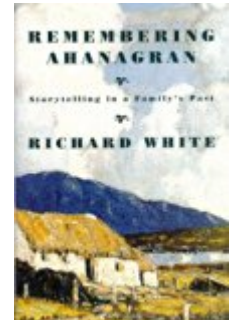




Richard White. *Remembering Ahanagan: Storytelling in a Family's Past.* New York: Hill & Wang, 1998. ix + 303 pp. \$24.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8090-8071-7.



Reviewed by Henry Goldman

Published on H-Oralhist (July, 1998)

Professor Richard White of the University of Washington has produced a fine example of the oral historians' craft. He recounts the historical tales learned from his mother who had emigrated to the United States from Ireland in 1935 and married Harry White. She was Irish-Catholic; he was Russian-Jewish. He was a Harvard graduate and an army officer in World War II.

The author has gone far beyond what would be expected in a family oral history. He has detailed the stories, identified the participants, and located the places. Sara White's memories are far more than history. Her memories provide a firm foundation upon which the insights of many immigrants can be built. Her clear understanding of her own family's traditions--as a child in Ireland, as a new arrival in Chicago, and as a wife, mother, and an American--represent a microcosm of immigration history.

When these stories are retold by a professional historian and placed within the proper historical context, the history of Sara White becomes a window into early twentieth-century American mores and ideals, particularly as they represent

Catholic families in the mixed salad of America's foreign-born immigrants.

The book is more than White's simple retelling of his mother's stories. It is more than family storytelling, more than one family's history. It is the history of one woman's experience, first as an immigrant, then as an individual seeking to find her place as an American, then as a wife and mother. Her marriage into a traditional Jewish family made more of an impression on her as a wife than it did on her religion. "He was Jewish from Boston. She was Roman Catholic from Chicago. Sara plays this down, but Harry, my father, never did. Sara says she didn't know anything about Jews, and his being Jewish was inconsequential. Harry knew little enough about County Kerry, but he knew Boston and its Irish Catholics" (p. 246).

The reader will laugh and cry with Sara as she tells the stories which make her and her family unique. The book reads far more like a novel and far less like a monograph. It is quite difficult to put it down after reading for any time at all. The book caused this reviewer to reflect on his

own family's history and to wish that he had had the foresight to ask his father the questions that Sara Walsh White was able to answer to her son, Richard.

On still another level, this book provides a template as to what the historian's craft ought to be: less concerned with pedantic writing and more concerned with readability. For all of us who are used to keeping a thumb at the end notes, a clip in the bibliography, and our attention to interpreting the text, this book is a refreshing relief. Don't try to find the index or the notes; they are not there. The words flow along the page uninterrupted by note numbers, making one of the successes of this book its readability.

However, the book will have limited value as a historical tool. It is not a guidebook for the oral historian. It is a work of great interest to those of us who are interested in society or, perhaps, in America in the twentieth century as a unique civilization. No one mentioned in the book will likely make a genuine mark in American history. They won't become subject matter for the freshman survey. But those whose names are mentioned are real. They represent our own history and our own backgrounds. It is, in short, a book that each of us who is engaged in interpreting the past needs to read, and perhaps, to reread.

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Citation: Henry Goldman. Review of White, Richard. *Remembering Ahanagan: Storytelling in a Family's Past*. H-Oralhist, H-Net Reviews. July, 1998.

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