

**Leff, David K. *The Last Undiscovered Place*. Charlottesville:
University of Virginia Press, 2004**

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We need not go far to discover a fascinating bit of history: a dilapidated building, an old church, even our own homes may be the source of long-forgotten (or never revealed) secrets. David K. Leff suggests that “the usual, taken-for-granted locations where we live our lives become more vivid as we hear and pass along what happened there” (103). With the aim of finding the extraordinary in the spaces and structures around him, Leff explores his home of Collinsville, Connecticut. At the same time, he encourages historians of all varieties to develop an appetite for local history. *The Last Undiscovered Place* is a unique collection of historical, geographical, architectural, and sociological anecdotes—at once a study of community and an urban biography.

The book is divided into thematic sections. Leff’s discussion of historical Collinsville occurs mainly in the section entitled “Surveying,” and the chapters “Factory Creations,” and “Six Guns, Fountain Pens, and the Uses of History.” In other chapters, such as those comprising the section entitled “Cycles,” the author discusses the present almost to the exclusion of the past. At times objective and at other times autobiographical, *The Last Undiscovered Place* appears to be as much about cultivating the author’s own heritage as it is about the village of Collinsville.

Collinsville was founded by Samuel Collins, who opened the Collins Company there in 1826 and became an important manufacturer of knives, axes, and blades of all sorts. The company’s fortunes waxed and waned over more than a century, and were eventually lost in 1966. Names such as Frederick Law Olmsted and Elisha K. Root grace the town’s chronicles, and Leff gives these and other figures due attention.

The author pays particular attention to the use of space, configuration of dwellings and businesses, and the town’s relationship to surrounding geological formations. Collinsville was designed not only to house workers, but also to encourage their moral fortitude. He posits that the layout of a town has a great deal to do with its present character—a point that may hold validity. However, he corrupts his own authority on these and other matters by mixing fact and imagination. In a discussion of his own neighbourhood, The Green, Leff ponders, “Somewhat fancifully, I sometimes wonder whether characteristics of those who have long owned a home are passed along to successors in a kind of genetics of tenancy.” He goes on to draw parallels between his own family and that of a previous owner, long since dead.

While his thoughts imbue the text with a certain flavour, hints of objectivity are lost in the imaginative stew.

Those who read this book will have a sense that Leff spends much of his time wandering the streets of Collinsville. The text is disproportionately focused on the present-day village, and the author frequently introduces history as it relates to the contemporary. For example, historical anecdotes about his house are inlaid with stories about afternoons he has spent making repairs. A brief examination of Olmsted’s time in Collinsville is concluded with Leff’s loosely related reminiscences of a hike with his daughter, and a visit to the river with his son. The reader, willingly or not, has become privy to Leff’s personal exploration of Collinsville—an eclectic historical journey in which fact and imagination mingle to create a rather nostalgic view of the past.

The author departs from historical method, mixing past and present to create a truly interesting and stylistically well-written book. Yet, it is important to emphasize that his research has not been presented in a strictly objective or methodical way. Particularly, the author’s failure to discuss his sources distances his work from the realm of academic writing.

Not only has he openly strayed from a methodical historical approach, but he has chosen his own backyard as subject matter. By the end of the book, we realize that we know as much or more about David Leff and his family as we do about Collinsville, Connecticut. Yet, herein lies its usefulness: rather than an ordinary urban biography, what we find is a lesson on how to become a valuable, knowledgeable, contributing member of a community. The author describes his experiences as a volunteer fire-fighter, as a friend visiting neighbours at the local store, as a maple syrup maker, and as a contributor to the local Memorial Day and Halloween celebrations. He muses, “The newspaper I buy at LaSalle is more valuable to me for the encounters I have than for the stories I read” (57). Leff’s commitment to Collinsville is palpable. Indeed, Leff seems to suggest that his exploration of the history of Collinsville is a mere component of his total participation in the community—as much as helping a neighbour carry in groceries or planning a local event.

The Last Undiscovered Place is noteworthy because it is unique. While the book’s merit as a source on Collinsville is highly questionable, its worth as an exploration of the idea of community might possibly outweigh its shortcomings.

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