

# H-Net Reviews

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Roger Adelson, ed. *Speaking of History: Conversations with Historians*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997. xxi + 263 pp. \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87013-464-7.

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## Historians Speak Out

In the preface to this collection of interviews with prominent historians, Roger Adelson writes that he is “deeply troubled over the narrow specialization and partisanship that characterizes so much of the historical scholarship that is published today” (p. xix). With this statement, Adelson articulates one of the more important themes of his book. In *Speaking of History*, fourteen diverse historians build on this and other themes as they discuss their backgrounds, accomplishments, historical philosophies, and outlooks, and give advice to the next generation of historians.

*Speaking of History* is a compilation of interviews conducted by Adelson between 1990 and 1995 for the journal, *The Historian*. In addition to a brief introductory autobiography by Adelson, the book includes interviews with the following historians: Thomas D. Clark, Gilbert C. Fife, William H. McNeill, Theodore H. Von Laue, C. Vann Woodward, Walter L. Arnstein, Natalie Zeamon Davis, John Demos, Joan M. Jensen, Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, Helen Nader, Darlene Clark Hine and Stephen Pyne. Brief biographies of each historian and abbreviated bibliographies for each person interviewed are also included. The contributors’ specialties cover a wide spectrum, with some bias towards U.S. history. Their personal backgrounds are diverse with some predominant characteristics—such as a middle-class orientation, and public school attendance. Most are white and Christian, though two are Jewish, one is Muslim, and one is African-American. Six of the interviewees are women.

The book is effectively organized around interviews

which stick to a standard format. These emphasize personal background and professional philosophy. Readers are treated to learning details such as Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot’s experiences as a young girl in Egypt during World War II, and C. Vann Woodward’s upbringing as a preacher’s son in early twentieth-century Arkansas. From a historiographical perspective, this theme is very helpful because readers are allowed a true insight into the formative and ongoing influences of these historians. For example, Darlene Clark Hine describes how her own family’s experiences with urban violence in the 1990’s (her own nephews were shot in the doorway of their Chicago home) have impacted her historical work on the evolution of a disaffected and threatened youth in the post-World War II United States. Similarly, Stephen Pyne’s lifelong experience as a fire fighter in the Grand Canyon shows readers how his historical work is clearly connected to his personal life.

Readers should also benefit from the commentary that these historians have on the state of the profession and their own accomplishments. While these comments are too varied to completely cover here, a few significant ideas did emerge. First is historical specialization. Like Adelson, many of the interviewees decried the current trend which has historians focusing on very specific, narrow subjects. Gilbert Fite expresses the problem as one in which historians spend “too much time burrowing around in worm holes.” Like many of the historians interviewed, Fite would like to “see more historians help us understand the big picture and the world’s biggest issues” (p. 100). Second is the centrality of teaching and working

with students to the lives of many of these historians. We learn that most have devoted their lives to illuminating the past to others and that this process has been tremendously fulfilling. In this regard, Natalie Zeamon Davis shares her enthusiasm for primary sources and historical films as teaching tools (p. 53), and Thomas D. Clark discusses the care and considerable time he spent with every undergraduate's paper, and the importance he always attributed to developing his students' writing skills (p. 29).

*Speaking of History* is most valuable for the advice that these eminent historians give to those entering the field. As a young historian, I found their words especially meaningful. We are told by Helen Nader to "trust your hunches" (p. 198) with experience gained from archival research. John Demos urges us to connect our own lives to our studies, while Theodore H. Von Laue suggests that we understand our work in a global context. Walter L.

Arnstein reminds us of Jacques Barzun's simple credo, as he learned in the 1950's: "be accurate; be orderly; be honest; and be self aware" (p. 20). He offers his own poignant addendum: "be imaginative in the questions you ask, but judicious in the conclusions you reach."

Roger Adelson's work is not without flaws. For example, not enough background information about the historians is offered. Despite their universally high esteem, some readers may not be very familiar with the work of many interviewees. To this effect, samples or excerpts of the subjects' work may prove effective in a later edition. However, Adelson deserves strong commendation for *Speaking of History*. We can all learn a lot from those who have devoted their lives to learning from the past.

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