

Crucible of Freedom: Workers' Democracy in the Industrial Heartland, 1914–1960. By ERIC LEIF DAVIN. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010. ix, 454 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$90.)

Crucible of Freedom is unlike any scholarly history book I have ever read. Throughout the work, Eric Davin interjects himself into the narrative. He frequently recounts anecdotes from individuals who describe what their grandparents told them about labor organizing in the 1930s and 1940s. Davin's approach reminded me of William H. Whyte's *Street Corner Society*. Much like Whyte, Davin is the participant-observer interpreting an oppositional culture that was—and remains—remote from Main Street America. There are also echoes of David Brooks's sociological rendering of contemporary professionals in *Bobos in Paradise*.

If viewed as a Hunkie steelworker counterpart to Whyte's ethnic Italians or Brooks's "bourgeois bohemians," *Crucible of Freedom* has merit. There once were vibrant, working-class mill towns in America's industrial heartland. Most inhabitants traced their origins to southern and eastern Europe. They filled the taverns on Saturday nights and nursed hangovers on Roman Catholic pews on Sunday mornings. This is the world that Davin seeks to reconstruct, a world so remote now that Hollywood decades ago stopped making films like *The Deer Hunter* and *All the Right Moves*.

As a work of history, however, *Crucible of Freedom* falls short. Historians should not insert themselves into the narrative. Moreover, historians should not call upon second- and third-hand anecdotes. Oral history is a tool best used carefully. Each point raised in an oral interview should be documented by other, separate sources to avoid unverifiable stories filtered through two or three generations.

Beyond the issue of second-hand anecdotes and personal interjection, is the matter of writing. Tighter editing would have helped the author. Too many passages are in a dissertation-style format. There are numerous bullet points and sequential paragraph leads, as well as chapters that could have been boiled down into a more succinct format. Bullet points disrupt the narrative flow while too much background obscures the focus of the work.

Most fundamentally, Davin does not come to terms with how unionization helped undermine the preeminent position of manufacturing in post-World War II America. Factories relocated overseas and automation replaced unskilled, well-paid American workers. The reasons for these changes ranged from too much compensation relative to value produced and the shoddy quality of union-made goods, to onerous union work rules and the difficulty in firing incompetent, union-protected workers. Ultimately, the "crucible of freedom" became the incubus of the Rustbelt.

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