

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



William Bruce Wheeler, Susan D. Becker. *Discovering the American Past: A Look at the Evidence*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000. xi + 367 pp. \$33.16 (paper), ISBN 978-0-618-01158-2.

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Doing History in the Classroom

In the last few years there has been a growing movement in academia to help students engage history in a more interactive manner and increase their understanding of our discipline. In recent weeks discussion groups have addressed the teaching of history, in particular, the battle between active learning and the traditional lecture. Fascinating anecdotes and lively lectures aside, many instructors question whether students really understand how compelling history can be. To help students discover the exciting and intriguing nature of our discipline, publishers have, in the last decade, provided books that offer the student an opportunity to “do” history. *Discovering the Past* is one such supplement that encourages students to act like a historian by investigating interesting historical topics and evaluating primary-source evidence. This particular edition has been designed for the growing number of colleges and universities offering one-semester survey classes.

Like earlier editions, Wheeler and Becker employ the same six-step “doing history” format history in this thirteen chapter concise edition. The authors begin each chapter with a brief overview of an important historical problem or issue, for example, the decision to drop the atomic bomb. This is followed by a background discussion to help students understand both the nature and historical context of the problem. The third step called “The Method” offers students suggestions on how to think about and analyze the evidence. The evidence is the heart of each chapter. The authors provide a range of primary source material ranging from first-hand accounts, demo-

graphic data, illustrations and photographs, and government documents. After exploring the evidence, Wheeler and Becker offer thoughtful questions to help students make sense of and connect the numerous pieces of evidence. The final step is a brief epilogue that describes the aftermath or outcome of the historical problem under study.

Discovering the Past offers historical topics ranging from the encounter between Hernan Cortes and Montezuma to California’s recent affirmative action debates. Three chapters deal with the colonial period, including one exploring the social history of Massachusetts Bay and another on the trial of Captain Preston following the Boston Massacre. Race and gender tend to dominate the middle chapters of this volume. The authors address, for example, the working women of the Lowell Mills and the question whether the “new” woman of the 1920s was a reality. Another chapter explores the lifestyle changes middle-class women and men experienced during the Gilded and Progressive eras. The authors also explore the perplexing problem of race in nineteenth-century America. First they address the nature of slavery by way of slave narratives followed by an examination of the debate regarding the use of African American troops during the Civil War. The famous Thomas Nast cartoons from the Reconstruction era are the focus of another chapter. The final four sections investigate rural poverty during the Great Depression through the lens of Farm Security Agency photographers, the decision to drop the first atomic bomb, the Vietnam War from the perspective of

soldiers and families that lived through it, and the debate on affirmative action in California.

The variety of fascinating topics and the breadth of primary source material are the strength of this volume. While space precludes a review of each chapter, a few of them clearly stand out. One of the most challenging chapters investigates the social history of Massachusetts during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The authors provide numerous tables of demographic material for the students to digest. Students will have to think a great deal about what census, landholding, and other demographic information can tell the historian about a particular community. Another important subject the authors examine was the controversy over the use of African American troops by both the North and the South during the Civil War. The wide-ranging evidence forces the students to view this from the perspective of free blacks, Abraham Lincoln and his cabinet, the press, and even Confederate politicians and military leaders. The most difficult chapter explores the racial cartoons of Thomas Nast. These cartoons offer a fascinating view of Reconstruction, yet students will likely struggle with the subtle meanings of the symbols and characters included in the illustrations. This chapter demands that instructors provide additional background and perhaps a glossary of symbols, people, and issues addressed in the various cartoons. The Nast cartoon chapter, however, will prepare students for later topics that likewise include illustrations and photographs, especially the magazine and newspaper advertisements used to detail middle-class life at the turn of the century as well as the depression-era photographs of rural America. Finally, Wheeler and Becker provide a refreshing perspective on the Vietnam War. Shifting the discussion of the conflict from the political and diplomatic channels, the authors let those who experienced the war at home and on the front speak. This chapter also includes sample release forms for oral interviews and encourages students themselves to interview people from that generation.

While the authors must be commended for the topics and primary sources they chose to include, a few weaknesses were evident in this concise volume. One significant drawback was the poor coverage of the colonial and early national period. The rise of slavery and the complex nature of southern life are absent. The two Anglo-American chapters deal with the northern colonies, specifically Massachusetts. To balance this geographic slight, the authors might have included a chapter on race and colonial Virginia and, if necessary to save space, dropped the nineteenth-century slave narratives chapter. While it

is common for textbooks to briefly explore Spanish contact with the Aztecs and Incas, this reviewer would have preferred that the authors choose English contact with Native Americans in the 17th century instead of Cortes and Montezuma. While the inclusion of both English and Spanish conquest would have been ideal, failure to address Anglo-American relations with Native Americans leaves a big hole in this book. Almost as troubling was the lack of coverage of the early national period. Students would surely benefit from a chapter on the Hamilton and Jefferson's contrasting visions of the new nation. Finally, a chapter exploring the politics and culture of the 1950s and 1960s would be warmly welcomed.

The debate over which topics or primary sources should be included or excluded largely reflects personal interest and no doubt many readers might disagree with my suggestions. This genre of American history survey supplements, however, invites discussion of pedagogy. H-Survey discussions have touched upon the nature of teaching in recent months. Some participants have debated the issue of coverage vs. depth in the survey course, while others have commented on the value and benefit of the traditional lecture format. *Discovery of the American Past* and other similar supplements, including James West Davidson and Mark Lytle's *After the Fact* or John Hollitz's *Thinking Through the Past*, force instructors to consider, even if implicitly, both these issues.[1] No doubt anything that increases student interest in history is worthwhile. The use of primary sources further adds to this volume's usefulness and value in the classroom. Yet some instructors who already struggle to cover the necessary issues, ideas, and events in one semester might find that this supplement only exacerbates this problem. Time will be needed in the classroom to discuss each chapter's historical issue or to help students understand some of the documents. This problem might be overcome by having students work in groups outside class or assigning some type of written assignment for each chapter. For those not concerned with coverage, Wheeler and Becker offer the opportunity to explore certain issues in depth. Moreover, the varied approaches employed by the authors can help students understand how to think about history and thus apply these skills to other topics or issues. Likewise, supplements such as this allow instructors to move away from the traditional lecture and let students participate in their own education. In-class discussions of both the historical problems and the primary-source evidence could be quite fruitful if handled appropriately. Class size, however, will likely determine if this method is possible. This volume also

permits group work by students. Instructors could divide up the primary sources among several groups or assigned each group particular historical questions to address in class. More ambitious instructors might assign each chapter to a group of students who would present it before the class.

As an instructor at a university charged with teacher education for much of San Diego County, *Discovering the American Past* has forced me to contemplate how I teach the American survey course. As is all too clear, the teaching of history in the primary schools needs reform. While many teachers successfully transmit their interest and passion for history to their students, many others do not or cannot. This failure thus leaves students on the college or university doorstep with little interest in, and sometimes hostility toward, history. If we do not help break or overcome this trend, we will likely perpetuate

it. If books like *Discovering the American Past* can help us engage students then instructors should consider their use in the classroom. This reviewer invites readers to offer their thoughts on the nature of the survey course and the value of these kinds of supplements in the classroom.

Note

[1]. James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle, *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection*, 4th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000); John Hollitz, *Thinking Through the Past: A Critical Thinking Approach to U.S. History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

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