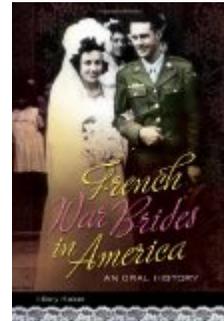


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Hilary Kaiser. *French War Brides in America: An Oral History*. Westport: Praeger, 2008. Illustrations. lii + 177 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-99398-6.

Reviewed by Kirstin Steele (The Citadel)
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Commissioned by Kara Dixon Vuic



Wives across the Pond

I enjoyed reading Hilary Kaiser's *French War Brides in America*. Her writing style and effort in translating and narrating twenty-five interviews make the book a quick and enjoyable read. Kaiser's introduction does an excellent job of giving the reader context, and I learned things I would like to know more about. Such morsels are interesting but do not unduly distract from the reading at hand.

Audiences who will appreciate the book are families of war brides, regardless of era, country of origin, or conflict; patrons of World War II or women's history; and those who take pleasure in reading biographies. As Kaiser notes, "everyone loves a story" (p. 1). An examination of the subject area (war brides–France–biography) in WorldCat reveals only individual biographies of French war brides, although several collective biographies of British war brides are available. Kaiser's book thus is a welcome addition to the literature.

The book consists of interviews with twenty-five women: twenty-two with war brides and three with their daughters. Some of the transcripts include excerpts from diaries, letters, or memoirs written by the women. Twenty-three brides were interviewed in the United States, a manageable if scientifically "insignificant" reflection of the percentage of more than six thousand French war brides who remained in the United States following their marriage to U.S. servicemen. Aside from inserting an occasional endnote, Kaiser lets each subject speak for herself. The transcripts reflect common

themes—religion, in-laws, children, citizenship, divorce, education, and employment—but are not formulaic.

I like biographies for their personalized, more subjective approach to historical events. Kaiser's experience as an American bride of a Frenchman, living in France, was apparently an important entrée into the French immigrant community in the United States, and she indicates that her work with the brides was significant to her personally as well as professionally. I found it interesting how recollection of historical details varies from woman to woman: one describes Camp Philip Morris and the SS *Brazil* in living color thanks to letters saved, while another recalls virtually nothing about the ship taking her to the United States. I imagine one might find similar discrepancies among any individuals interviewed, and such differences underscore the importance of personal correspondence and other contemporary written memories. In addition, Kaiser notes that when she raised more intimate questions (on the recommendation of a recent how-to on oral history), she was greeted with surprise and reserve. So while some historians might like to have seen greater personal detail, I respect Kaiser's instincts to not overstep her welcome.

Kaiser's superb introductory material gives readers useful context. Her introduction summarizes the history behind experiences common to most interviewees: civil and church weddings, pre-embarkation barracks, voyages to the United States, American attitudes leftover from World War I war brides, and the brides' assimilation.

lation process, without losing their “Frenchness.” Although I have not read much about civilian France in World War II, Kaiser’s introduction gave me a solid foundation onto which to fit her interviews. I even picked up a novel about postwar France (Sheila Kohler’s *Children of Pithiviers* [2006]) that would never have caught my eye before reading Kaiser’s book. Kaiser’s conclusion summarizes the themes that I had noted to myself while reading: the American Dream and the universal naïvete of youth. For these reasons, *French War Brides in America* will be a valuable addition to undergraduate or even advanced placement high school curricula. The book is an easy but not simplistic read, making it accessible to a large audience.

I definitely recommend Kaiser’s book for coursework,

pleasure reading, and research. It is particularly important because the “Greatest Generation” is in its sunset, and their oral histories will not be possible for much longer. While much of the background history in *French War Brides in America* will not be new to professional historians, casual or undergraduate readers will likely find details that pique their interest. For instance, I was unaware that Frenchwomen “got the vote” late (1945), that an outbreak of cholera occurred in Egypt in 1947, and that there is a historical association of Freemasons and Jews. Kaiser also treats the subjects of wartime rape and American racism briefly and in useful context. Her bibliography and endnotes are selective and concise, so they will likely be appreciated and even used by non-scholarly researchers.

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