BOOK REVIEWS

University presses and independent publishing houses regularly produce a wealth of new scholarship on various aspects of Western Pennsylvania history. This magazine will provide an in-depth, critical review for one or two books each issue, plus synopses of content and publishing information for others. Those interested in reviewing books can contact book review editor Nicholas P. Ciotta at nciotta@hswp.org. Send review copies to the attention of the Editor, Western Pennsylvania History, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania History, 1212 Smallman Street, Pittsburgh, PA, 15222.

A Catholic New Deal: Religion and Reform in Depression Pittsburgh
By Kenneth J. Heineman (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1999). Illustrations, notes, index. xv + 265 pp. $60.00 cloth, $22.50 paper.

Explores the relationship between religion and labor activism in Depression-era Pittsburgh arguing that the city’s Catholic leaders played an integral, though often-overlooked, role in strengthening the city’s labor movement.

Guide to the State Historical Markers of Pennsylvania

Complete texts to more than 1,800 markers across the state installed through 1999. Markers are listed alphabetically within each county; address and dedication date are also supplied. County maps show major towns and roads but not marker locations.

Keystone of Democracy: A History of Pennsylvania Workers
Edited by Howard Harris (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1999). Illustrations, index. xiv + 338 pp. $24.95 hardcover; $16.95 paper.

A history of Pennsylvania labor history including short essays on Pittsburgh labor leader Amy Ballinger, the teachers union in Pittsburgh, and Western Pennsylvania’s construction industry.

Pennsylvania Battlefields and Military Landmarks

Travel guide containing detailed visitation information for Pennsylvania battlefields, forts, and other military history sites, roughly organized by conflict.

Smokestacks and Progressives: Environmentalists, Engineers, and Air Quality in America, 1881-1951
By David Stradling (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). Illustrations, notes, bibliographic essay, index. x + 262 pp. $42.50 hardcover.

Overview of the American anti-smoke movement that resulted in successful reform efforts in cities such as Pittsburgh and St. Louis.

William Findley From West of the Mountains: A Politician in Pennsylvania, 1783-1791
By John Caldwell (Gig Harbor, WA: Red Apple Publishing, 2000). Notes, appendix. 284 pp. $15.00 paper.

Biographical account of a Western Pennsylvania politician whose populist, “Man of the People” image endeared him to many backcountry pioneers.

Petrolia: The Landscape of America’s First Oil Boom
By Brian Black (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) Illustrations, tables, notes, index. xii + 225 pp. $42.50 hardcover

A weekend drive through the Oil Creek valley in northwestern Pennsylvania offers many pleasant views and abundant opportunities for outdoor activities. The stream provides good fishing while several trails along its banks serve bikers and wildlife enthusiasts. How different the scenery is now compared to its appearance 140 years ago when the Oil Creek valley was the site of the world’s first oil boom. Brian Black, assistant professor of history at Penn State University, Altoona, has returned to the Oil Creek region of the 1860s in his well-written book, Petrolia: The Landscape of America’s First Oil Boom. What the reader encounters, however, is not a pleasant valley, but a landscape fallen victim to a destructive industrial process, one that affected the natural environment and also shaped the region’s human society and culture. Black notes it was a “culture of mass disturbance” fueled by American economic development and a boom-inspired frenzy that sought immediate monetary gain.

Edwin Drake’s discovery of petroleum along Oil Creek in 1859 was a timely one. Had it happened even 30 years earlier, the event would likely have triggered only minor interest.
In fact, as Black explains in his first chapter, the discovery of oil was not only timely but a direct result of the times. The whaling industry, which had provided a desirable fuel for illumination and a lubricant to grease the wheels of early industrialization, was dying out by the late 1850s, in large part because the whales themselves had been overhunted. Experiments with the distillation of petroleum to make kerosene eventually led to a burning fluid that was cheaper and more readily abundant than whale oil. America was also getting ready to enter its second phase of industrial development by the 1860s, which would rely on petroleum oil to lubricate new machinery and eventually power it. The discovery of petroleum thus supplied a new market and at the same time created a new industry. That industry, as Black reveals, shaped the landscape of Petrolia, both natural and man-made.

The limited scientific knowledge about oil reserves and its fluid state made it a difficult resource to regulate legally in the 1860s. Black comments that “the liquid nature of petroleum allowed it to fall between the cracks of American ownership law.” (59) This characteristic of oil directly contributed to the way oil speculators and oil companies treated the land. Underground oil reserves were considered common resources with monetary rewards going to those who extracted or “captured” the oil. The law of capture encouraged oil hunters to drill, extract, and move along when a well gave out. There was almost no concern with clean up, especially as land was leased and subleased, and distanced from the original landowner, a process that lessened respect for the land and resulted in its being viewed as merely part of an industrial process. The numerous period photographs that Black includes give evidence of the industrialization of the landscape. Many of them, taken throughout the boom years by John A. Mather, show land and waterways succumbing to oil and the drive to capture as much of it as quickly as possible.

As news of the oil boom spread across the country, the population of the Oil Creek region exploded. The end of the Civil War further increased the influx of young men seeking fortunes and immigrants seeking opportunity. Existing communities such as Titusville, Oil City, and Franklin grew while new boomtowns developed overnight. Black has done a fine job describing the rough existence of boomtown life: the constant danger of fire, knee-deep mud, and unsavory characters constituted only part of the unpleasant nature of towns such as Shamburg and Pithole, Petrolia’s best known. These towns were destined to fail as long-term communities, since, as Black explains, they existed for one purpose, the extraction of oil. When oil ceased to flow, they quickly collapsed for lack of an infrastructure and other commodity to support them.

Ironically, the almost total emphasis on oil extraction in boomtowns made basic commodities such as water and food very profitable for those who carried it in. Savvy land speculators made small fortunes by selling plots in boomtowns while oil speculators frequently drilled wells that produced nothing. Even mill owners upriver on Oil Creek turned the creek itself into a profitable commodity by releasing freshets, an environmentally destructive process that raised the water level and allowed boats filled with oil barrels to float to refining stations in Oil City and elsewhere.

Oil defined the landscape of Petrolia during the 1860s and early 1870s and gave it a mythic quality. Popular literature turned tales of oil fires into gothic horror; engravings presented picturesque landscapes where nature and human progress coexisted in harmony; accounts of oil strikes were described in terms of America’s divine progression toward economic and social superiority. Black’s investigation of the Pennsylvania oil boom reveals an industry and a nation on the verge of monumental change and growth. It also presents a disturbing look at the beginning of our own industrial society.

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