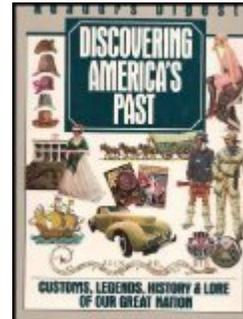


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William Bruce Wheeler, Susan D. Becker. *Discovering the American Past. Vol 2:* Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002. xiv + 310 pp. \$34.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-618-10225-9.



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In recent texts, historians have put more emphasis on the development of critical thinking skills, and this text, *Discovering the American Past, Volume II: Since 1865*, by Susan Becker and William Wheeler, encourages students to actively explore the study of history. This is not just a text for students of history, but the emphasis on examination and analysis of evidence makes it applicable for anyone. This is a book that actually encourages comprehension of the “doing” and “making” of history, rather than simply restating the facts. In eleven concisely-written chapters, including two new chapters in this fifth addition, Wheeler and Becker clearly value an interactive approach to history. By providing more of a social and cultural construction to this edition, the authors give students a more diverse view of American history.

Volume Two covers topics ranging from Horace Greeley to the “fourth wave” of immigration in the 1990s. What is most appealing about this volume is the dispersion of primary source materials, including political cartoons and images. Each chapter ends, not only with an Epilogue, but with a list of “questions to consider” regarding the images included at the end of the chapter. Several of the chapter discussions are outstanding in their emphasis on the social and political conditions, including chapter two, with its discussion of the end of Reconstruction and the challenges facing both blacks and whites.

With the use of primary source material by Ida Wells and Frances Harper, as well as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, the authors incorporate texts from easily-recognizable figures, as well as texts from individuals who are just beginning to receive coverage in history texts. And, then by encouraging students to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the movement through a series of questions dedicated to the examination of these texts, the authors concentrate on the development of critical thinking skills.

The visual nature of this text is of incredible value; the bold chapter titles and subtitles, as well as charts and graphs, allow students to identify major themes within the text. As an additional feature, the running head at the top left hand corner of the even-numbered pages gives the chapter number and title in easily readable text. Designed with the student in mind, *Discovering the American Past* is both instructor and student-friendly, since many of the primary source documents could easily be used for discussion during course lectures. Both Becker and Wheeler should be commended for their inclusion of social, political, cultural, and economic history. The work is surrounded by a political narrative, but the social interpretation is never far behind. Particularly interesting is the emphasis on advertisements, such as those from the Sears Roebuck & Company catalog or the Ford Motor

Company. This emphasis on a discussion of middle-class values is one of the strengths of this text; in fact, the authors devote an entire chapter to the era of 1870 to 1917, and the beginnings of material culture.

In discussing the development of major themes that have shaped the twentieth century, including a largely social-scientific approach, the authors document incidents such as the USS Greer incident in September of 1941, as well as the impact of the Brown vs. Board of Education decision. Rather than simply dealing with these events by merely providing the facts, Becker and Wheeler attempt to explain the background, how cases are argued before the Supreme Court in the case of Brown vs. Board, or the interpretation of log books on ships such as the USS Greer. In its discussion of major themes that have shaped the United States, including the growth of presidential power and the influence of immigration, the authors explain how events such as the New Deal expanded the power of the federal government, or how the agony of Vietnam set the tone for a nation in turmoil.

With its incorporation of end-of-chapter elements, headed by the subtitle, "The Method," *Discovering the American Past* is an exploration of American heritage, and with its coverage of controversial topics such as Vietnam, the text never wavers from its interdisciplinary, unbiased stance. The review questions in "The Method" sections are designed to assist students in developing a more concise interpretation of history, and to encourage students to locate the major themes in history more effectively. *Discovering the American Past* succeeds in its aims to present the stories and backgrounds of the individuals who created the story that is America; Wheeler and Becker have combined an amazing amount of oral history and primary sources with historical fact. For the student of social history, *Discovering the American Past* covers both the unique and the mundane, providing equal coverage to both. With its well-balanced coverage, it is an excellent teaching resource for instructors of American history at the college level.

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