, but of postwar domesticity, a place of leisure and family togetherness. Contemplating the nature and function of today’s airport, more resembling an armed camp than a green space oasis, it is difficult to imagine fighting one’s way through security barriers and police checks for the sole purpose of sharing a family meal, let alone finding a place to spread out the picnic blanket. Bednarek’s work introduces us to a new dimension of the not-so-distant past, when flying machines and natural landscapes complemented and did not war against each other.

Bednarek makes her case about the evolving functions of airports by examining the cities of Wichita, Omaha, and Minneapolis. Her work reminds us that case studies can help to reveal not just the particulars of American history, but broader themes as well. Monica Najar’s essay, “‘Meddling with Emancipation’: Baptists, Authority, and the Rift over Slavery in the Upper South,” focuses on debates over slavery in Kentucky Baptist churches around 1800.⁴ By taking a relatively narrow view, she is able to provide local texture to this widening crisis in American political life. At the national level, politicians crafted tortuous compromises between the