A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History

By Michael Frisch


The 13 essays in this volume, all previously published, are collected for the first time and enhanced by a solid introduction. They focus on case studies of the doing of oral history and of public historic presentations to general audiences. Professor Frisch, a noted practitioner in these fields, details his own experiences and also includes extended reviews of a number of historical documentaries, “coffee table” histories of several New York cities, and urban museum presentations in New York City, Philadelphia and St. Louis.

Structurally, the essays are grouped in three sections: those specifically on oral history, those on documentary form (where hands-on experiences are particularly emphasized), and finally those on public history programming including various exhibition projects. Thematically, Professor Frisch fairly consistently grapples with two related issues. He is concerned with making history effective for audiences — and he believes that many efforts misfire, including those informed by radical as well as by conservative political purposes. He recurrently engages the problem of relating scholarly history and especially the analytical questions raised by various forms of social history, to the historical experiences and judgments of the general public. Neither a how-to manual nor a theoretical statement on oral and public history, the collection revolves around the marriage of practical experience with underlying concerns about what historical evidence and historical learning consist of.

Essay collections are notoriously difficult to review, and even this one by a single author concerned with closely related topics poses problems. Many readers will prefer to pick and choose individual essays of interest rather than reading straight through, for segments are of uneven quality and generality. Several of the essays that are little more than review essays of previously issued material have limited interest, though Frisch seeks to draw more general themes from particular topics. Certain essays fall rather flat. A long piece on problems of editing oral history testimony, while including some sensible injunctions, consists mainly of edited and then unedited transcripts of a single interview which add little to the injunctions themselves. An essay recalling the author’s 1972 book on Springfield, Massachusetts, on the occasion of a later visit, is rather trite — a bit self-indulgent — for it offers little more than a few notes on how the city has changed. (Also indulgent are undue introductory layouts on when the author initially wrote each essay.) Two different essays deal with the Public Broadcasting System’s documentary on Vietnam; they repeat judgments annoyingly, though the second’s more extended comment is interesting in itself.

There are also some troubling omissions that reflect but go beyond Frisch’s desire to avoid elaborate theory. While his fascination with oral history as a historical source and a basis for public history presentations conveys the author’s excitement, it can also mislead. None of the essays explicitly discusses how to blend oral history evidence with data of other sorts, or the desirability of doing so, though the author’s views are compatible with this approach. Public history is so firmly equated with oral history materials that it risks being confined to contemporary topics alone — for in no essay, save the throw away on Springfield

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and the review of coffee table books, are periods prior to the Depression evoked. The contemporary history-broader perspective relationship deserves more attention.

Other topics, sensibly treated to a point, are simply not fully explored. Frisch is fascinated by the nature of public memory, but in these essays he does not probe potential social-psychological angles. An intriguing essay on what college students remember about American heroes, though based on very limited data, ventures some plausible conclusions about the importance of general cultural pressures in creating a surprisingly uniform and rather boring viewpoint. Questions about the nature of the public audience for history in the United States, and the kinds of expectations it brings to public history, are more often evoked than systematically probed.

At the same time, the book has two major strengths. First, several of the individual essays are very good. The account of the author's clash with the New York Times over how to present oral history testimony about unemployment in Buffalo is both interesting and revealing. Evaluation of audience reaction (both American and Chinese) to a documentary on a Chinese village is useful. The three final essays, on urban museums, the Philadelphia tercentenary celebration and the Ellis Island museum project use the case study approach to excellent effect; here are practical and useful issues to grapple with in thinking about public presentation of history.

The book's second strength comes from the author's characteristic good sense in basic judgment which shines through, even in some essays of modest scope. Frisch wants a balance between use of oral history that is overwhelmed by scholarly interpretation and the nonsense idea that oral history evidence "speaks for itself." Scholarly categories of analysis and oral evidence must intertwine. He wants public history presentations that challenge audiences, rather than confirming stereotypic expectations, and while he recognizes the abstruseness of much social history scholarship, he wants some of the leading issues to inform general exhibits — so that viewers ask questions about their own sense of the past. He attacks conservative impulses in manipulating history, including the common temptation in documentaries to have ordinary people convey only limited reactions while elite participants offer more general perspectives — as if only the latter group could really think in ways anyone else would wish to know about. (This was the core of the dispute with the Times.) At the same time he reminds radical historians that the public, and oral history interviewees, are often also conservative because of the power of conventional historical culture and a desire to make the past safe.

Judgments of this sort, often eloquently presented and applied to specific kinds of historical work, offer humane and useful guidance. Rarely definitive, and in some ways not as reflective as the author seems to imagine, this book offers much to readers interested in some newer methods of doing and presenting contemporary history.

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Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South
By Grady McWhiney

This book proceeds by an old principle in ethnic conversation: only Jews may be anti-Semitic, only blacks may use the "n" word. These pages offer up every facet, every detail, every angle of the traditional stereotype of the American South; only what Yankees said to disparage, Grady McWhiney means to understand — in fact, to praise. As the Lyndon Baines Johnson professor of history at Texas Christian University and possessor of the right sort of surname for this kind of book, someone like McWhiney can march forth intrepidly where others would demur.

To parody Crewecoeur, what was this odd beast, this Southerner? Lazy, improvident, reckless and careless; loose of morals and low in ambition. A lover of idleness, of the sensory, sensuol and sensational. Hostile to work and trade, to fences, roads and bridges, to government, towns and education. Zealous for whiskey, gambling, tobacco, racing and racy women. Fond of dancing, banjo-playing, fiddling, dueling, eating, hospitality and above all, talking — the more exaggerated, inventive and dramatic, the better. The Southerner was, in short, the Cracker.

But before or beneath that, he was the Celt. McWhiney's intent in this book is not simply to reverse valuations, but to attribute the distinctiveness of the old South to ethnicity rather than to economics (the slave labor system) or geography (the frontier). Southerners in this account came largely from the fringes of the British Isles: Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and the north edge of England. Yankees descended mostly from the English heartland. Thus the colonial and early national periods perpetuated — and by the Civil War accentuated — an ancient Old World contest of cultures. Contrary to traditional wisdom, immigration and the frontier did not reduce diversity to a common "American" type; rather they allowed the retention, simplification and intensification of old ways of life that were becoming untenable in the land of origin.