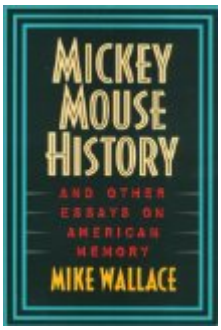
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mike Wallace. *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. xiv + 381 pp. $69.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-56639-444-4.



Reviewed by Michael J. Schroeder

Published on H-Review (April, 1997)

Any book capable of sparking in your typical metanarrative-wary secular humanist critically progressive historian a desire to visit Disneyland - and to learn and care about the difference between Disneyland (California) and Disney World (Florida) - must be packing something special. This one is -lucidly written, smartly conceived, rigorously executed, and a welcome rejoinder to the quasi-theological polemics of the New Right's high priests in the still-raging culture wars. If only it included tips on sneaking over the fence.

Mike Wallace, Professor of History at John Jay College of the City University of New York and longstanding critic and helpmate of museum curators and exhibit designers across the country, explores in this collection of thirteen essays the varied representations of the American past in the most mundane and likely of arenas: in museums and theme parks, in historic districts and restorations, in Civil War battlefields and the expressway-squeezed urban battlefields of a century later. His point of departure is the well-founded assumption that most Americans learn the bulk of their history not from academic monographs or in ivied lecture halls but through catch-as-catch-can accretions to the mythstory served up in schools and the media - an afternoon with the in-laws at Henry Ford's Greenfield Village, perhaps, or a romp with the kids through Disney World, or a bathroom break at a rest stop adjacent to a historic marker. Professional historians ought to care, submits Wallace, about the visions of history presented in such venues, no less than about what ordinary citizens think about our nation's past, for there is much at stake. One cannot but agree. For newcomers to the field of "public history," Wallace provides a thought-provoking, imaginative, and eminently readable critical introduction. To seasoned veterans he offers consistently astute observations and a host of specific programmatic interventions, suggestions, and critiques. The result is an incisive, judicious, and accessible look into the past, present, and possible futures of public history in the United States - and one that is also just plain fun to read. But *caveat lector*: after reading *Mickey*, one may never look at public history in just the same way again.

The book is divided into four sections, what might be called: I. History Museums, II. Disney-Pasts, III. The Historic Preservation Movement, and IV. Historical Revanchism in the 1980s and 90s. All are linked in their effort to "examine the way Americans have grappled with the preservation and presentation of history in public settings" (p. xii). Here I will offer thumbnail synopses and evaluations of each essay, followed by brief critical reflections on the principal strengths and limitations of Wallace's approach.

The brief (seven page) Introduction, "Battlefields of Memory," offers the salutary reminder that the past is, and always has been, contested terrain, while effectively laying out the book's central themes: "the interplay between power and memory," the closely related "balance between memory and forgetting," and especially, the ahistoricism, or what Wallace calls the "historicidal" qualities of American culture - "for promoting an ahistorical temper, for obscuring the ways the past continues to shape the present, and for leaving us marooned in the now, adrift on the temporal surface of things" (p. ix). While the term "historicidal" may strike some as overblown or inaccurate, the diagnosis and description of ahistoricism are surely on the mark. Wallace attributes this "impatience with the past" primarily to American capitalism's "creative destructive" dynamics and power - an analysis that also suffuses each of the essays. Here, as throughout the book, the author successfully eschews both liberal glossings of race, class, and power relations and inequalities, and Marxist class reductionism, while making plain his own commitments to democracy, antiracism, and social justice. The end result is consistently fair, reasoned, subtle, and informed - in a word, ***humane***.

I. History Museums

The lead essay, "Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States" (30 pp.) is one of the best in the collection. Though fifteen years old (the essay first appeared in ***Radical History Review*** in 1981), it shows few signs of age. Here Wallace offers an incisive reading of the history of history museums in the U.S., from their beginnings in the mid-19th century to the late 1970s. From the patricians of the early republic, who exhibited a general disdain for all sentimentalizing reminders of the past, we move swiftly to the late 19th century, where, in a "remarkable transformation" (p. 6), the dominant classes had radically changed their tune; museums and historical societies mushroomed under their sponsorship. Why? What better way to mend a rapidly unravelling social fabric, submits Wallace, than by offering to the immigrant laboring poor a series of visible, tangible reminders that they were entering a country with deep and abiding traditions of respect for law, order, authority, and property? In this important and original argument, museums and historical societies emerged at a specific historical juncture as cultural expressions of ongoing class struggles. As much shrines as museums, they were also intended "to 'Americanize' the immigrant working class" (p. 8). Here Wallace alludes to but does not explore working class responses to these campaigns. This points to one of the principal shortcomings of the essays: devoted mainly to reading the intentions of the creators of such public representations, the analyses generally ignore how those messages have been received and interpreted by their target audiences - a much more difficult set of questions, to be sure, but also a crucial part of the problem the author himself has set up ("the way Americans have grappled with the preservation and presentation of history in public settings").

After a brief if pointed tour of this remarkable Gilded Age transformation (and, unfortunately, an elision of the influence of progressivism), we enter the postwar decade, which saw, along with Big Capital and Big Government working hand-in-glove, a quantum leap forward in the corporatization of public history. Leading the pack here were Henry Ford and John D. Rockefeller Jr. Wallace's reading of Ford's vision of history, espe-

cially as it came to be expressed in Greenfield Village, just outside Detroit, is especially compelling. Where others have seen in this "museum village" a "hodgepodge" lacking any "clear central idea," Wallace discerns a highly structured vision of the past, a glorification of the "common man" that was at the same time stripped of all signs of conflict and struggle: war, politics, foreclosures, depressions, unemployment, classes, all were erased, leaving behind "a static utopia" of "individuals; square dancing was about as close as they got to collective action." He concludes: "Greenfield Village distorted the past, mystified the way the present had emerged, and thus helped to inhibit effective political action in the future." (p. 12) This is vintage Wallace, and but one example of the canny and critically progressive spirit that infuses the book.

John D. Rockefeller Jr.'s Colonial Williamsburg receives a similarly penetrating reading. In contrast to Ford's elevation of the "common man," in Rockefeller's Williamsburg, "order flows from the top down. It is a corporate world: Planned, orderly, tidy, with no dirt, no smell, no visible signs of exploitation." Slavery was erased utterly, as were "the 90 percent who create the wealth . . . Ford, at least, had grappled with history in the course of mystifying it; Rockefeller denied that history had ever happened" (p. 15). (For me the discussion evoked memories of being dragged through Colonial Williamsburg as a young boy in the mid-1960s; all I remember is the stifling heat, an endless sea of shuffling white legs in bermuda shorts, endless rows of precision flowerbeds, and endless boredom; though Rockefeller's narrative, which had changed little in the intervening forty years, would soon be successfully challenged, as we see in a later essay.)

"[A]s the balance of class forces shifted" with the crash and Depression, continues Wallace, "so did the nature of public history" (p. 16). An invigorated state, via the New Deal, entered the arena previously reserved for private capital; as "the definition of the historic" was expanded, the previously excluded were now included: slaves' quarters were now photographed and measured along with the big house. The WPA's Federal Writers' Project, the Historic Sites Act, and other federal laws and projects served to reshape the contours of public history. But it didn't last long: the revanchism of the 1980s had its antecedents in the postwar years, as the chill of the Cold War constricted the boundaries of the possible and structured the gamut of corporate and state public history offerings. Public history grew increasingly sanitized, homogenized, technologized, depoliticized, sterilized, with Colonial Williamsburg - still without slaves, classes, or conflict - at the celebratory epicenter.

But consensus was a myth, as the tumults of the 1960s and 70s so dramatically demonstrated. The decade transformed public history in myriad ways, many of which are examined here in sensitive and textured detail. As museology was challenged by movements of social protest and the "new social history," the hitherto consensus-driven tools of the dominant were reappropriated by a new generation of activists and scholars. Even Colonial Williamsburg discovered slavery. Still, despite many advances, "limits remained" (p. 23). Oppressive and exploitive social relations of race, class, and gender tended to remain marginalized and silenced. "Many farm museums," for instance, "concentrated on sowing and reaping; they balked at examining tenantry, foreclosures, world markets, commodity exchanges - the processes of capitalist development at work in the countryside - and the agrarian movements that responded to these processes" (p. 24).

The essay concludes with a trenchant set of reflections on "The Uses of History." Just as "museums generated conventional ways of seeing history that justified the mission of capitalists and lent a naturalism and inevitability to their authority," so too "they generated ways of not seeing." By promoting "the idea that the past was something

sharply separated from the present," history was transformed into antiquarianism: "pleasant but irrelevant to contemporary concerns" (pp. 24-25). Museums, born to legitimate and justify existing relations of power, continued in that role, though not without challenge. And it is on this note of challenge that Wallace concludes: "Above all, the museums should consider it their fundamental mission to assist people to become historically-informed makers of history." Would that they did.

The second essay of Section I, "Razor Ribbons, History Museums, and Civil Salvation" (21 pp.) explores how urban history museums "can help restore severed chronological connections - reknit our temporal fabric . . . [by setting] contemporary problems in historical context" (p. 35). Building on the periodization scheme developed in the first essay, Wallace first uses the Museum of the City of New York as an exemplar of the trajectory taken by many urban history museums across the country - from a dull, elitist, exclusionary repository of dusty relics to a more inclusionary, responsive, community-centered institution. After showing how, in a variety of ways, "urban history museums are making tremendous strides," the essay adroitly explores some of the "ongoing problems" with the "current enthusiasm for 'sharing authority' with local communities" - most critically, "that localism can lead to provincialism" (p. 43). The essay concludes with a helpful and imaginative set of programmatic suggestions about "new possibilities" for urban history museums that ought to be required reading for urban history museum curators and exhibit designers. For instance, what about shows on the history of crime; poverty; transport; public health; urban ecology; shopping and consumerism; housing; urban renewal; suburbanization; deindustrialization and capital flight; or labor? Or, what about an exhibit exploring the city's future? "[F]or the most part the[se] big issues remain untouched" (p. 47). Here as elsewhere, the author's principal concern is to develop ways to design "municipal museums to strengthen the democratic process by enhancing visitors' ability to make historically informed decisions" (p. 53).

The third essay, "Boat People: Immigrant History at the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island" (19 pp.) offers a brief but finely drawn guided tour of controversies surrounding the mid-1980s overhauls of the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, while raising a host of still-relevant questions - most centrally, how might museums best represent the history of immigration? After gently decrying the irony of using private monies to fund these public history restorations, Wallace walks readers through the mid-1980s fight between the National Park Service and the Statue of Liberty's American Museum of Immigration (AMI); the Park Service, which was hoping to dismantle the AMI and its mouldy Cold War reading of immigrant history, lost that battle but won another museum (also within the statue) focusing on the history of the statue itself. After walking readers through this new facility, the next stop is the far more massive Ellis Island and its $161 million restoration. Here Wallace offers characteristically perspicacious readings on different sections and exhibits at Ellis, and concludes with a series of pragmatic "What about?'s" and proposals for the future. Tack another item onto my growing list of "must sees" - and we haven't even made it to Disneyland yet.

The fourth essay, "Progress Talk: Museums of Science, Technology, and Industry" (11 pp.) offers an archaeology of science and technology museums. The origins and character of such museums, submits Wallace, were closely bound up with the formation of engineers as a distinct class (one fraction of the larger professional-managerial class) from the late 19th century. Museums of science and technology provided this new and professionally insecure class of engineers with a sense of their own identity and professional legitimacy. This was especially the case from the 1920s, which saw the mushrooming of such museums across the country, and at the same time, the ab-

sorption of engineers "into the corporate-industrial order as a subaltern class" (p. 81). Science and technology museums have tended to embody a kind of "machinery fetishism" (my term) by focusing on machines and things rather than capitalist social relations, and in general, to advance a worldview that has tended strongly "to imply that machines, not capitalists, were in charge" (p. 80). Here Wallace makes one of his few forays into an explicitly theoretical realm when he deftly addresses critics who have charged him with employing "simplistic theories of cultural hegemony" (pp. 82-83). Gramsci fans will be pleased. Despite the its brevity, this is a compelling and nuanced essay that sheds further light on the author's larger concern with the emergence of museums as cultural expressions of class struggles.

The fifth essay, "Industrial Museums and the History of Deindustrialization" (14 pp.) picks up where the previous essay leaves off. This and the two essays to follow are the most explicitly programmatic interventions in the collection. The focus here is on how museums might best represent processes and issues of industrialization and deindustrialization in U.S. history. Wallace finds the term "deindustrialization" problematic for a host of reasons (pp. 92-93), mainly for its elision of the specifically ***capitalist*** nature of industrialization in the U.S., though some will find his reservations about the term no less problematic, since after soundly thrashing the term he continues to use it. Whatever the case, the historical processes at the essay's heart clearly carry extraordinary contemporary relevance. After offering a host of specific and cogent suggestions and critiques, the author once again circles back to the book's central theme: "Involving museum-goers as citizens might enhance their capacity to make historically informed decisions and thus strengthen the democratic process" (p. 96).

The sixth essay, "The Virtual Past: Media and History Museums" (14 pp.) explores the interface of cyberspace and history museums. "Imagine the possibilities": "electronic galleries," "virtual museums," "Donning a helmet and seeing oneself in the Acropolis listening to a Platonic dialogue"; these and other "armchair alternatives" to on-site visits are explored with imagination and verve, without losing sight of larger issues of democracy, community involvement, and equality of access (pp. 104-106). While some specifics here will probably soon be dated (if they aren't already), many of the more substantive issues will surely be around for as long as cyberspace is. Especially welcome are a series of suggestions for "interpreting the world of media itself" (p. 110). Making the horrifying (and doubtless deadly accurate) assertion that "The mass media is perhaps the single most critical source of popular historical imagination. . . . because cinematic modes of perception seem so real, moviepast *is* the past," he very sensibly asks, "why shouldn't museums turn media itself into an artifact?" (p. 111). Classroom teachers laboring to subvert Hollywood-derived epistemologies and incorporate media criticism into their curricula might take away lessons of their own here. Overall, this is a grounded and sensible set of responses to some overhyped but pressing contemporary e-issues.

The seventh essay, "Museums and Controversy" (15 pp.) encourages museum curators, exhibit designers, and others not to shy away from controversial subjects, but to continue even further along the path set upon in the 1960s and 70s. A survey of formerly taboo topics that have since entered the museological mainstream includes race, imperialism, class, gender, and ecology. We've come a long way, submits Wallace, but there remains a long way to go. For instance, "there has not been a single substantial museum exhibition on the causes, course, or consequence of the war in Vietnam" (p. 120). Related "taboo topics" include "issues of sexuality and gender," which despite some openings, "remain problematic"; the history of organized labor; "the production of poverty and unemployment"; "deindustrialization"; and "ecological concerns" closer to

home than Brazilian rainforests (p. 121). Preempting the predictable objection that "such exhibits are in the domain of politics not history," Wallace effectively argues that "history, and history museums, are inescapably political, and always have been" (p. 122). Noteworthy here is the historian Al Young's suggestion for a Museum Bill of Rights "that would put 'curatorial freedom' on a par with 'academic freedom'" (p. 123). Reminding readers of "the fragility of recent gains, of their potential reversibility," Wallace concludes by urging "history museums to press on in the direction they have been going, seeking not simply customers but constituents; becoming partners with communities in effecting change; serving as centers of civic debate and organization . . . [and] enhancing [visitors'] capacity as citizens to be historically informed makers of history" (p. 128). Mickey Mouse history this ain't.

Section II: DisneyPasts

The book's title essay, "Mickey Mouse History: Portraying the Past at Disney World" (25 pp.) offers a marvelously textured and nuanced reading of two main Disney visions of history - the "Original Walt's" vision as expressed in the two Disney theme parks he created - Disneyland (California) and Disney World (Florida), and the "Corporate Walt" that succeeded him after his death in 1966, particularly as expressed in EPCOT (Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow) housed in Disney World in Orlando, adjacent to the Magic Kingdom. More generally, the essay offers some very revealing "insights into the growing world of commercialized history" (pp. 134-35). We learn, first, something of Walter Elias Disney's own chequered past, and then, of how Disney and his "imagineers" labored not to reproduce the past "but to *improve* it" - creating a kind of "Disney Realism" whose essence was the "vacuum-cleaning of the past" (pp. 136-37). After a wryly entertaining walk through the Hall of Presidents, the Carousel of Progress, and other key "sites of ideological production" and "commodified fun" (p. 141), readers are treated to a guided tour of EPCOT. This curious hybrid had its beginnings in the Original Walt's dream of "a planned, controlled community, a showcase for American industry and research" that was then transformed by Corporate Walt into a "permanent world's fair" celebrating the virtues of - and indeed, rendering synonymous -human progress and corporate capitalism (pp. 142-43). After close-up views of the visions of history presented by the likes of AT&T, Exxon, GE, GM, Kraft, and others, sensitive readers won't know whether to laugh or cry. Concludes Wallace: "Corporate Walt's history is bad history" - like "Future World," an eminently "historicidal enterprise" (pp. 148-49). The essay concludes, characteristically, with a host of sagacious reflections and questions. For some, asking citizens of a reputed democracy "to reflect upon the consequences of the corporate commodification of history" may seem out of step with the times; for others it will come as a breath of fresh air.

The second essay, "Disney's America" (16 pp.) sketches the controversies surrounding Corporate Disney's recent efforts to "reinvent the Disney theme park experience" (while reviving their bottom line) through the proposed (and now-scotched) "Disney's America" historic theme park at a site five miles west of Manassas National Battlefield Park in Virginia (p. 162). But while Disney's plan was beaten back by a groundswell of opposition, both academic and popular, the battle also served to generate a host of questions and issues that Wallace insists merit continued discussion. Subjecting Disney's critics to a searching critique of his own, he takes on, among others, the "sacred soil" argument, effectively arguing that "It is disturbingly easy for the sacred to be put to repressive ends" (p. 169). He then asks a question underlying much of the controversy, and doubtless close to the heart of historians everywhere: Is "edutainment" a viable approach to the past? His answer, thankfully, is a sensibly qualified 'yes': "I do not find compelling the claims that there is an inherent contradiction between education and en-

tertainment" (p. 169). What is compelling are his warnings about the continued erosion of the already fuzzy boundary between public and private and, more broadly, about the increasing commodification of historical discourse. While there are no easy answers here, Wallace does provide a very useful guide, both to the recent Disney flap, and to the kinds of questions today's citizen-historians should be asking.

Section III: The Historic Preservation Movement

The first essay, "Preserving the Past: A History of Historic Preservation in the United States" (45 pp.) is a fine-grained and thickly documented look at "the tangled history of the historic preservation movement" in the U.S. (p. 179). Building once again on the periodization scheme developed in the first essay, this instructive and stimulating survey begins with a look at the principal historic preservation groups and movements that emerged from the 1880s to the 1940s. The author then traces with care and subtlety the post-WWII battles between a powerful government-led and profit-driven "growth coalition" and various preservation movements. Like any good war story, the tale is a complicated one, full of twists and turns, but the author's eye for irony, close attention to context and contingency, and analytic acuity pay off in the end. The principal flaw in the preservationists' strategy after their victories of the 1970s, he argues convincingly, was to ally with their traditional foes in the growth coalition. Attentive readers will find more than a few echoes here with ***The Eighteenth Brumaire***. Like its classic antecedent, the essay carries a finely wrought sense of historical movement, transformation, structured contingency, and irony, always undergirded by an engaging prose, e.g.: "The response of the preservation movement to the Reagan offensive was to scurry toward its real estate right and away from its populist left" (p. 205). Or: "Only when citizens are not confronted with the choice of a preserved past or a squalid present can preservationism have a future" (p. 210). First published in 1986, the essay leaves off at a particularly depressing moment, and not only for the historic preservation movement.

The second essay, "Preservation Revisited" (24 pp.), carries the story through to the mid-1990s. The setbacks of the 1980s and 90s, he shows, were partly offset by innovative strategies pursued by the historic preservationists and their allies in the federally funded National Trust. Notable here are preservationists' efforts to "promote multicultural comity [and] help revive wounded inner cities" (pp. 231-234) - goals whose practical pursuit has often exhibited no small measure of hypocrisy and racism, but which have also spawned some innovative and politically progressive projects. Preservationists' efforts to link up with the ecology movement have proven particularly promising, contends Wallace, making "eco-preservation" one possible wave of historic preservation's future. These two essays together comprise, to my knowledge, the most extensive and sophisticated treatment of the U.S. historic preservation movement yet published.

Section IV: Historical Revanchism in the 1980s and 90s

The first essay, "Ronald Reagan and the Politics of History" (20 pp.) focuses on the "historicidal" qualities of Ronald Reagan's vision and practice of history. Briefly surveying some of the many terrains upon which the Reagan "administration launched an aggressive and broad-based attack on prevailing understandings of the past" (p. 252), Wallace first shows that Reagan's view of U.S. history was "riddled with inaccuracies and falsehoods . . . Reagan lied. . . . repeatedly sidl[ing] over the border . . . between history and myth" (pp. 253-54). The focus then shifts to Reagan's penchant for mythmaking, particularly his use and misuse of foundational myths in U.S. history (e.g., his egregious misreading of John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity," p. 257). Tracing Reagan's stock of mythologies to their Hollywood ori-

gins, the essay complements the more substantive work of Lou Cannon and Garry Wills, among others. Wallace's response to the more difficult part of the question - explaining Reagan's popularity and "how he convinced others" (p. 263) - is suggestive but inadequate as an explanation of either Reagan's popularity or the purchase of his mythic vision on so many American psyches. Ending on a characteristically pragmatic and political note, Wallace issues a clarion call for "a politics of 'organized remembrance'" and the fashioning of concrete strategies "to counter future remythification programs" (p. 266). "History can be a major support for democracy. To ignore its potential contributions is to impoverish, even imperil ourselves" (p. 267).

The collection's final essay, "The Battle of the *Enola Gay*" (50 pp.) reprises the infamous struggle over the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum's ill-fated exhibition. With great care and attention to detail, Wallace provides a blow-by-blow account of the flap itself, followed by a brief but penetrating exploration of some of the larger issues at stake. The essay concludes with a number of concrete suggestions for preventing similar fiascoes in the future. Notable here is his very practical advice to curators and exhibit designers to consider drafting "political impact assessments" along with exhibit drafts, and more generally, to always remember that they may, in fact, have enemies out there. Especially welcome is the proposal to develop "standards of professional rights and responsibilities, fashioned by the museological community at large. These should be akin to but not identical with standards of academic freedom" (p. 307). One would be hard-pressed to find a more comprehensive and even-keeled account of the blowup itself, or a more sound and judicious set of responses to it.

These are, in short, excellent essays, though not without flaws. Perhaps their most critical shortcoming, as suggested early on, is the tendency to downplay or elide the public's reception of various public history offerings. Wallace is at his best when critiquing the messages, intended and not, transmitted by a particular piece. He is weakest when considering (or not considering) how others, or the public generally, might be reading that same piece. This issue of reception is not a trivial one, especially given the book's stated aims. On the handful of occasions when this reception question is broached, the treatment tends to be shallow and unconvincing; e.g., ". . . we do not know if the messages projected . . . are the messages received. I certainly do not assume people are blank cassettes waiting to be magnetized" (p. 84; one would hope not!). Or, when he decries "the kind of passive receptivity characteristic of the media world" (p. 109), he seems unaware that scholars as diverse as Michel de Certeau and Neil Postman have done to the "passive receptivity" argument what Steven Spielberg has done to the stereotype of the dimwitted dinosaur. One cannot fault Wallace for not writing a different book, but one can legitimately critique his approach for failing fully to address the questions that he himself has formulated.

Sadly, the book also lacks both index and bibliography; Bronx cheers to budget-axers at University Presses everywhere.

Despite a lack of substantive engagement with this question of reception, however, this is a terrific book - a deeply humane, often funny, empirically rich, and theoretically sophisticated look at a range of important topics and issues in the field of public history. Nonspecialists will walk away with a deepened appreciation for many of the key issues in the field. Those searching for paradigmatic models for reading public history offerings need look no further than the first essay, though they'd be much better served reading through to the end. Specialists and practitioners, particularly those engaged in ongoing struggles to fashion a democratic politics of organized remembering, will, I expect, be rewarded with a host of fresh ideas, insights, and strategies. Even the most

hardnosed critics and cutesyphobes can expect to walk away from *Mickey Mouse History* with a hankering to someday actually visit Disney World.

Citation: Michael J. Schroeder. Review of Wallace, Mike. *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory.* H-Review, H-Net Reviews. April, 1997.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=950