

Review

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Paul Ashton and Hilda Kean, eds. *People and Their Pasts: Public History Today*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, xiv + 304 pp. ISBN 978-0-230-54669-1.

The anthology *People and Their Pasts: Public History Today* takes as its starting point a commitment to a “participatory historical culture,” described as a philosophy that treats the past as “a shared human experience and opportunity for understanding” (p. 2). In exemplifying this perspective, Paul Ashton and Hilda Kean, the editors, have sought out a selection of historians, archivists, and other professionals to demonstrate the many approaches public historians are applying in their attempts to represent and remember the past. The authors’ shared intentions are to break down knowledge barriers between academics and the public, promote the use of different materials among practitioners of public history, and to highlight public history exhibits that have been successful in their attempts to engage with the public (p. 9). On these points, the anthology is partially successful, for it only truly realizes these goals in the final section of the collection.

The contributions are organized according to three themes, including “The Making of History,” “Presenting the Past in Place and Space,” and “Material Culture, Memory and Public Histories.” The chapters in the first section, on “The Making of History,” are primarily theoretical and promote a perception of history as “an active and complex process that involves an ensemble of practices” that is not solely confined to the classroom, the archive, or the filing cabinet (p. 21). The second section, on “Presenting the Past in Place and Space,” consists of a series of case studies that speak to the ways that visual representations nurture public memory and inspire people to connect with their pasts, often in opposition to state-sanctioned public history projects. Finally, the third section, on “Material Culture, Memory and Public Histories,” emphasizes the relevance of personal and/or family histories due to their ability to engage the public in a more intimate and meaningful manner by applying personal archives and collections to the historiographic process.

The anthology’s greatest success lies in its careful mapping of the theoretical and practical terrain of public history as practiced in the Western world, using case studies from Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and the United Kingdom. From Bernard Jensen’s historiography of three dominant, yet interlinked, conceptual frameworks that form the basis for debate among current public historians (p. 42-56), to the intimate case studies offered by John Siblón (p. 146-162) and Hilda Kean and Brenda Kirsch (p. 187-202), novices to public

history will find themselves exposed to a wide range of theoretical perspectives and practical possibilities that are thoroughly interdisciplinary in scope.

This statement is particularly true of the contributions that speak to the merging of public and personal histories in the third section. The chapters by Hilda Kean and Brenda Kirsch, Martin Bashforth, Toby Butler, Mary Stewart, and Jon Newman all invoke personal histories in an attempt to demonstrate the “radical possibilities” inherent in this practice (p. 184). To this end, Kean and Kirsch explore the working-class primary school they attended as children, using materials archived by one of their teachers as inspiration for dialogue about their pasts (p. 187-202). Following this, Bashforth examines three generations of absent fathers in his life in order to highlight family history’s potential to “thoroughly democratize the practice of history” (p. 218). Next, Butler uses his experience of living in a houseboat in the middle of the River Thames as the starting point for constructing a cross-cultural memoryscape from oral history interviews he collected while drifting along its shores several years later (p. 223-239). Stewart, meanwhile, considers the life and works of her great, great grandfather by engaging with her family’s archives, and particularly materials that had been “previously hidden from the wider historical record” (p. 256). Finally, Newman uses the personal photographic archive maintained by Harry Jacobs to reconstruct a museum exhibit that speaks to individual histories from the Caribbean diaspora in Brixton (p. 260-278).

In a volume that seeks to break down knowledge barriers, promote the use of different materials, and to celebrate engagement, these goals are only truly met by the latter chapters. The third section is a refreshing shift away from the densely theoretical and largely impersonal chapters of the previous two sections that threaten to alienate readers from outside the realm of academia. Following the conclusions of previous contributions, such as the chapter by Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton, the third section of the anthology demonstrates how history can be related to the public by finding connections with members’ daily lives and deconstructing the artificial barriers that have traditionally separated practices of academic history from public history. Whereas contributions contained in the first two sections of the anthology speak repeatedly to the importance of connecting with and engaging the public in histories by making them relevant to their daily lives, the third section translates these recommendations into practice with great success for the reader.

The practice of family history is a subtle but important contribution to this success. By reflecting upon personal experiences and family myths, and the innovative methods used to explore these contexts in meaningful ways, Kean and Kirsch, Stewart, and Bashforth demonstrate the value of family history as a means of challenging official narratives and complementing the historical record. Their chapters are intimate and very specific in terms of the narratives they represent,

and yet they successfully engage the reader in deeper consideration of the practical possibilities that exist for family collections, photograph albums and narratives as they are handed down through the generations.

Butler and Newman further expand upon the relevance of family history by documenting responses from members of the public who participated in their attempts at making family histories public. Butler concludes his chapter by noting the relevance of his memoryscape on the River Thames for members of the public, who appreciated it for “the variety of voices...which gave the experience authenticity and emotional impact” and for its ability to “engender a feeling of identity with the landscape” (p. 235). Similarly, Newman reflects upon responses of “engagement and ownership” that were experienced by members of the local community as a result of the Lambeth Archives exhibit on the photographs of Harry Jacobs (p. 273). Most notably, visitors to the initial private viewing were spontaneously moved to start a trend of attaching post-it notes with descriptions to the photographs. This act was continued by later visitors, and ultimately allowed the local community to determine its own meaning for the exhibit.

Were it not for the provocative successes of these forays into the practice of family history, the anthology would likely have failed in its goal of breaking down knowledge barriers between academia and the public. Despite this criticism, however, it is fair to say that the volume should be appreciated for its ability to provide novices with an overview of the theoretical foundations influencing public history today. Likewise, its chapters demonstrate a variety of methods relevant to the practice of public history, particularly as approached by practitioners in the West.