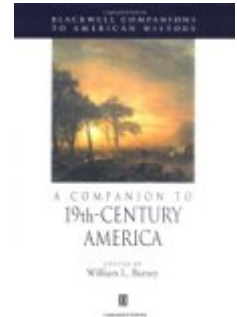


William L. Barney, ed.. *A Companion to 19th-Century America*. Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001. ix + 414 pp. \$124.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-631-20985-0.



Reviewed by Kevin Sheets

Published on H-Survey (January, 2002)

Past Appraisals: The Writings on Nineteenth-Century American History

William Barney, professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has assembled a useful collection of essays on nineteenth-century American history that college teachers of the U.S. survey should find helpful. This volume, part of the Blackwell Companion to American History series, presents two dozen essays on the political, social, economic, and cultural history of the central century of America's past. For teachers of the survey U.S. history course, especially those who need a quick refresher on a particular topic before heading into the classroom, this book is indeed a welcome companion.

Organized into six broad sections, the book opens with five chronologically defined essays and a sixth dealing with American law. The two essays in part two discuss America's foreign relations. The essays in Part Three, on the economy and class, chart the emergence of a market economy and the flowering of an industrial and corporate economy. Two essays, by Kevin Kenny and Cindy Aron, ably describe the historiographical

debates about class formation. Donald Wright's essay on African Americans opens Part Four on race, gender, and ethnicity. These essays note the significance of the new social history in recognizing including those on native Americans, women, immigrants, and other groups as legitimate areas of historical inquiry. Regionalism has become increasingly fertile ground for historians recently, and Part Five of this volume acknowledges this interest with three essays on the South, the Middle West, and West. This last essay, by Molly P. Rozum, describes the emergence of the "new western history" and the debates that have occupied historians in the past decade. For teachers who plow reluctantly through textbook chapters on the West, this essay presents "the west" as a remarkably fertile, contested, and as yet unsettled region of historical debate. The final part of this volume, organized loosely around the broad themes of culture and ideas, includes essays on the communications revolution and popular culture, religion, and science and technology. The volume ends with a fascinating discussion by Barbara Groseclose of the historical representations of America, including Columbia and Uncle Sam, but also of the land it-

self as a personification of America's expansive and robust present and future.

As Barney makes clear in his introduction, the past generation or two of historians writing about the nineteenth-century have been shaped by several historiographical trends. Prominent among them was the "new social history" of the 1960s and 1970s. These historians initiated a shift away from the consensus framework, which was dominated by the history of public policies and white men, toward a conflict-oriented interpretation where marginalized groups competed for power. The new social history had its most profound effect on topics dealing with gender, race, class, and ethnicity. For instance, as Donald Wright notes, historians were influenced by the social reforms of the 1960s and recast the history of slavery from the perspective of slaves. Slaves became actors in their own destiny and their relationship to masters became far more complicated than earlier historians believed possible. The picture of antebellum slavery that emerged was one of negotiation where slaves exercised at least some influence in shaping the work they did and the lives they led. "Agency" became part of the vocabulary of historians as they invested these "put-upon groups" with power, self consciousness, and autonomy. Laura Edwards sees a similar pattern in the historiography on women. Rather than see women as passive recipients of actions, women's historians in the 1960s and 1970s argued that women defined roles for themselves, sometimes in opposition to an emerging middle-class capitalist economy, sometimes within it. Immigrants, as Nora Faires shows, underwent a similar historiographical birth: becoming actors in their own destiny in a new world. From there scholars indulged in studies of the particular, fleshing out the individual lives of these people in order to understand the complexity of past experiences. Ultimately, this is the path both Wright and Faires sees historians taking. As Wright notes, recent works on African-Americans explore "multifaceted individuals in complex situations" (p. 207).

From her perspective, Faires urges historians of immigration and ethnicity to weave together the "multitudinous narratives told in multiple voices" (p. 253).

The same can be said for religious history. Catherine A. Brekus notes that the new social history energized historians of religion to explore the experiences of "outsiders," meaning the non-Protestant mainstream. Works appearing in the wake of Martin Marty's *Righteous Empire* (1970) explored the theme of religious pluralism. As a result, the past generation of historians has focused on religious conflict more than consensus. The need now, as with so many of these topics, is to integrate recent works into a framework that makes sense of so many parts. "Instead of longing for an elusive Protestant unity," Brekus writes, "they [historians] must write narratives that wrestle with the reality of religious pluralism in both the past and the present" (p. 332). Similarly, Timothy J. Gilfoyle ends his essay on urban history by confessing that the field has "no totalizing theory, hegemonic interpretation, or universal paradigm. A plurality of micro-theories now characterizes the history of nineteenth-century American urban development" (p. 162).

This embrace of complexity and particularity is traceable to the project of cultural history, a field we might call the intellectual history of ordinary people. As much as anything, cultural historians attempt to immerse themselves in the intellectual milieu of their subjects: to see what they saw and understand what sense they made of the world around them. Often this has been accomplished, or attempted, through interdisciplinary borrowings from other social sciences, including anthropology. Historians have become scavengers in their search for discarded sources: the forgotten joke, the well-thumbed novel, the trial transcript, the campaign memorabilia, the oral tradition, even the DNA. Here is where recent historiographical trends most benefit the U.S. survey teacher. The use of unorthodox sources and the

attention to individual voices helps the past come alive for students. In building a narrative for our students, we teach them how to look at the past. And by emphasizing the interpretation of sources, we teach the skills necessary for learning as much as we teach the "boring facts" whose mastery students frequently condemn us for requiring.

Yet there is a fine line to walk in the survey course: how much historiographical conflict do you admit to? These essays clearly and concisely describe the academic in-fighting that drives our discipline, but do students care? Probably not. Students often want more definite answers because they fear we demand them on examinations and in papers. Our "he said/she said" lectures about what historians think, no doubt, frustrate some students. Yet these essays which Barney has assembled reveal the vitality of the discipline. Historians don't need convincing that history is exciting but students often do. While historiography is not likely to enchant them, knowing that history is both a process and a work of interpretation might. History, of course, is not about the "dry, boring facts" but about what historians do with those "facts." I often begin the semester by asking students to describe the differences between a primary and a secondary source. Then I hold up their textbook, which they already labeled a secondary source, and ask how it can be a primary source. They finally hit upon the idea that scholars twenty years from now could use their text as a primary source to discover what turn-of-the-century historians taught undergraduates about the past. By then ideas will have changed and our students' college age children will learn something different from what we teach today. History is a process of interpretation based on evidence. There is something electrifying (and humbling) in the thought that future historians might think our ideas quaint, outdated, backward, perhaps perverse. Historiography teaches us, and can teach our students, that histo-

ry is alive because the past is recreated each time we look back at it.

Clearly, this volume of essays is not one that we would assign to survey students. But teachers of the survey will want it on their shelves. It is a remarkably handy book. Its coverage of major themes in nineteenth-century history is complete and its style is marvelously accessible. This compass to nineteenth-century studies gives non-specialists direction and charts new paths for future explorers.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-survey>

Citation: Kevin Sheets. Review of Barney, William L., ed. *A Companion to 19th-Century America*. H-Survey, H-Net Reviews. January, 2002.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5822>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.