In Its Native Tongue: Religion and Community in Johnstown
By James Bratt

'The Horse Died at Windber': A History of Johnstown's Jews of Pennsylvania
By Leonard Winograd

How to write history? Academics have one answer, maybe two. The first is the Solid Monograph: traditionally organized into a coherent narrative around the comings of Big Events and the doings of Important People; more recently, arrayed schematically to test or illustrate Big Theory in the social sciences. The second is the Reflective Essay, cashing in the wisdom of experience (only past masters dare venture here) for the illumination of the educated or concerned book-buying public.

Hollywood, together with its Madison Avenue hosts, has another answer. History is Present Melodrama foisted upon past events, starring big bucks and bosoms. Tokugawa Japan and the American Civil War, medieval Venice and the French Revolution, immigrant-fed industrialization and homely heartland throb alike to suburban yearnings for passion, freedom, security, passion, status, adventure, and passion. In this approach, Big Public Events become set pieces — oddly abstract and wooden — for the hero(ine)'s search for survival and success, a thread winding up (or down, as you prefer) to bank and bed, yet trailing with Profound Doubts as to the Meaning of It All, which promises the Dread Sequel.

Between high and pop history lies a third possibility, folk history. Such work is not the spontaneous utterance of the People; it is crafted. But the craft rules may be simpler, the product less polished, and the audience more intimate than with the other two styles. Folk history recalls, or defines, the memory of a real community in its vernacular; it may include Big Public Events but only as these registered in the community's own terms. Alas, for twentieth century America, few such communities exist in perfect peace — Hollywood and State U. intrude from every side. Folk history can be written but requires an independent sensibility, almost a calculated simplicity, to be done well.

Leonard Winograd has a few of these powers but not nearly enough. His Jewish subject matter aside, the book resembles the Christian doctrine of the trinity — three in one and one becoming three — only lacking the efficiency, harmony, and originality theologians ascribe to the deity. Some Hollywood strands run through the volume, motifs of individuals finding success, the Big Event (Johnstown's 1889 flood) framing personal destiny, etc.; but none of the finish that the Jewish-American Story a la Pop attains in Marjorie Morningstar or Evergreen. The volume takes an academic pose too: 819 footnotes, an eight page bibliography, 13 appendices; but those desiring coherence on the subject had better run and not walk to Ewa Morawska's For Bread With Butter: Life-Worlds of East-Central Europeans in Johnstown, Pa., 1890-1940 (New York, 1986). One appendix does show some real folk narrative, an excerpt from Natalie Sprung's The Unshaken (New York, 1945), glistening with small-town America and Victorian papa in a Jewish vein.

But the rest, or the whole, of the book: what is it? A melange of kosher and treyf, a vernacular out of control, giving away more than it knows. It is an ethnic, industrial-Appalachian equivalent of those Midwestern rural newspapers filled with the comings, goings, hostings, and visitings of a thousand Aunt Sadie's and a hundred potluck suppers. It is positively Faulknerian in its stream-of-consciousness style, its enmeshment in the lived experience of its subjects; but it offers neither a glossary nor a hint of structure that might make that experience more accessible to outsiders. It has lots of humor that, where intended, I didn't find funny and where funny is unintended.

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Take the subtitle (please): 'A History of Johnstown's Jews of Pennsylvania.' We were expecting, maybe, Johnstown's Jews of Jamaica? Or take a page, and almost any page will do. We learn of Noah Goldman, who died "as did most of his company, of chronic diarrhoea" in the Mexican War. "He may not have been Jewish." (page 27) As for one of Johnstown's "most stable Jewish organizations: ...Not too much credit can be given Rabbis Perelmutter and Stillpass for their excellent work in this direction." (244) The book's organization follows the twin principles of repetition and bewildermanent, each chapter spiralling randomly like the last. We begin with Mr. Winograd's own tenure in Johnstown as Reform rabbi (1960s), bounce back to the 1889 flood, up to the 1920s, then to the frontier, the future, the 1936 flood, the present, the era of Hitler, more 1889 flood, temple fundraising in 1906, etc., etc. Stream of consciousness, indeed.

What virtues might this style hold? A couple — one for insiders, one for outsiders. Someone who grew up Jewish in Johnstown will probably find a thousand points of enlightenment here: just when the Big Families came to town, who's related to whom, and since when, where this or that building came from, how and why the congregations have (and haven't) gotten along. Outsiders will find here a virtually unmediated look at religion and community at the grass roots. What do these mean for ordinary people in the day to day? They mean strings of rabbis distinguishable for where they had been and where they would go after. They mean burial societies and graveyards; schooling and weddings and births; rivalries, tenacity, and a stubborn sense of precious things. And they mean fundraisers — late, soon, and in between. Anyone shy about checkbook Judaism should leave this book alone, for Rabbi Winograd is one person not afraid to write "Jews" and "money" in the same sentence. In fact the distinctive mark of Johnstown's Jews, the author states repeatedly, is their historic national leadership in per capita giving to United Jewish Appeal. That this has slipped lately gives him cause for worry — worry about the city's economy and worry about his group's faithfulness. Poignant enough, until we read his concluding effect: "[W]e can at least look back on a fabulous but all-too-brief day in the limelight and ponder if, like Camelot or Tara — both civilizations that are 'gone with the wind' — we shall see the likes of them." (275)

EMPLOY OF FORTUNE: CROWNS, COLONIES & TRIBES IN THE SEVEN YEARS WAR IN AMERICA

By Francis Jennings


Pp. xiv, 520. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. $27.50.

R EVISIONIST histories, by their very nature, challenge established interpretations of events and pose more convincing alternatives. Empire of Fortune does this with enthusiasm. Provocative in its language, controversial in its conclusions, this scholarly work will influence, for years to come, studies of Indian-white relations and the French and Indian War.

Readers wishing a new, candid assessment of America's colonial period will welcome this re-examination. Others, equally in earnest, will squirm with discomfort: Jennings wields a keen machete. Myths long accepted are exposed for the false and malicious creations they are. Heroes like Washington, Franklin, Montcalm, and Wolfe slip from pedestals of naive adulation; and poor Francis Parkman, the well-known nineteenth century American historian. He is denounced as a "liar" who "fabricated documents, misquoted others, pretended to use his great collection of sources when he really relied almost entirely on a small set of nastily biased secondary works, and did it all in order to support an ideology of divisiveness and hate based on racism, bigotry, misogyny, authoritarianism, chauvinism, and upper-class arrogance."

In 1775 the initial volume of Jennings' Covenant Chain trilogy appeared. The Invasion of America traces the growing relations between New England Puritans and their Indian neighbors with particular attention paid to the cultural imperatives that shaped the attitudes and actions of both. The myth of European moral and cultural superiority is rejected.

The second volume, The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire (1984), explores the advances and reversals of the Five Nations from their first encounter with the French and Dutch to the start of the Seven Years War in 1756. The Iroquois are seen not so much as savage aggressors as skilled diplomats who achieved a workable relationship — the Covenant Chain — between the English colonies and eastern tribes. In this way relative peace was preserved throughout the region and the inroads of whites into Indian hunting grounds were slowed.

Completing the trilogy, Empire of Fortune focuses on the American phase of a global struggle between Great Britain and France and their European allies. In 1754 Canadians erected Fort Duquesne at the fork of the Ohio. When Virginia's Assembly sent a force of provincials under George Washington to evict the Canadians, the expedition was defeated at Great Meadows.

Within a year French and British regulars were in the field, the latter regiments attacking on three fronts. Only in Nova Scotia, however, were the British able to expel a hostile population and build a naval base. In the south Brad-