

**Schlereth, Thomas J. *Artifacts and the American Past.*
Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local
History, 1980. Pp. vii, 294. \$13.95 (U.S.)**

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1980s working class political influence in Worcester, Massachusetts, forced park commissioners to adopt a bipartite park system: playing fields for active recreation in the industrial part of town and scenic parks for passive recreation in the middle class areas.¹ Other work explores the search for escapist pleasures in amusement “parks,” a late nineteenth century trend that undoubtedly influenced twentieth century attitudes towards urban recreational space.² Cranz merely alludes to this relationship between popular culture and park design. Yet, as American historian Roy Lubove has noted, it is precisely this “relationship between environment and culture” that is of most concern to social historians studying urban parks.³ Failure to assess broadly based social and cultural influences on the development of public parks is the book’s principal failing.

If set in this wider context, the historical examination of Canada’s urban parks promises important new insights into the nature of the Canadian urban experience. Despite its flaws, Galen Cranz’s book can provide a useful starting point for this pursuit. Her work offers a number of hypotheses that can be tested for Canada. In addition, a comparative approach will raise obvious questions about the extent to which the British influence in Canada and the Progressive movement in the United States shaped unique park histories in the two North American countries.

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NOTES

- 1 Roy Rosenzweig, “Middle-Class Parks and Working Class Play: The Struggle Over Recreational Space in Worcester, Massachusetts, 1870-1910,” *Radical History Review*, vol. 21 (Fall 1979): 31-46. Also see Stephen Hardy, “‘Parks For The People’: Reforming the Boston Park System, 1870-1915,” *Journal of Sport History*, vol. VII, 3A (Winter 1980): 5-24.
- 2 Robert E. Snow and David E. Wright, “Coney Island: A Case Study of Popular Culture and Technical Change,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. IX (Spring 1976): 960-1975, and John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Millions: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: 1978).
- 3 Roy Lubove, “Social History and The History of Landscape Architecture,” *Journal of Social History*, vol. IX, 1 (Winter, 1975): 269.

Schlereth, Thomas J. *Artifacts and the American Past*. Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1980. Pp. vii, 294. \$13.95 (U.S.).

Artifacts and the American Past was read in considerable anticipation and is reviewed with some regret. The anticipation was based upon the promise of the title and the reputation of its author, Thomas J. Schlereth, as an enthusiast for innovative urban history. His previous calls for a

historic study of the city, represented by “The City as Artifact” in the *AHA Newsletter* (February, 1977), characterized the most creative thrust of a multi-disciplinary, integrated urban historicism. “Artifacts and the American Past” suggest an attempt by a scholar interested in urban history to focus the methodologies and perspectives evolved in that field on smaller objects. Whether a subject is a thimble or a skyscraper and whether the context is a button collection or an urban landscape, the material creations of a civilization represent its technological and intellectual endowments. Despite the sustained, disciplined analysis directed at our cities, relatively little parallel attention has been brought to bear upon our smaller material culture. It was hoped that *Artifacts and the American Past* would channel some of the riches of the one field onto its undernourished neighbour, but regrettably it does not.

The book is divided into three major sections, the first of which deals with graphics as artifacts. Three categories of documentation, photographs, mail-order catalogues and maps, are assessed for their historical potential. In each instance, a good case is made for the use of the specific documentary genre as a source of information, and guidelines are offered to aid converts in their task. While the particular material is American rather than Canadian, the author, in his references and asides, is clearly aware that his statements pertain to this country as to his own. The reader need only substitute “Eaton’s” for “Sears, Roebuck and Co.” and “Goad” for “Sanborn” to give the chapters a familiar ring. Indeed it is the familiar ring that may cause the reader some apprehension. However apt the points the author is making may be, and however well-documented his train of thought, there is little that is new in these chapters. The real achievement is an admirably thorough review of the American literature, rendering the footnotes a useful guide for further reading. The essays themselves, two of which have been published elsewhere, are distantly removed from the archival frontier, though ably done.

In the second section, “Historic Sites as Artifacts,” the author has his greatest opportunity to review the use of small-scale artifacts in historical interpretation. Three types of institutions are considered: historic houses, museum villages and the 1876 Philadelphia International Exhibition. Each has its own chapter, all of which are reprints of previously-published articles. Despite some hints at analytical techniques and references to books actually containing analyses, the treatment of historic houses amounts to a brief review of several strategies for using such institutions in teaching. Schlereth believes admirably that more history can be taught outside the classroom than is currently done, and his approaches are offered in the hope that they will be used, but the ploy of approaching historic houses as teaching devices does not develop the already-established theme of explaining alternate historical sources. Museum villages are also approached as an instructional tool. Included is an apt warning that the image projected may not accord closely to

reality. For that reason one is struck by his failure to suggest a methodology by which these reconstitutions of early communities could be improved by the proper application of research techniques familiar to him as an urban historian. The final offering of the section of the Philadelphia "Centennial" affirms the utility of artifacts for historical interpretation and refers to the considerable interest in them by historians. Attention is again directed at the teaching possibilities of the event, thereby evading the issue of how those historians actually interpret history by using artifacts.

The third section finds the author straddling the two themes. Entitled "Landscapes as Artifacts," the section devotes its first study to vegetation and the third to "above-ground archaeology," both of which point out the historical evidence apparent in our physical surroundings. The value of recognizing this information is clearly established, although the prior knowledge of historical fact appears to be a prerequisite, if for no other reason than to distinguish false leads from valuable clues. Thus the artifact again becomes illustrative. The middle chapter on regional studies in America suggests Chicago as a model for the practice of urban history. Useful for its extensive bibliography on Chicago, this segment provides urban historians with few lessons on how to examine a community beyond the obvious one of doing it well and in detail. The final section of the book, aptly called "Coda," is a useful, but not novel, series of reflections on historical fallacies and a number of the crafts' fundamental objectives.

Regardless of the theme of a particular chapter, Schlereth tantalizes the reader with references to the volume of work now touching on the interpretation of artifacts. He alludes occasionally to his viewpoint, mentioned in the introduction, that artifacts contain unique data which can be unlocked with "methodological rigor and precision." For the most part the singular nature of material evidence is not proven and the methodology remains unarticulated. If Schlereth knows how to unlock this information, he is not telling. Certainly he fails to apply the insights developed by studying urban history to this closely-related field. To be fair to the author, he also intends the book to expatiate teaching techniques, and in this he succeeds. The author declares himself as addressing professional historians, students and the general public in writing history. Readers of this journal will likely find that there is little in the volume for them unless they have the energy and desire to get their classes out of the classroom. Considerably more will be found by their students, particularly those engaged in urban and regional studies and public history courses. Persons not actively engaged in history will benefit particularly from exposure to *Artifacts and the American Past*. It is well-written and clearly organized and underscores the existence of historical evidence all around us. As for those of us waiting for some leadership in the establishment of a methodology for studying artifacts, Schlereth has just provided *Material Culture Studies in America*. A compendium of seminal essays

in the field, the volume does not obviously impinge upon urban history and is thus best reviewed elsewhere, but it does provide a thoughtful review of past scholarship, a bibliography and useful introductions to classic material culture studies. Urbanists interested in all aspects of their surroundings are well advised to secure a copy of the second volume.

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Rabb, Theodore K. and Rotberg, Robert I., eds. *Industrialization and Urbanization: Studies in Interdisciplinary History*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981. Pp. 324. \$5.95 (paper).

Stave, Bruce M. ed. *Modern Industrial Cities: History, Policy, and Survival*. Beverly Hills, California: Sage, 1981. Pp. 307. \$9.95 (paper).

One of these collections brings together some of the most influential and polished essays that have appeared in the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*; the other, papers presented to a 1979 conference at the University of Connecticut on "The Dynamics of Modern Industrial Cities." In form and content these respective volumes reflect their origins.

Rabb's and Rotberg's *Industrialization and Urbanization* is slick, sophisticated to the touch and to the eye, and impossibly eclectic in its presentation of an urban experience that reaches from imperial Rome to post-colonial India, passing by early industrialization in England, nineteenth-century Marseille, coal mining "towns" in England, Wales and the United States, and social experience in Gilded Age and Progressive Boston and Buffalo. Were this not enough, such specialized essays are supplemented by book reviews supposedly indicative of the "revisionist concern . . . of the new urban history." There are workers, families, transients and ideologies sufficiently afloat in the pages of this collection to attract numbers of scholars (most of whom will be, as are the contributors and editors, historians), but just what is distinctly urban about their experience is never forcefully articulated, nor is it readily apparent what kind of reader could possibly remain riveted to this disparate assemblage of articles, however attractively packaged.

Modern Industrial Cities, edited by Bruce Stave, is also discursive, spanning American and European experiences, but is more focussed conceptually, exploring how families, neighbourhoods, housing and urban organization have reflected city-dwelling peoples' adaptation to the class tensions of capitalist society. Subtitled *History, Policy, and Survival*, this volume addresses the academic's classic moment of self-doubt: is what I do useful in the real world?