

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



James A. Henretta, W. Elliot Brownlee, David Brody, Susan Ware. *America's History*. New York: Worth Publishers, 1993. xxxii + 1037 pp. \$42.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87901-552-7.

Reviewed by John W. Malsberger (Muhlenberg College)  
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One of the most difficult tasks I face each time I teach a section of the U.S. history survey is to disabuse many of the students of what they have learned previously about the study of history. At my institution, the overwhelming majority of students who enroll in a history survey have never taken a college-level history course (and most will never take another history course after it). And although in my experience a small minority of these students already have an appreciation of history as a rich and complex discipline, most begin the survey with a view of history that could have been shaped by the schoolmaster of Charles Dickens' novel, *Hard Times*. In it, Thomas Gradgrind repeatedly reminds his young charges that "in this life, we want nothing but facts... nothing but facts!"

How, then, does the instructor of the survey gently nudge his/her students to see the "big picture," rather than only the individual people and events that comprise it? How also, does the instructor encourage students to understand that because history is, at its most basic level, a study of human beings and human institutions, the past is not always what it appears to be at first glance?

To address these concerns I have for a number of years insisted that students re-evaluate the knowledge and question rigorously the assumptions they bring to the survey about the development of the United States. Through readings and class discussions, students are exposed to a variety of sometimes contradictory evidence and each must critically evaluate that evidence in order to formulate his/her own interpretation of the nation's past. In pursuit of these goals I have experimented with many different textbooks; after several years of use, I'm convinced that *America's History* by James A. Henretta, et al. (with its accompanying supplements) is among the best available textbooks for U.S. history survey courses.

Foremost among its qualities is the textbook itself. The authors have proceeded from the assumption that the nation's history was the product of the interaction of many different forces. Consequently, the text uses

a nicely balanced approach that blends economic, social, cultural, intellectual, and political history in roughly equal amounts. The text also effectively uses the lives and experiences of ordinary men and women to demonstrate that history is not simply made by the actions of the great and powerful, but is, in fact, a rich and varied fabric woven from the experience of common people like the students themselves. In the chapter concerned with the approach of American independence, for example, the authors include the text of a 1773 letter written by the Philadelphia "Committee on Tar and Feathering" to the captain of a British ship hauling East India tea to the colonies. In it, the committee gives poignant testimony to the colonies' political concerns over the importation of tea. The same chapter also includes a two-page essay that recounts the life of Boston shoemaker George Robert Twelve Hewes, who participated in the Boston Tea Party. Through these "mini-essays" students are encouraged to understand not only the significant role played by ordinary Americans in the great events of the nation's past, but also to realize that the meaning of such events to ordinary people like Hewes was often quite different than it was for some of the leaders of American society.

The ability of this textbook to foster independent and critical analysis among students is greatly enhanced by a rich, two-volume Documents Collection that can be purchased with the text for a nominal amount. Each volume, containing over 160 documents, is a rich collection of primary sources that furthers students' ability to view important themes in the nation's past from a range of different perspectives. In attempting to determine if the War for Independence also unleashed a social revolution at home, for example, students can read Gouverneur Morris' worried fulminations about the awakening political sensibility of the common people. "The mob begin to think and reason," he wrote to Thomas Penn in May 1774. "Poor reptiles!...they are struggling to cast off their winter slough, they bask in the sunshine, and ere noon they will bite, depend on it." Students can also read of the efforts taken by Boston women in 1777 to support price

controls. Faced with a wealthy merchant who refused to sell coffee for the established price, a group of approximately 100 women marched to his warehouse and demanded his keys. When he refused, Abigail Adams noted in a letter to her husband, "...one of them seized him by his neck, and tossed him into the cart." When this action convinced him to hand over the keys, Adams continued, the women "...then opened the warehouse, hoisted out the coffee themselves, put it into the truck, and drove off....A large concourse of men stood amazed," Adams reported in conclusion, "silent spectators of the whole transaction."

By reading and discussing such documents, students learn several valuable lessons about the study of history. Certainly, such documents powerfully testify to the meaning that great episodes in the nation's past had for people like themselves. The documents also help students to realize that the study of history requires much more than memorization of facts and dates. Whenever my classes have analyzed Abigail Adams' letter on the Boston women and price control, for instance, most have argued that it provides solid evidence of the improving role of women during the Revolution. Invariably, however, several members of the class challenge this interpretation, contending that even though the Boston women took extraordinary action to enforce price control, their political and legal status remained far below that of men for many years to come. Through such discourse, students understand that in order to recover the meaning of their nation's past, they must actively engage their intellect to interpret such documents, and that, wonder of wonders, historians regularly disagree with one another over such interpretations! The Documents Collection that accompanies *America's History*, then, by providing about ten such documents for each chapter, affords numerous opportunities for students to move far beyond the fact-oriented concept of history with which many of them begin the survey course.

*America's History* and its Documents Collection have also been felicitously organized to keep students' gaze directed toward the "big picture" of history. The text is divided into six parts, such as "The Creation of American Society, 1450-1775" or "Early Industrialization and the Sectional Crisis, 1820-1877," each of which contains a number of chapters exploring aspects of the broad, overarching theme for that era. Each of these parts, moreover, begins with both a time-line that surveys important social, political, economic, and cultural developments in that era and a brief essay that provides an overview of the major forces that influenced the nation's history during that period. More abbreviated time-lines conclude

individual chapters. The Documents Collection follows a similar pattern. Brief essays introduce a group of 10-15 documents that correspond to the appropriate text chapter, and then each group of documents is further subdivided to illuminate several important themes for that chapter. The authors have similarly provided a succinct introduction to each subdivision that both introduces students to a specific historical event or problem and raises important questions to consider about the documents. In this manner, the organization of the text and the documents volumes helps students to remain aware that the individual events and people they encounter were part of the larger fabric of America's history.

Finally, the smaller details of *America's History* also deserve brief mention. Like most modern history textbooks, *America's History* can be supplemented with a student guide, an instructor's resource manual, a test bank, and a set of 110 full-color transparencies. But one detail of this work, I believe, needs special mention. *America's History* is simply the most visually appealing U.S. history textbook I have worked with. Printed in a large, 8 1/2 by 11 format, it contains numerous color reproductions of maps, charts, art, photographs, and advertisements that encourage even the most disinterested student to pick it up and thumb through it. Although for many years I held adamantly to the belief that a book needs to be judged by its content, not its appearance, *America's History* has convinced me that appearance cannot be overlooked. My experience has been that when I've assigned textbooks that included only a few black-and-white photographs interspersed among the columns of printed words, my students tended to spend less time reading it.

In all its capacities, then, my students and I have found *America's History* to be an immensely readable and stimulating introduction to United States history. By the end of each semester, most of my survey students have come to appreciate history as a rich and complex discipline, one that demands active, personal intellectual engagement. I am not sure how much of this result can be attributed to *America's History*, but surely it has at the very least made easier the task of disabusing my students of the Gradgrind view of history.

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*America's History*: Author's Response

To: Subscribers to H-Survey From: James Henretta,  
co-author of *America's History*

Let me begin by thanking John Malsberger for his positive review of our survey textbook. We tried hard to write the Second Edition of *America's History* so that it conveyed the complexity and diversity of the American

experience but did so in a way that was easily understood by undergraduate students. It is gratifying to learn that our efforts have been greeted with some success.

Let me also thank the editors of H-Survey for inviting me to comment both on the review and on the process of textbook revision. The latter is very much on my mind, as we have just finished a year-long process of revision. The Third Edition of *America's History* will be out in September [1996].

Why are textbooks revised? Obviously one reason is financial: Used books are cheaper for students and make money for bookstores and used-book wholesalers, but they don't make money for authors or publishers. Beyond that, there is competition, and tough competition. Creative authors and innovative publishers are constantly putting out a better product: the latest interpretation of the coming of the Civil War, a superior set of maps, a more incisive book of supplementary documents, accompanying video-tapes, CD-ROMS, computerized textbanks. The list goes on. Simply to stay in the market, a book has to be revised and improved.

As John Malsberger points out, many of these changes and innovations really do help instructors and students. When the First Edition of *America's History* went out of print as the result of a corporate merger ("intellectual downsizing" we would now call it), we were fortunate enough to stumble into the hands of Worth Publishers, a very successful family-run firm that only published college-level textbooks and only a few each year. A real artisan shop! And that made a difference. Every book that Worth published HAD to be good; had to be well-edited and well-produced; had to have a full range of supplementary materials.

As Malsberger notes, Worth served us well. The Second Edition of *America's History* is a very handsome and visually accessible book, and the supplementary materials are superb. The content is also much better-written, more sharply focused, more accessible to students—because the Worth editors pushed us hard—much harder than we wanted or liked—however much we were pleased by the result. And, again thanks to the Worth editors and production staff, the Third Edition is of the same high quality.

The point is simply this: competitive capitalism has its downside (the merger than nearly snuffed our book out of existence) and its upside (we had to produce a superior product to make it in the marketplace). Will our luck hold? Hard to say. The founder of the firm, Bob Worth, has retired and Worth Publishers, Inc., has recently been purchased by a publishing conglomerate

(that also owns Hill and Wang, St. Martin's, and other houses). Will the artisan-like quality for which Worth was famous be there if and when we think about a Fourth Edition? We don't know.

Which brings me to the Third Edition. What revisions did we undertake, and why? The answer falls into three parts:

First, we listened to what instructors and their students told us about weaknesses in the Second Edition. Some of these were organizational: a chapter in the antebellum period needed more emphasis on chronology; the chapter on the West did not distinguish sufficiently between settlement on the Great Plains and the Far West; the Vietnam War would be more comprehensible if covered in one chapter. Addressing some of these weaknesses was relatively easy; others were more complex. For example, three chapters had to be partly reconceptualized so that the Vietnam problem could be "solved." That is, we think it is solved, and reviewers seem to agree. But we will have to see what happens in the classroom. In the meantime, we worry that in solving that problem we may have created others; as we all know, there are always trade-offs.

Second, we augmented those features of the Second Edition that worked well in the classroom. John Malsberger mentioned the two-page biographical portrait of George Robert Twelves Hewes, the Boston shoemaker that Al Young rescued from obscurity. We had about 20 such "American Lives" in the Second Edition; because they worked so well, the Third Edition will have 33, one for each chapter. We also made lots of small changes—expanded our TimeLines, created a "General Section" in each of the chapter bibliographies for two or three books of particular importance, prepared some new maps and tables, etc.—which, when taken together, do make a difference.

Finally, and most important, the revision gave us the opportunity to read new scholarship and to work it into the text. Each author had a slightly different strategy. My own was thematic, and focused on the new scholarship in five fields. First, I read deeply in African history to improve the treatment of the slave trade and of African-American society and culture. Much to my surprise (and excitement) I found that, thanks to recent work, it was possible to construct narratives that directly connect specific African peoples to specific groups of enslaved African-Americans. Equally exciting discoveries awaited me in the other four fields: the native American history of the eastern part of the continent; Spanish settlements in Florida, California, and the Southwest; the history of

women and of gender among Anglo-Americans in British North America; and, finally, Republicanism during the era of the American Revolution.

The challenging part was working that material into the narrative. In most cases it demanded a fresh start—not just adding some new facts or illustrations but recasting the basic framework of the presentation. Whole sections of chapters had to be thrown out and rewritten. But that, of course, is what this new scholarship deserves and demands: it not only adds new data and insights but challenges existing frameworks and how we look at very familiar subjects.

My coauthors tell similar stories: how Theda Skocpol's work on *Mothers and Soldiers* forced a reconsideration of the role of the American national state in

the late nineteenth century; how the end of the Cold War demanded a rethinking of the entire post-World War II period. The list is long, but I won't go on. As we endured the many drudgeries involved in textbook writing, we were stimulated by the new scholarship that we read. We hope that those of you who decide to use the Third Edition of *America's History* will share our intellectual excitement.

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