H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Johnson James Roark, Patricia Cline Cohen, eds. *The American Promise: A History of the United States.* Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1998. xxxii + 1270 pp.

James Roark, Michael Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, eds. *The American Promise: A History of the United States.* Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1998. xxxii + 1270 pp. (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-09525-3; $56.10 (paper), ISBN 978-0-312-11196-0.

Reviewed by April R. Summitt (Andrews University)

Published on H-Survey (March, 1998)

This new survey text by Bedford Books is a well-balanced and appealing book, user-friendly for both teachers and students. The authors' intent is to combine the newer interests of social history with a more traditional political narrative as a framework and thereby have the best of both worlds. This reviewer is satisfied that the authors have achieved this goal.

Starting with the assumption that students are reluctant to read history, the authors created a very visual textbook, full of illustrations, maps, charts, anecdotes, and thought-provoking questions to grab the attention of the reader. The text uses a fairly traditional chronological organization rather than the thematic approach of the newer "social history" texts. While expanded discussions on social issues are included, they are combined within or "wrapped around" a political narrative. Neither interest outweighs the other, making one of the most balanced survey texts now available. Covering the period from pre-contact through 1997, the text includes special sections on the impact of technological advances, photos of artifacts, and expanded captions for most illustrations.

These illustrations are remarkable in themselves because of their sheer number. While they make the text longer than usual, the overall effect is well worth the extra weight to the students. Each chapter begins with a full-page photograph of an artifact relevant to the theme with an extensive caption explaining its importance. This serves as an interesting integration of material culture with more traditional illustrations such as maps, charts, and political cartoons. Another unusual feature of the illustrations is the use of magazine, book, or video covers. Reproductions or photographs of covers for Time, Life, Ladies Home Journal, and T.V. Guide are just a few pieces of popular culture used to stimulate student interest in the subject matter.

Another valuable feature is the visual appeal of the text itself. Each chapter is divided by clear headings and includes "call-outs" or attention-grabbing portions of the main narrative set off from the text. These, along with the usual chapter divisions, help students identify major themes. Another helpful addition is a running head on the top of each page that not only gives the chapter title and theme, but the time period it covers. It is an easy-to-

read text type, interspersed with maps, charts, and illustrations that help the student visualize the history they are reading. Each chapter begins with a "vignette" or story to help engage the student, and the narrative itself is filled with more than the usual number of quotations from characters within the story, making them come alive to the reader. At the end of each chapter, the student is given a conclusion that summarizes the major points, a chronology chart, and a bibliography. An extensive index is also included. All in all, this work provides one of the easiest and engaging narratives in a survey text so far, avoiding unnecessary detail and focusing on fewer, larger points or themes.

To further aid student learning, several support materials are available, including an excellent map workbook, a study-guide with chapter outlines and self-tests, and two volumes of historical documents to supplement the text. The support materials for the teacher are also extensive and include the usual teacher's lecture guide, test banks, a large transparency collection and accompanying booklet with teaching ideas, and a small booklet of discussion ideas for first-time teaching assistants. The latter covers everything from helping students with paper-writing to tips on working with a difficult professor. Other topics include grading standards, classroom discipline problems, and preparation for section-teaching.

While designed with the student in mind, *The American Promise*, with its bibliographies, illustrations, and extensive appendices, also works well for the instructor. In addition to the usual Declaration of Independence and Constitution are annotations explaining the importance and history of each constitutional amendment. Also included are valuable demographic charts such as immigration trends, economic growth, literacy rates, population distribution and women in the work-force. Within the chapters themselves are interest-grabbing historical questions that lend themselves nicely to class discussion. Thirteen separate sections of primary texts are interspersed throughout throughout the book, allowing for further discussion of key topics.

As with all survey texts, some subjects receive more attention than others, and in spite of the authors' attempt at balance, there are some in particular that receive short shrift. One of these subjects is Native-Americans. The text does begin with the usual discussion of native cultures prior to 1492, but largely neglects discussion of the Columbian Exchange. Later coverage on Native-Americans is even thinner and covers the turbulent period of Indian Removal during the Jacksonian Era in one-two pages and the so-called "Indian Wars" following the Civil War in about the same space. The same could be said for the coverage of other ethnic minorities such as Asian-Americans and Hispanics who are lumped together in a brief discussion of the 1980s into under two pages. While African-Americans and some other groups receive better than usual coverage–a strong point of the text–women's history is scantily covered, at least in the discussion of the Women's Suffrage Movement. Yet, focus on women and African-Americans can be found interspersed throughout the text, perhaps a result of having several of the authors with expertise in these areas. Perhaps the inclusion of a historian with expertise in other group histories would have created a better balance of discussion of ethnic minorities.

Mostly, the text should be noted for its unusual strengths. Even though the work is framed by a political narrative, the social history is never absent nor relegated to special block sections. The approach to controversial presidents is also balanced, neither vilifying nor idealizing those such as Kennedy and Truman. The Cold War Era in particular receives excellent and thorough coverage from both political and cultural viewpoints. For example, the text contains an extensive discussion on the evolution of Containment policy, gives equal blame and understanding to both the U.S. and U.S.S.R. for the start of the Cold War, and provides complete chapters on popular and high culture for the 1950s, 1960s, and more recent decades.

Other subjects that receive unusually thorough coverage include the importance and struggles of American agriculture, the impact of technology over time, the social geography of urban centers, working class conditions, family life, labor unions, and the Populist Revolt of the 1890s. Frequent discussions of environmental issues appear interspersed throughout the text as do more traditional themes such as U.S. involvement in international affairs. The authors provide better than usual discussion of recent events such as U.S.-Middle East relations and anti-government sentiments exemplified by growing militia groups and the horror of the Oklahoma City bombing. Overall, the subject coverage is thorough, broad, and well-integrated.

While discussion of ethnic minority histories leaves something to be desired, overall the text is a worthy contribution to the teaching of survey classes. It is certainly one of the better balanced narratives and best visually presented texts now available. I would highly

recommend it to those interested in stretching beyond traditional historical approaches and to those concerned about student apathy. It is an excellent aid to the teaching of American History at the college level and Advanced Placement High School courses and should serve as a benchmark for good survey texts.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-survey

Citation: April R. Summitt. Review of James Roark, Michael Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, eds., *The American Promise: A History of the United States* and Roark, James; Johnson, Michael; Cohen, Patricia Cline, eds., *The American Promise: A History of the United States.* H-Survey, H-Net Reviews. March, 1998.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1799

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.