

## A Companion to American Cultural History

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John Wills

The Blackwell Companions to American History series tackles major themes, periods and regions of US history. Karen Halttunen, Professor of History and American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California, is the editor of the latest book in the sequence, this time concerning American cultural history. For editor Halttunen, the true essence of cultural history is to learn more about 'meanings': 'the meanings of the signs, gestures, artifacts, performances, and other expressive forms by which people communicate their values and their truths in a given society' (p.xi). In an impressive set of historiographical essays, 30 of her fellow cultural historians ponder precisely this. Through their work on objects, rituals, language and expression, they deconstruct the meaning of culture in the United States. They also ruminate on the status and trajectory of their discipline, on its successes, failures, and key scholarly breakthroughs.

To give some order to the essays, the book is split into three sections, one based around chronology, another thematic/methodological, and a third tackling the impact of cultural history on other disciplines. The first, time-sensitive section is the most dominant, occupying around two thirds of the book (amounting to some 260 pages). The chronological sweep begins, as would be expected, with a chapter on 'cultural encounters'. In it, Peter C. Mancall highlights misunderstandings between Native Americans and European explorers and colonists, a ground very familiar to any scholar on indigenous issues. Carla Gardina Pestana then considers the issue of 'cultural continuity' in European colonial settlement. Karin Wulf explores scholarship on British America, while Catherine E. Kelly tackles ideas about culture during the Revolution. 19th-century coverage is substantial, and includes a look at race, class and the meaning (and transnational export) of American popular culture in antebellum America by James W. Cook, 'religion and reform' by Lewis Perry, and black culture by Demetrius L. Eudell. Alice Fahs looks at the Civil War, Ann Fabian at the West, and Scott A. Sandage at the Gilded Age. The final chapters on the 19th century tackle immigration, authored by Hasia R.

Diner, and 'cultural watersheds,' written by Janet M. Davis. Moving onto the 20th century, subjects include mass culture and consumption, by Charles F. McGovern, modernism, by Joel Dinerstein, the impact of politics on culture in the 1930s and 1940s, by Julia L. Foulkes, the 1950s and 1960s, by Daniel Belgrad, and globalization by Petra Goedde.

The book then shifts toward a more thematic stage. George Lipsitz discusses the interface between cultural history and cultural theory, Sally M. Promey tackles the discipline (and disciplinary problems) of visual culture, and J. Ritchie Garrison covers academic approaches to material culture. M. Alison Kibler shows how scholars have explored 'performance, power, and social difference' (p. 311) in theater and exhibition, while David Glassberg tackles the study of memory, including its connection to environment and place. Chapters on gender (Jane H. Hunter), ethnicity (Eric Avila) and popular culture (Nan Enstad) also feature.

The final section of the book deals with the impact of cultural history on other disciplines. Casey Nelson Blake ponders the contribution of the 'cultural turn' to the 'reinvigoration' of intellectual history over the past three decades (p. 383) by 'broadening its scope of study and deepening practitioners' understanding of the complexity of interpreting texts and contexts from the past' (p. 392). Lawrence B. Glickman explores how cultural history informs its older relation, social history. Originally keen to distance itself from social history by the following of fresh approaches – for example, 'where the new social history drew on Marxism, sociology, and the Annales school, the new cultural historians found their inspiration in literary theory, anthropology, and postmodern social theory' (p. 396) – Glickman now sees greater convergence and elements of true synthesis between the disciplines. Elsewhere, Leigh E. Schmidt tackles the influence of the cultural turn over religious history, and Joanne B. Freeman holds that political history was given new life in the 1980s and 1990s by a shift in interest towards political *culture*. For Freeman, this meant fresh insight into 'the human dimension of the quantifiable world of the "new political history"', exploring the values, motives, and understandings that guided and shaped political interaction' (p. 416). A closing chapter by Andrew J. Rotter writes of the utility of the cultural approach to studying foreign relations, and the advent of 'foreign policy "culturalism"' (p. 425).

Inevitable given its ambitious scope, *A Companion to American Cultural History* on occasion falls short of offering truly great coverage. Some chapters are a little too general and brief. For example, in his chapter on the meeting of Native Americans and colonist-explorers, Peter Mancall offers great ideas about 'transferable culture' (p. 7), but the line 'Most encounters between Europeans and [native] Americans took place in the Western hemisphere' (p. 5) is vague. Meanwhile, Daniel Belgrad, faced with the unenviable task of summarizing American culture in the 1950s and 1960s, leaves just two paragraphs for covering environmental issues and feminism (pp. 241–2). Likewise, Petra Goedde, who manages to fit the globalization of American culture into 17 pages and offers some great questions over the effect of global strategies on the production of US culture at home, passes too quickly over mass cultural symbols such as the neon arches of McDonalds or giant ears of Mickey Mouse. Thus valuable work by George Ritzer on McDonaldization, as well as scholarly explorations of Disneyfication by Alan Bryman, Aviad Raz and other Disney scholars, goes ignored. The chapter on the American West is a great read. However, the decision of Ann Fabian to offer a biography of Henry Nash Smith (author of *Virgin Land*) sits a little uncomfortably, exaggerated perhaps by her interpretation of the West (and Western culture) based loosely around the key male 'players' of Buffalo Bill and Frederick Jackson Turner. Despite her endeavors to use the male agents to reveal greater systems at work, a different approach might have worked even better. Fabian's chapter does make good use of Philip J. Deloria, but on the whole the book could be more sophisticated in its coverage of Native American culture and scholarship.

Another reflection of a large edited work, the *Companion* sometimes lacks perfect coherence. For example, the first two chapters meld into one, the beginning pages of Carla Gardina Pestana's work on colonial settlement covering very similar issues to Peter Mancall's chapter on encounters. Both authors ponder the same problem of Native/European encounter. Separate chapters on fin de siècle culture and mass culture in the early 20th century by Davis and McGovern unfortunately exhibit some overlap. Inevitably 30 chapters have 30 different feels. Some authors focus on narrating cultural history (for example, McGovern's overview of the rise of mass culture in the early 20th century), while others offer reviews of their own sub-

disciplines.

Another criticism that might be leveled at the work is its choice of authors. While the international origins of American cultural history are noted (p. xi), and the book is clearly ‘designed for an international audience’, (p. ii) its geographical breadth of scholars is not. All of the contributors (along with the editor) reside at US universities, which begs the question: does the work suffer from an internal, national perspective when the discipline of American cultural history certainly goes way beyond national borders? It would have been good to see some contributors on the list that hail from outside the USA. The publisher also might have included some illustrations to the text. Given how important the image (or visual culture) can be to cultural history, this is a shame. There are many opportunities throughout the text for image inclusion: for example, in the very first chapter, Peter Mancall fruitfully explores the use of illustration in *The Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1588) by Thomas Harriot. Catherine E. Kelly writes a whole section on visual culture in her chapter on the Revolution and early Republic.

Criticisms aside, the *Companion* is a monumental achievement. The breadth of coverage is staggering, and the depth of insight a credit to its multifarious authors. Rarely can one book offer so much. There are pieces on high culture and popular culture, gender and ethnicity, subgroups and subcultures, social control and etiquette. A veritable cornucopia indeed. Authors really do probe their own research areas and offer superb guidance to the uninitiated. For example, in her chapter on colonial life, Carla Gardina Pestana performs admirably in tracking the dominant ideas about the colonial period, and ably identifies key scholarly interests in cultural encounters, the survival of European culture, religion, and the formation of new American identity. Exceptional chapters, such as Karin Wulf’s on the ‘consumer revolution’ of the 18th century, serve as statements of how sophisticated and eloquent cultural historians tend to be. With a beautiful introduction on the elite tastes of Philadelphian Henry Hill, Wulf explores the role of material goods in the crafting of status and identity in British America and the paradox of how ‘the interior self was best known by the exterior surrounding it’ (p. 34). The teapot of the time is revealed as a not just a tool to quench one’s thirst, but an object of political sloganeering and female empowerment (p. 37). Likewise, Alice Fahs’ chapter ‘Civil War in American Culture’ absorbs thanks to a focus on memory and remembrance, gender dimensions, and our perennial love affair with ‘war’ (p. 122). Janet Davis’ exploration of technology, transport and entertainment spectacle in fin de siècle America similarly impresses. Tackling showman P. T. Barnum’s freak shows and museum pieces, along with tendencies in performances of ‘Playing Indian and Blacking Up’ (p. 316), M. Alison Kibler’s chapter on ‘Performance and Display’ simply enthralls in its coverage of deception, authenticity and identity.

In bringing together so many specialists on so many topics, the obvious question is whether any singular or coherent message can come out of such an ambitious undertaking. One message is that of progress: *A Companion to American Cultural History* is a powerful statement of dynamic evolution in the field. So many of the contributors talk of the move away from narrow historical focuses of the past to the expansive, inclusive and interdisciplinary approaches of recent times. As James W. Cook notes in his survey of Antebellum cultural history, the attention of scholars has shifted from the white power elite to ‘path-breaking studies of workers, women, immigrants, and African Americans’ (p. 65). Karen Halttunen’s *A Companion to American Cultural History* is a testament to how far cultural history as a discipline has grown.

The editor is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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