

H-Net Reviews

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Jim R. McClellan, ed. *Historical Moments: Changing Interpretations of America's Past; Volume II: The Civil War through the 20th Century*. Second Ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000. xxxii + 552 pp. 50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-07-228383-9.



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The concept behind this collection text is an interesting one: to examine particular moments in history, both at the time and as viewed after the fact. The book promises to show “that each generation writes its own history by revising and reinterpreting earlier views” (back cover). Every teacher who has encountered student resistance to history as interpretation (rather than explanation of constant, eternal truth) will welcome such an approach in a reader.

But the concept of “historical moments” presents some difficulties. By definition, it requires a particular event “that in some way altered the course of history” (p. ii). All historians know that many of the most important historical phenomena cannot be traced back to one specific event; in fact, most of us expend a great deal of effort in our survey classes trying to disabuse students of this notion (e.g., the widespread belief that the sinking of the Maine caused the Spanish-American War). To cite but one example of many, the chapter on Vietnam uses as its “moment” the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964. While this event was an important part of the American escalation in Vietnam, it hardly altered the course of history. Had it never occurred, the American escalation no doubt would have proceeded anyway. Tonkin represented a part of that process; it was not the cause of it. As one of the sources in the chapter aptly puts it,

“The American involvement in Indochina began almost imperceptibly” (p. 446). It is precisely such almost imperceptible developments that the concept of historical moments is ill-suited to illuminate.

A similar problem occurs in chapters one and two, on the Civil War and Reconstruction. Chapter one begins with a series of documents on the status of Fort Sumter. Had the chapter focused solely on that one event, it might have worked. The subsequent sources, however, veer off into discussions of the larger question of Civil War causation and drop all reference to the controversy over the fort. Students might well be bewildered by these choices. What insight do newspaper accounts of the attack on the fort give them about the deeper causes of the war? How can students use these documents to evaluate later arguments regarding the role played by slavery in bringing about the war? Had the chapter limited its focus to the decision-making process on both the Union and Confederate sides, and examined the more limited question of responsibility for the outbreak of hostilities, it would have been far more effective.

Chapter two has a similar problem. What “moment” caused Reconstruction? According to McClellan, it was the surrender of Lee. Certainly, had the Confederacy not lost on the battlefield, there would have been no Reconstruction. But does reading the correspondence between

Grant and Lee that led to Appomattox equip students to evaluate the successes and failures of Reconstruction?

The book is far more successful when it chooses discrete events that naturally raise larger issues. An excellent example is chapter six on the Haymarket incident. Accounts of the event, trial testimony, newspaper editorials, and other primary sources illuminate the positions of protesters and the popular backlash against radicalism, while subsequent secondary sources put the event in context. The connections between this event and the larger issues growing out of the industrial revolution emerge naturally. Chapter eleven, on the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, is similarly effective. Its numerous accounts of women seeking desperately to escape the horrors of the fire vividly recapture for students the impact of this event and make understandable the subsequent legislative reaction. The comparison of these two chapters to those on the Civil War and Reconstruction demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses of the “historical moments” approach.

Between these two extremes lies a gray area, in which McClellan chooses moments that are the result of a long process rather than the beginning of something. McClellan seems of two minds on how to deal with these events. The most stark examples come in chapters fourteen and fifteen, which look at the 18th and 19th Amendments. The different treatment of these two subjects is rather jarring. The chapter on Prohibition begins with Benjamin Rush discussing the effect of alcohol in a document from 1784, and proceeds with six other sources (most from the 19th century) before culminating in the actual amendment itself, the eighth document in the chapter. This approach is perfectly defensible; prohibition was a change long in the making, and these documents give the student a good sense of that. However, the contrast with the next chapter is surprising. The first document is dated 1913, and the following twelve documents all deal with the seven year period immediately preceding the passage of the amendment guaranteeing women the right to vote. If understanding the temperance movement requires that we go back to 1784, does not comprehension of the suffrage movement merit at least an excerpt from Seneca Falls in 1848? One could make a good argument for either of these approaches, but using them both raises questions of consistency that are likely to confuse students on the survey course level.

The organization of each chapter also presents a significant problem. The chapters are divided into “First Impressions” and “Second Thoughts.” These categories

at first glance seem merely to be another way of saying primary and secondary sources, and indeed the back cover reinforces that view, using the term “primary documents” for “First Impressions,” and describing “Second Thoughts” as “diverse interpretations offered by scholars of succeeding generations.” One of the compelling reasons for using a this type of reader in a survey class is to introduce students to the distinction between primary and secondary sources, and unfortunately this text hopelessly confuses the two. To cite but one particularly egregious example, in chapter thirteen, on World War I, the first source listed in the “Second Thoughts” section is an editorial from the *Washington Post*, two days after Wilson’s address to Congress asking for a declaration of war. In no sense can this document be considered a secondary source. In fact, it neatly fits the text’s own description of “First Impressions: primary documents consisting of commentary and observations of those contemporary to the event” (back cover). By contrast, chapter nineteen, on the wartime internment of Japanese Americans, rightly begins the second thoughts section with historical accounts, the earliest in this case coming from 1961. Even here, however, the line is blurred. In the midst of the scholarly sources, we find President Ford’s 1976 statement officially rescinding FDR’s 1942 executive order. While this source is a “second thought,” it is not a scholarly interpretation. To mix the two confuses rather than illuminates. (The final chapter, dealing with the Clinton impeachment, may make the text up-to-date, but it flies in the face of the idea of examining changing interpretations over generations: the “Second Thoughts” in this chapter encompass the generations spanned between February 13, 1999, and July 30, 1999.)

Lastly, the book often suffers from a lack of context and guidance for students. In some cases, as in chapter one, on the Civil War, the student is simply presented with sources with little editorial comment. At other times, for example in chapter eighteen, on Pearl Harbor, the one and a half pages of background material come after the student has read eleven sources and seven and half pages about the attack. Would it not make more sense to present this material first? In chapter seven on Coxey’s Army, one of the better chapters in the book, McClellan does exactly this. He gives the reader not only the general context of the depression of the 1890s, but also explains Jacob Coxey’s plan to aid the unemployed and march on Washington to pressure the government to enact it. This inconsistency adds to the text’s extremely uneven nature.

In general, this text tries to do too much. It is literally

too big; at 531 pages of text, small type, it is quite long for a supplemental text. The 29 chapters would, if all assigned, come out to about two per week in a standard semester. One could spend almost the entire semester discussing the material contained here. Some chapters have as many as thirty different sources, the sheer variety of which can be difficult for students to keep straight. This volume could easily be cut in half, focusing only on those chapters (e.g., the assassination of Lincoln, Haymarket, the Triangle fire, the Scopes trial, Hiroshima, and Watergate, to name a few) which work best within its conceptual framework.

McClellan has done a great deal of research for this volume and assembled an impressive collection of sources. Some of the selections are particularly striking. For example, Dick Gregory's excerpt on Stokeley Carmichael and H. Rap Brown in chapter twenty-three is the best brief explanation for the radicalization of the civil rights movement I have ever read. The selection by W.E.B. DuBois on Reconstruction historiography is particularly instructive, since he directly addresses by name other historians whose ideas appear earlier in the chap-

ter. This example shows students in an unambiguous fashion how historians converse with each other over the decades. In an extremely nice touch, McClellan includes in the Vietnam chapter a speech by Senator Wayne Morse that quotes an earlier document by Carl Schurz from the Phillippines chapter, thus tying the anti-imperialism of the turn of the century to the opposition to the war in Vietnam. The only shortcoming in this area is the lack of variety in the primary sources; there are only a handful of non-text sources. Political cartoons, photographs/illustrations, charts, graphs and maps would give students a greater sense of the range of materials historians use to reconstruct the past. This problem is somewhat addressed by the large list of web sites compiled by McClellan, which dramatically broaden the potential sources for students to access. This annotated list is in itself a great resource, and is well-coordinated with the text (icons in the margin alert students to the existence of a relevant site).

Unfortunately, these positive attributes do not outweigh the deficiencies of this volume. It is of uneven quality, and should be used selectively, if at all.

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