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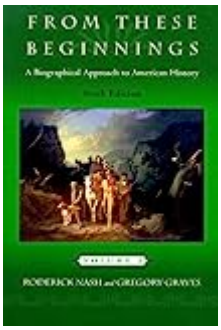

Roderick Nash, Gregory Graves. *From These Beginnings: A Biographical Approach to American History.* New York: Longman, 2000. vii + 289 pp. $35.80 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-321-00295-2.

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The Biographical Approach to the American History Survey

The authors of *From These Beginnings* work from the premise that history textbooks need not conform to the "standard ... method of dividing the past into periods, eras, or ages" (vii). Rather, they suggest, why not utilize people's natural attraction to biographies as a way to inform students about the past. In this way the course of historical events is interwoven with a contemporary's life experiences. Thus, for example, the reader encounters the path to American independence and beyond by walking alongside Jefferson as he, himself, develops as a person and interacts with other key players of the day. By presenting history as the study of humanity, rather than as the examination of "laws, treaties, elections, or eras," the authors contend that history "can be made as exciting as life itself" (vii). Citing as endorsements for this approach their own personal experience as well as the success of media dramas such as *Roots* and *Malcolm X*, the authors suggest that teachers can discard their standard textbooks for the more human-focussed method presented in their book.

But before following this advice, there are some things to consider. Teachers should give careful consideration to their own personal preferences, to what they hope to impart to students, to what they think their audience requires or expects, and to what their experience has shown to work. In this review, I will discuss some of the points that arose in my own mind as to how suitable the book would be in a survey course, especially when used, as the authors propose, as the principal text for a course.

The authors begin their examination of the "stream of events" that makes up the American experience with the story of Christopher Columbus. The ensuing biographies are positioned so as to parallel the

progression of American history. Thus the second entry belongs to the Puritan leader John Winthrop, followed by Benjamin Franklin, the outspoken Abigail Adams, Thomas Jefferson, the almost mythological native chief Tecumseh, mountain man Jim Bridger, Frederick Douglass and, lastly, Robert E. Lee. At the end of each biography are "Selected Readings," consisting of a briefly annotated list of books and articles on "The Person" and "The Period." A half-dozen or so questions "For Consideration" conclude each chapter, constructed along the lines

of reading comprehension.

While the list of biographies includes some very famous personalities, the authors feel that none of the individuals is completely satisfactory as the subject of a chapter in a book. On the other hand, they argue, the choice is not all that important, for a "surprising amount of information about the course of national events can be tied to *any* American life" (viii). As way of example, it is suggested that readers try this for themselves. And to a certain extent many of us could probably relate our lives to what has happened around us. Still, it is safe to say that some people's lives are more useful than others as windows into the unfolding of historical events. This is especially true the further back one goes into the past, where the written record becomes concentrated in the upper echelons of society.

This limitation points out one potential criticism of the biographical method: that it presents (and perhaps encourages) a top-down view of historical periods and personalities. After all, much of the lure of biography is in name recognition–whether this renown arises out of esteem or notoriety. Not that this is inherently wrong, but teachers do have consider when such an approach fits in with their own attitudes and goals.

Feelings about whether a biographical approach to American history would work as a survey text relate to overall considerations that teachers need to take into account when planning their courses. Attention should also be given to more specific concerns, namely to the handling of the individual biographies themselves. In general, the authors do a commendable job of tieing the subjects to their eras, but there are some topics that better lend themselves to this kind of approach than others. The biographies of Columbus and Tecumseh illustrate this point.

In the first entry, on Christopher Columbus, a well-honed narrative presents an intimate, if necessarily slimmed-down, portrait of the personal motivations that impelled the explorer, coupled with a concise, integrated presentation of the economic, political, and social milieu in which he lived. The result is a skillfully fabricated time-lapse snapshot of the person and his times–a collage of people, places, and events that shared a reciprocal relationship with Columbus. A brief excerpt illustrates the method.

The authors start off by noting that as the "son and grandson of humble weavers," Columbus "had little reason to anticipate a life of discovery and exploration. But the Europe into which he was born in 1451 simmered with the forces that eventually propelled him across the Atlantic. Some were already centuries old." The Crusades, for example, "had opened European eyes to new worlds" and to new products, from "colorful tapestries that made ideal wall hangings for dark, drafty European castles and Oriental spices to preserve as well as flavor food" to "gold and gems" (1). But Europeans paid a high price to get these goods. What was needed was a "cheap and direct access to the Orient" (2). Attaining such access became possible, the authors note, because the Renaissance had expanded intellectual horizons, advances in navigation had facilitated open-sea voyages, while institutions of early capitalism provided the financial means for far-flung expeditions (4). And so the biography proceeds, fusing the journey of the man with the trajectory of European society.

All in all, the Columbus biography achieves a tight integration between the man and his era. The presentation of Tecumseh's life and times, by comparison, seems less pleasing from both the narrative and scholarly perspectives. It is here that some of the difficulties with the biographical approach surface, as, for example, with the time frame. While the biographies that precede Tecumseh touch on the aboriginal peoples of North and South America, it is not until Tecumseh (about half way through the book) that the appearance of native peoples in the Americas is given substantial attention. (In all fairness, a brief mention of the origins is made in the Columbus biography, with instructions to look at the appropriate section in Tecumseh.) Even then, ten-thousand-plus years is condensed into two pages at the start of the chapter, with the result that much of the fascinating history of aboriginal peoples is, inevitably, glossed over.

When discussing native origins, the authors acknowledge that the "precise time and circumstances of the real beginning of American history swirl imprecisely in the mists of long ago" (151). The authors are, however, much less forthcoming about the fact that nearly everything we know about Tecumseh comes to us secondhand. Tecumseh, like most natives, left very little record of his life behind. This important point is not stressed in the biography. Students unfamiliar with the way most of our knowledge of native societies has been constructed–from archaeological evidence, oral tradition, and European observation–might get the impression that historians have just about figured everything out. But as well written as the narrative is, it is, nonetheless, only a consensus view of what we have uncovered so far. For some teachers this might be problematic. Part of what I try to

impart to students is that historians do not have all the answers, despite the factual way that history is often presented. It is important that students realize the relative merits and shortcomings inherent in the way we gather information about the past. Although these points could be discussed in lectures or seminars, my concern is that students might take the consensus view as hard fact to the exclusion of other interpretations.

In mentioning such concerns, it is not my intention to denigrate what is overall a pleasant and engaging book to read. Rather, my object is to try to determine under what circumstances *From These Beginnings* would work as the principal text for a survey course. Unlike many of the elaborate textbooks currently available – with their companion teaching guides, professional overheads, and website links – the authors give few details as to how they themselves have employed earlier versions of the text.

As broadly conceived as the biographies are, the nine chapters still revolve around the central characters and the issues or events with which they have become associated. Thus, for example, the life of Abigail Adams (the only woman chronicled) lends itself to a discussion of eighteenth-century American society, especially as regards to women; just as the story of Frederick Douglass naturally leads to a discussion of slavery over the course of his lifetime. This style tends to indicate that the book might be most useful for teachers preferring a thematic, rather than chronological, approach for their courses.

All things considered – from the hook provided by personalities to the concentration on general trends, all packaged in a very seductive and accessible narrative – the text might best be utilized in an environment where teachers are mainly interested in getting students to see the "big picture." In this kind of context *From These Beginnings* should work very well, especially among students who show little interest in exploring historical topics much below the surface.

Even here, the division of the book into nine (primarily thematic) chapters would necessitate some creative juggling of class schedules to fit in with the typical number of semester weeks.

One final comment: the same things that make *From These Beginnings* attractive–the polished writing and the macro view–make it less useful as a reader, many of which have a very narrow focus and a similarly narrow intent, such as to help students comprehend historical methodology. Teachers wanting to use biographies for this purpose may prefer a book like *The Human Tradition in Colonial America* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1999), edited by Ian K. Steele and Nancy L. Rhoden. Consisting of sixteen chronologically ordered, but essentially unlinked, essay-like biographies of mostly little-known individuals, this work provides a sharp contrast to the highly integrated biographies of the conspicuous persons in *From These Beginnings*. On the other hand, teachers looking for a different kind of textbook–those who, first off, are willing and able to adapt their class schedules and, secondly, are prepared to deal with the compromises inherent in the book–should find that Nash and Graves's *From These Beginnings* an appropriate tool for the task.

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