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Christopher Waldrep, Michael Bellesiles, eds. *Documenting American Violence: A Sourcebook.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. xiv + 399 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-515004-9.

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Documenting Public Violence in the United States

This is a difficult book to categorize. It is much more ambitious and provocative than most collections of primary sources and features some incisive essays and commentaries along with the documents. But the quality of those essays and commentaries is uneven, and the scope and purpose of the book fluctuate. The result is a book that is both illustrative and interpretive, intriguing and diffuse.

The editors begin with a thoughtful but slippery attempt to define their subject. They point out that violence "can seem, and often is, random, chaotic, anarchic," that it can include "a duel, a brawl, a shooting, a war, a feud, a riot"–and that Americans often use the term indiscriminately (p. 1). Waldrep and Bellesiles will focus "on violence as a domestic tradition, not as an instrument of foreign policy." They are specifically interested in "violent events that have been sensationalized into metaphors." They intriguingly refer to the nation's "'wound culture,' a pornography of pain that translates into a fascination with injured bodies" (pp. 1-2). The brief introduction then explores the role of violence in the nation's history and historians' discovery of violence in the 1960s. According to its introduction, this book will focus on how Americans have represented violence. But the editors in fact treat violence much more broadly.

There are eleven chapters, each beginning with a brief essay or overview of its topic and ending with a useful bibliography. The chapters are entitled: "Crime as Social Drama"; "The Conquest of America"; "Revolutionary Violence"; "Slavery"; "The Civil War"; "The New South"; "The Wild West in Myth and Reality"; "The Industrialization of Violence"; "Violence as a Means of Crime Control"; "Civil Rights"; and "Lost to History." Each chapter includes three to fifteen documents, each with an introduction.

This structure provides the editors with many opportunities to inject their own insights into the book. Indeed, the volume at its best reads like a set of brief and illuminating essays interspersed with complementary pieces of evidence.

This is particularly the case in the first and, I think, strongest chapter: "Crime as Social Drama." The chapter uses five documents to explore the public discourse around four murders that occurred between 1698 and 1994. The introduction traces how accounts of such murders shifted from cautionary tales to entertainment, but it closes by suggesting that the "will to sexual dominance plays a significant role in fostering male violence" (p. 17). This generalization seems plausible, but we are already straying from the editors' promise to focus on representations of violence to considerations of the forces that generated violence, from cultural to social history.

To be sure, this chapter tells us about the place of homicide in popular culture by presenting a seventeenth-century murderer's purported conversation with a minister and accounts of early-nineteenth- and twentieth-century men who killed to defend a woman's honor. But the O. J. Simpson trial–an event that seems ideally suited to the editors' interest in representations of violence–is represented by a prosaic assessment of the lawyers' tactics, a selection introduced by a general account of the trial that does not much get at its rich symbolism.

The chapter on industrialization does a splendid job of showing how violence cannot be understood apart from the cultural contexts in which it occurred and was discussed. Being the victim of violent acts could bring labor unions or factory owners public sympathy and hence political power, for example. The documents are from Allan Pinkerton (who headed a detective agency hired by factory owners), a policeman, a newspaper, an assassin who claimed to be employed by a union, a federal report, and three observers of an industrial disaster.

Most of the chapters are more eclectic and general. The one on slavery includes several legal documents, Nat Turner's account of his slave revolt, Frederick Douglass's

recollections of violence toward slaves, and records from a white vigilante group organized to suppress slave rebellions. A debate on dueling among whites is inserted without the editors relating it explicitly to slavery. Some of the chapter introductions are broad and generic. The one for the Civil War, for example, is a serviceable preface to the subject, but it does not much get at the role of violence–let alone the question of how Americans of that time represented violence. The Civil War documents are diverse: a newspaper account of John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, a soldier's reflections on the war and warfare, a British officer's description of the battle of Gettysburg, an account of the New York City draft riots, the diary of a soldier imprisoned at Andersonville, and a description of Lincoln's assassination.

Nor do the editors consistently tell us about how the documents were created. We learn, for example, that the excerpt on the assassination of Lincoln comes from a book by Thomas M. Harris published in 1892, but not who Harris was or why he wrote his book. Indeed, unlike most collections of primary sources, the editors do not offer guidelines on how to approach primary sources–and occasionally it is difficult to tell whether one is reading a primary or a secondary source.

The book contains some curious omissions and assertions. The chapter on civil rights has eleven excerpts but none on the rich debate around Black Power. The chapter on western violence begins by noting: "Scholars differ on the actual number of homicides in the West but generally agree that the rate was no higher on average than in the contemporary urban east and probably lower than in the South" (p. 207). The editors do not cite what may well be the most ambitious book on this subject. Clare V. McKanna, Jr.'s study of nearly 1,000 western homicides from 1880-1920 indicates that the West in fact had a much higher homicide rate than the urban East.[1] The book's treatment of intimate violence is weak. They hazard the remarkable assertion that wife-beating has shown "little evidence of the change over time that historians study," which likely means either that they are unfamiliar with the meager scholarship on the subject or that this scholarship has not yet established how wife-beating has fluctuated (p. 9). In either event, to acknowledge the difficulty of discerning the history of family violence is not tantamount to asserting that family violence has somehow operated outside of history in a way that more public and well-documented types of violence have not. This book unfortunately does little to redress this neglect, as its chapter on family abuse (tellingly entitled "Lost to History") contains just three documents.

Documenting American Violence is at once a rewarding and frustrating book. This reviewer wished for a more disciplined and consistent approach to the subject but is also grateful for the volume's diverse documents and, especially, insights.

Note

[1]. Clare V. McKanna, Jr., *Homicide, Race, and Justice in the American West, 1880-1920.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997.

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