

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Meredith Mason Brown. *Touching America's History: From the Pequot War through World War II.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. xii + 271 pp. \$36.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-00833-6.

Reviewed by Alexandre F. Caillot

Published on H-War (July, 2015)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Material culture can reveal a great deal about a society. The idea that a historical object is a powerful storytelling medium is one museum professionals and public historians have long embraced. From the standpoint of both academia and popular history, however, the connection between artifacts and the resulting text is rarely made explicit. In his book *Touching America's History: From the Pequot War Through WWII*, author Meredith Mason Brown seeks to change this status quo. In an excerpt from the back jacket cover, historian Joseph J. Ellis proposes the term *tactile approach* as a description of the author's methodology. Rather than providing a one-volume, sweeping survey of American history, Brown uses an array of twenty family heirlooms to serve as touchstones—points of interest around which engaging narratives can be woven. His book is indeed grand in scope, as it explores topics both well known (for example, George Washington and the Constitutional Convention) and decidedly less familiar (for example, the Philippine War). Still, it is never overambitious. It combines an easy-flowing style and scholastic rigor, carefully treading the line between approachable volume and imposing monograph.

Brown's thesis is that his collection of heirlooms can unveil major patterns and processes in American history. These disparate objects bring to mind that growth and those changes and the central roles in them played by the quest for the new, the hunger for financial betterment, and the recurrent use of military force (p. 4). It is a broad theme, not a bold new interpretation of the nation's past. The scholar interested in a work that challenges the historiography will not find it here, but for the

general reader, the author has succeeded in bringing together three centuries of history into a single, engaging book. This ease of reading is made possible by Brown's decision to employ the narrative style. The sources can be blended together, providing a story-like reading experience that facilitates a ready comprehension of the subject matter. Naturally, as with every historiographical writing style, it has its downfalls: in this case, the inability to clearly convey the sense of debate and inquiry that plays such a large role within the field of history.

Brown provides ample introductory content for each chapter, making the book accessible to even the most unfamiliar reader. Still, the dedicated history enthusiast could study the pertinent topics in more detail by selecting works with a narrower focus, in lieu of an American historical compendium. For example, due to the abundance of entire volumes written about D-Day, Brown's own section cannot be considered an exhaustive examination. Importantly, this is not his intent. His purpose is to stress the connections between the objects in his possession, and the broader events from which they acquire meaning. The narrative derives its significance from his family history, for Brown's relatives—who once owned most of the objects—were involved in some of the nation's formative periods of development. Westward expansion, the schism of the Civil War, the assertion of imperialist ambitions with the acquisition of the Philippines, and the economic transformation that saw fruition at the end of the Second World War—Brown is able to present the reader with a history that is at once nationally relevant and deeply personal.

One of the central questions arising from such a wide-ranging text is the quality of its source material. As reflected in the acknowledgements, the author consulted local historical societies, historians, and even the National Archives. His nine pages of bibliography further emphasize the degree of involved research. A look through the endnotes reveals that, in the effort to cover such a great span of time, Brown draws frequently on a select group of sources, many of them secondary. Still, he sheds light on highly pertinent primary material, and given the book's stated objectives, a willingness to em-

brace ample secondary sources is not unexpected.

Touching America's History: From the Pequot War Through WWII is a demonstration of how scholarship can combine material culture and family genealogy in a fashion that will attract readers interested in early America, the Civil War period, and even the twentieth century. The academic historians among us might wish for a more narrowly focused volume that sheds extensive introductory content for a more detailed examination; the public for which this book was intended will, however, find it to be to be satisfying and enriching.

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

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Alexandre F. Caillot. Review of Brown, Meredith Mason, *Touching America's History: From the Pequot War through World War II*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. July, 2015.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44172>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.