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Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History

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Book Review: Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History

Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History by Denise D. Meringolo

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brought financial difficulties to her family. Women's suffrage was a hotly debated subject among Earle's peers, but she avoided taking a distinct side on the question.

Today's professionally trained historians tend to have an uneasy relationship with amateurs such as Earle. Williams quotes Linda Kerber dismissing the work of Earle and her peers as "descriptive and anecdotal" and without broad significance (2). But Williams clearly respects Earle and depicts her as a proficient historian—one who cared about authenticity, based her work on primary sources, and prefigured the introduction of social history with her emphasis on the subject of ordinary domestic life. Williams also makes a claim for Earle's lasting significance by demonstrating that her work informed popular displays of the past such as those found in historic house museums and historic pageants. Seeing Earle as a kind of public historian facilitates such a reassessment by valuing her ability to reach a mass audience and provide them with an engaging and compelling interpretation of the past.

BRIANN GREENFIELD

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Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History by DENISE D. MERINGOLO. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012. xxxii + 207 pp; illustrations, notes, index; paperbound, \$24.26.

When historians first began to work for the National Park Service (NPS), during the busy, inventive 1930s, Chief Historian Verne Chatelain sought individuals willing to become a new type of historian. What was needed, in Denise D. Meringolo's words, were men who were "as good on the ground as they were in the books." That phrase is a useful reminder to today's leaders of the American Historical Association, who have of late rediscovered public history as an outlet for PhDs unable to find academic jobs, that good public historians are not made in elite PhD programs but through "on the ground" work with the historical resources and interaction with the public. In this welcome addition to the literature on the origins and nature of public history Meringolo narrates the emergence of a new type of "public service" historian in the National Park Service of the New Deal era.

Meringolo's concise study has two purposes and in some ways reads as two books joined in a single binding. Her overarching goal is to add to the necessary, and perhaps never-to-end, debate about how we define the public history enterprise. Her second goal is to explore the origins of history in the United States federal government.

In her prologue and in her conclusion Meringolo succinctly summarizes the attempts by the founding generation of the National Council on Public History (NCPH) to define "public history," and the lukewarm response of many federal government historians to the new name and the academicians

who rallied under its banner. It was curious then and now in retrospect that the National Park Service—the world’s largest public history agency—played little to no role in the early development of either NCPH or in the debate over the definition of public history. Historians of a relatively new agency like the Department of Energy were engaged with public history from the beginning while the National Park Service—perhaps because of its strong institutional culture and alienation from the academy—reacted with initial indifference. This was especially unfortunate in Meringolo’s opinion because during the 1930s the NPS created a type of “public service” history based on interdisciplinary practice.

The core of Meringolo’s book is a narrative of the gradual embrace of science and later history by the post-Civil War federal government. Here the author effectively synthesizes an established literature from western and environmental history. When the narrative moves to the 1920s and 1930s, Meringolo makes an original contribution to our understanding of how history became integrated into National Park management through her careful primary source research and judicious use of many Park Service institutional history projects. This portion of the book seems somewhat divorced from the discussion of the definition of public history because Meringolo breaks off her study of NPS history programs in 1941 with the beginning of World War II. She does this in the belief that the agency’s basic approach to the practice of public service history had been established by that time. This seems to me unfortunate considering the massive expansion of the National Park Service in the 1960s and 1970s and the increasing professionalization of credentials for park service history positions in the 1980s and 1990s. These developments both stimulated the formation of academic public history programs and in turn influenced NPS historical practice. With a survey of the late twentieth century her “genealogy” of park service public history could have included discussion of experiments in what we now call “shared authority” at Civil War battlefields or “reflective practice” through the agency’s administrative history program.

Meringolo concludes her interesting study by broadly asking questions about how the legacy of National Park Service history relates to the practice of public history today. For her the National Park Service bequeathed to today’s public practitioners a complex and contradictory legacy. Creative pioneers such as Verne E. Chatelain, Jesse Logan Nusbaum, and Ronald F. Lee, carved out a place in the federal government for historians, and in doing so, they established a kind of history that was “not simply an intellectual exercise” but also a “tool for the expansion of governmental authority and the management of both landscapes and people during the twentieth century” (167). Seemingly, she looks for a less bureaucratic and more collaborative relationship between experts and their audience. Therefore she sees the public service history model that came out of the New Deal as having built a foundation for modern public history, but one which needs to be expanded to embrace broader interactions with “groups of citizens and stakeholders” (168).

This is a book that should and no doubt will find its way into the curriculum of most introductory courses on public history. Although I do not quite agree with Meringolo's characterization that the development of history in the National Park Service has been a forgotten chapter in our understanding of the field's development, she poses the discussion of that history in an engaging and useful manner. As advocates of the importance of history in understanding the present we would do well to pay more attention to our own history. Near the end of the book she notes, "The history of public history is, at its most basic level, a story about expansion—of federal authority, disciplinary expertise, and public space" (155). If expansion has indeed been a factor in public history's development as a field—something well illustrated by the National Council on Public History's growth and maturity since 1980—how do we as educators, site managers, and consultants adjust to what may well be an age of contraction?

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History on Television by ANN GRAY and ERIN BELL. London: Routledge, 2013. 246 pp; notes, bibliography, index; clothbound, \$150.00; paperbound \$39.95; e-Book, \$39.95.

This important new work arises from "Televising History 1995-2010," a specific research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), which drew on a range of disciplinary areas and approaches to explore the development of "factual history" programs on television. Undertaken by British scholars, the work focuses on programs designated as history. The emphasis is not on audiences' *reception* of history programs, which also would have needed to include the plethora of past-based fictional programs with which audiences enthusiastically engage. Rather, the book emphasizes the motivations of film-makers and commissioners.

I started off disliking the approach—albeit recognizing the funding constraints of the project—since an understanding of people's fascination with the past and their use of it in their daily lives cannot be reduced to programs defined as history. I was also wary of an approach that seemed to imply, at least initially, that public history was reducible to "the" presentation of "the" past to "the" public by professional historians and how historians were incorporated into the "business of television" (4). However, I was quickly won over by the authors since their approach is far more nuanced and interesting than the first pages suggest.

Importantly, Gray and Bell situate their discussion within debates in public history around the social construction of knowledge and the democratic opening up (or not) of the making of history programs. As they sensibly conclude, to suggest that television history is democratic simply because it is placed outside academia is "almost certainly inaccurate" (219). The most interesting