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Studs Terkel. *My American Century*. New York: The New Press, 1997. xxiii + 532 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56584-365-3.

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Eighty-five-year-old Studs Terkel grew up in Chicago and has been a fixture on radio, the stage, television, and public podiums for most of his life. Few Americans have listened to other Americans with the patience and the ear for street rhythms as he, and few have shown comparable discipline when interviewing subjects across racial, economic, and ideological divides. Who besides Terkel could get away with interviewing John Birchers and anti-war protesters? Steel workers and corporate raiders? Black activists and Ku Klux Klan members?

My American Century is a veritable "greatest hits" gleaning of eight previous oral history projects undertaken by Terkel. In all, forty-five interviews are reprinted, plus the original forewords from each of the books in which they first appeared. In his foreword to the current collection, Robert Coles stresses Terkel's mellifluous voice, his consummate ability as an actor, his skills as editor and journalist, and his basic humanity. It is important to note that Coles does not call Terkel a scholar, nor would Terkel identify himself as such. *My American Century* serves as a wonderful introduction to the work of a remarkable man, but it is not without pitfalls for academics. It is a breezy work that contains very few revelations for researchers, but may well impress students.

There is much to commend this collection. Professors seeking to integrate oral history into U.S. history or American studies undergraduate surveys are always faced with choosing among narrow studies. *My American Century* resolves this dilemma. The culled material from works compiled between 1967 and 1995 touches upon numerous themes in American social, cultural, economic, and political development. These include urbanization, immigration, the Great Depression, World War

II, racial tension, labor history, and American identity.

This collection reveals oral history at its colorful best. First-hand memories of slavery and Jim Crow add poignancy to the current debate on race, just as battlefield recollections from World War II vets serve as a powerful antidote to the glamorized invented histories of that conflict served up by Hollywood and monument builders. Indeed, debunking stereotypes is an unintentional subtheme of the collection. The concomitant eloquence and profanity of industrial workers, waitresses, and street hustlers punctures simplistic notions of education and social class, just as the underlying despair and alienation shared by ordinary Americans peel away the myth of Reagan-era prosperity in the 1980s.

The book also contains now-classic Terkel material, including his interviews with Kid Pharaoh, an ex-boxer turned con man; C. P. Ellis, a former Klansman who became a union official and advocate for racial fairness; Peggy Terry, a Kentucky version of Rosie the Riveter; and Genora Johnson Dollinger, a firebrand during the 1937 Flint sit-down strike. There are also wonderful selections from Terkel's two most famous collections, 1972's *Working*, and 1984's Pulitzer-Prize winning *The Good War: An Oral History of World War II*. Terkel's subjects remind us that lived history is considerably messier and more complex than the neat summaries that too often appear in textbooks and lectures.

If the pedagogical potential is enormous, so too are the challenges involved in using the book. Since Terkel is more a recorder than a scholar, he is content to let informants speak, with little or no commentary. This occasionally leads to errors of fact, like the misreading of Operation Wetback given by Immigration and Naturalization Service agent Leonel Castillo, or the pithy nos-



trums uttered by corporate consultant Jack Culberg. One should—as Terkel did—allow subjects to speak for themselves, but what separates an oral historian from an interviewer is the former’s willingness to pursue a paper trail and add explanatory notes that elucidate accounts and correct inaccuracies.

The biggest challenge will come when professors seek to do what ought to have been done with this collection, but was not: update it. Nearly all quoted statistics will be meaningless to today’s undergraduates, as will a significant number of inter-textual references. How many students will know what \$2,000 bought in 1972, or will be able to identify former basketball player Cazzie Russell? (Or Sheriff Jim Clark for that matter?) These are minor problems, however, when compared with that of the antiquated (and largely irrelevant) prefaces to each chapter. For inexplicable reasons, *My American Century* reprints the introductions from each of the eight books it excerpts. This was unwise for several reasons. First of all, Terkel’s original words were musings on entire manuscripts. *My American Century*, however, is distilled, with representative works contributing as few as three, but no more than nine, selections each. Thus names and references appear in the prefaces that no reader will encounter in the actual text.

The prefaces are equally problematic stylistically. It is here that Terkel most clearly reveals his journalistic background. The language he employs is Brechtian in sweep,

structure, and style. It is frequently elegiac, poetic, and eloquent, but it also bespeaks a different era. The analogies, inferences, and metaphors Terkel employs give his text a time-bound quality that, in some cases, weathers badly. I would be tempted not to assign most of prefaces to an undergraduate class. In my view, The New Press made an editorial blunder when it chose not to have Terkel rewrite each preface to make it specific to the selections contained in each chapter, and not to update his commentary on the topics.

Despite my misgivings, I intend to teach the book when it comes out in a paperback edition. One can hardly fault this collection for opting for breadth over depth, when said practice is endemic in a survey course. *My American Century* surveys the twentieth century in a manner that restores narrative and human agency to history. For more than three decades now, scholars have spoken of “bottom up” approaches to history, culture, and society. Here’s a collection about America by Americans. There’s not a high-falutin’ theory in sight, but the voices are ubiquitous.

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