

History in the Making: An Absorbing Look at How History Has Changed in the Telling Over the Last 200 Years

Kyle Ward

(New York: New Press, 2006. 374 p. Cloth, \$26.95.)



History in the Making examines the ways in which American history textbooks have changed over time. All of us know at least something about these books because we were expected to read them when we were in school. We may not have formed strong positive attachments to particular textbooks, but it is unlikely that we were as alienated as the student who wrote inside one of the books Ward found: “If poison won’t kill ya, try reading this.”

Ward’s book is organized chronologically and thematically into eight sections with titles such as “The American Revolution,” “Industrialism, Imperialism, and War,” and “The Great Depression and World War II.” Each section has several chapters dealing with specific topics, and each chapter—there are 53 in all—consists of excerpts from several textbooks, presented in chronological order from 1794 to 1999. Each excerpt is followed by brief comments from Ward. The book’s primary audiences seem to be general readers and classroom students.

Ward does not tell us in detail how he selected the textbooks he excerpts, and he observes that it is difficult to know just how widely nineteenth-century volumes were distributed. He provides a succinct overview of history textbook publishing, noting that 22 states require schools to adopt specific ones. Policies like this give considerable market clout to textbooks selected by populous states such as Texas and California. Ward suggests, as have others, that the result is publishers catering to the perceived wishes of decision makers in these states.

Because of its organizational structure, *History in the Making* has a repetitive quality that can make reading it not unlike mowing the lawn. The individual topics, however, make it interesting. Most of those topics are just what readers might expect: Columbus’s landing, Lexington and Concord, slavery, the League of Nations, the Bay of Pigs. Only occasionally does Ward include lesser-known topics. For example, the 1836 Caroline Affair, a Canadian incident that created a short-lived diplomatic crisis between Great Britain and the United States, either did not made into my high-school history text or I must have dozed off while reading about it.

Some topics will especially interest students of Minnesota history. Although there are no references to the Kensington Runestone in “The Vikings,” Ward does devote a chapter to the Dakota Conflict of 1862, which is meant to demonstrate that some subjects, given attention at one time, have “long since faded from U.S. history textbooks.” He includes textbook excerpts from 1874, 1888, 1889, and 1994. The 1994 selection is only two sentences long and, not surprisingly, fails to explain an event that still carries resonance in Minnesota. Readers familiar with recent Minnesota history textbooks know that this is a subject that does get attention in the North Star State. An entire chapter of *Northern Lights: The Stories Of Minnesota’s Past*, published by the Minnesota Historical Society Press, is devoted to it.

Ward, as a history educator, wants readers to understand that history textbooks “have been written, published, taught, and studied by people with personal biases, perspectives, and interpretations of what our past was like, and the impact that [fact] has for us in the modern day as well as the future.” *History in the Making* does allow its readers to see how interpretations of the past change over time. This idea will not be new to many readers of history. Ward, however, believes that many people do not know this, and he wants to “let others in on the secret that history is not written in stone but is actually a subject that needs discussion, debate, and research to keep it alive and interesting to all.” If readers take away this point, he will certainly have accomplished his goal.

Reviewed by Timothy C. Glines, who in 2007 retired from his position as manager of outreach services in the Minnesota Historical Society’s Historic Preservation, Field Services, and Grants department.

Dreaming the Mississippi

Katherine Fischer

(Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006, 208 p., Paper, \$18.95.)



Great bodies of water speak to the souls of many who live within their sphere of magic. Henry Beston heard his calling in the roar of the Atlantic Ocean, as he labored at his writing desk in a small shack on a sandy stretch of Cape Cod. Rachel Carson honed her lyricism in summers she spent at her cottage on the coast of Maine. Terry Tempest Williams found a refuge in Utah’s Great Salt Lake, which inspired her best-known work on her mother’s death.

The Mighty Mississippi, third largest river on Earth, would seem to be water that speaks. From its small, sparkling source in northern Minnesota to its massive, muddy delta at New Orleans, the waterway cuts through the heart of North America, draining nearly half of the lower 48 states.

Mark Twain responded to the presence of the river with *Life on the Mississippi*, a collection of experiences arising from familiarity with its broad, coursing stream. Now, farther upriver, where the Mississippi runs clearer and quicker, another writer taps its well of inspiration. Katherine Fischer's *Dreaming the Mississippi* is a set of sixteen wide-ranging essays and one "Landlubber's Lexicon" in which she explores her passion for the river. Fischer, an English professor at Clarke College in Dubuque, Iowa, extols the majesty of "The Father of Waters" by examining different facets of life lived on the upper Mississippi.

In the beginning essay, appropriately titled "Itasca," she tells of her introduction to the turbid, turbulent stream that is both attractive and intimidating to a woman who spent her girlhood on the shore of translucent green Lake Michigan. The second piece reveals, however, that now, as an adult, she is "hooked." The river has captured her imagination, and she labors in the current of obsession. She is restless in winter, when ice blocks her access to it, and caught in the rush of its waters the remainder of the year.

Later essays detail how she explores this fascination. As her love for the river rises, she buys a boat and learns to navigate the pitfalls of flowing water, especially that which has been manipulated by the dictates of global commerce. She discusses, in detail, wing dams and levees, locks and pools, man-made structures that further the movement of barges down the river. She and her family camp on the river's islands, explore the river's human communities, and finally, in complete surrender to compelling emotion, invest in a house on the floodplain, despite knowing that it will flood every spring the Mississippi rises to fifteen feet.

The very spring they move in, the river *does* reach the high-water mark, and Fischer, on a moonlit night, opens her basement doors to the rising water, inviting "the greatest river in America to run through the foundation of our house."

If readers are looking for a book that describes the natural history of the river, the plants and animals living in and near it, they will be disappointed. Neither will they find accounts of past peoples of the upper Mississippi. Rather, what Fischer focuses on is a social geography of the river around Dubuque. She is recording life on the river today, conveying "its people and its energy as a life force within America."

In three of the essays, Fischer takes us away from the upper Mississippi, to as varied of places as New Orleans,

Salt Lake City and a theme park three hours outside of Tokyo. Although each spot has a tenuous tie to her Mississippi at Dubuque, these essays seem out of place. They threaten the narrative flow of the book by lifting the reader out of the river world of Dubuque that she has labored to create, and away from the people—including her own family—who inhabit it.

Nevertheless, *Dreaming the Mississippi* poignantly conveys how an imposing body of water can leave its mark on a people who live on its banks and a writer who listens to its liquid voice.

Reviewed by Sue Leaf, a zoologist who has taught biology and environmental science, published widely, and received a McKnight Individual Artist Grant. Her book Potato City: Nature, History, and Community in the Age of Sprawl (2004) plumbs the historical, biological, and ecological stories beneath the suburban veneer of the Anoka sand plain.

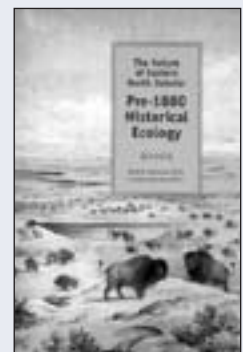
The Nature of Eastern North Dakota: Pre-1880 Historical Ecology

Kieth E. Severson and Carolyn Hull Sieg

(Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 2006. 308 p. Paper, \$21.95.)

There are many reasons why Minnesotans would be interested in the historical ecology of eastern North Dakota. The human history of a region is influenced by its geography. Long before there were states, the borderland between forest and prairie in the drainage of the Red River created similar conditions for aboriginal occupants, fostering admixtures of woodland and prairie cultural influences and contested hunting grounds. Shared river systems served as a regional transportation network for many of the same traders, explorers, and travelers. The same animals attracted the fur industry, and similar climates affected early settlers.

Authors Severson and Sieg organize a daunting array of scientific and historical information topically and chronologically, melding details of geology, climate, human presence, fire, vegetation, and animals into a narrative accessible to general readers. The integration of historic accounts of bison numbers, movements, and their relationship to climate and fire makes an especially good read. Summaries at the end of each chapter recapitulate major points, making it easy to cross-reference from chapter to chapter. Addressing



ongoing debates within the prairie-management scientific community, the final chapter summarizes the writers' interpretation of how the form of the landscape interacted with functions like fire frequency and grazing, but the wealth of primary material in the abundant tables and appendices enables the reader to draw independent conclusions.

The depth of research into historic narratives is impressive. If the land story woven from these resources sometimes reads like a compendium of short quotations about each species or group of organisms, the style reflects the nature of available sources. Gleaning information about natural history from nineteenth-century narratives is challenging. Many likely sources are not indexed for this purpose. Natural history was not the primary focus of the traders, explorers, military expeditions, and settlers whose accounts provide brief hints about the distribution and numbers of animals and plants. Travelers tended to focus on useful or troublesome species, whereas those documented by scientific explorations reflected the interest or expertise of expedition members. Hence the smaller number of plants and mammals but comparatively larger number of birds and mussels reported by the 1823 Keating Expedition on its journey up the Minnesota River, down the Red River, and to Lake Superior via the border lakes. Expedition logs and diaries often note the distance traveled in a day, but matching routes to particular places is difficult. Many a "little lake without a name" on which Nicollet and his party camped may now be drained. Antiquated names present similar challenges: "Bois blanc" and "tremblier" for basswood and aspen, "dore" for walleye, "loup cervier" for lynx, and "red" and "fallow" deer for elk and white-tailed deer are good examples.

Ten tables and seven appendices make this book an indispensable new summary resource for scholars, teachers, and land managers. Here the reader can find geographically organized lists of sources, summaries of climate data, lists of presettlement plants and birds, and unexpurgated quotations about fire and bison sightings from the earliest records up to the period of agricultural settlement. Clear reproductions of lithographs from Isaac Stevens's 1853 Pacific Railroad Survey enliven the text.

The book's shortcomings are few. The maps, while reflecting the writers' intent to provide a frame of reference, are nearly illegible. Specialists in geology or paleoecology may quarrel with the level of generalization or use of dated sources. Nonetheless, the comprehensive bibliography provides a solid springboard for readers interested in local environmental history.

The Nature of Eastern North Dakota rides the wave of Great Plains environmental history books commemorating the 200th anniversary of the Corps of Discovery. By ad-

ressing the region north and east of the Missouri basin, it showcases the magnificent repository of information about the Red River basin contained in the journals of Alexander Henry the Younger and David Thompson—both predating Lewis and Clark. Readers attracted to such works as Bray and Bray's *Joseph N. Nicollet on the Prairies and Plains* will find *The Nature of Eastern North Dakota* a valuable addition to their libraries.

Reviewed by Nancy Sather (MS Ecology, MFA Creative Writing). Trained in paleoecology and plant community ecology, she has been a field ecologist with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources for over two decades, working throughout the state's prairie region. Her MFA thesis, "Lipstone and Rubber Ice," integrates memoir, landscape history, and personal essays about northwestern Minnesota, using many of the same scientific and historical sources as The Nature of Eastern North Dakota.

Italian Voices: Making Minnesota Our Home

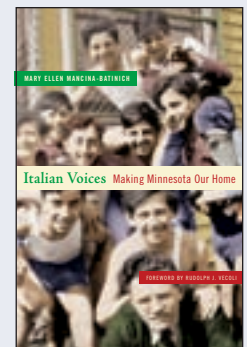
Mary Ellen Mancina-Batinich

(St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007. 315 p. Cloth, \$29.95.)

Twenty years in the making by a daughter of Minnesota's Iron Range, *Italian Voices* serves to remind those of us who conceive of diversity as belonging to the present that there was, arguably, greater variety in our immigrant and ethnic past. Based on a collection of more than 100 interviews with immigrants and first-generation Italians from the Iron Range, Duluth, the Twin Cities, western Minnesota, and northwestern Wisconsin, this book is a compendium of everyday Italian and Italian American life between 1900 and 1960.

This marvelous collection of ordinary lives and stories is, in the introductory words of immigration historian Rudolph Vecoli, "a cornucopia of a book." With lengthy (two-to-five-page) extracts from interviews conducted over coffee in kitchens, living rooms, and retirement homes, *Italian Voices* illustrates the inherent power of oral history, which allows people to speak for themselves. In their words I heard the voices of my own Sicilian family in Detroit in the 1940s and 1950s.

In this collection, strong and unique individuals recount great journeys and ordinary and humble lives in families and small communities. Although starkly elemental in their needs and responses, their biographies are never free of



emotion and intelligence or complexity of motives and tensions between individual wishes and familial obligations. The circumference of their days first centered on food and gardens, family and cousins, and bosses, day labor, union work, trades, and small businesses. Their narratives, so often consisting of differentiating chance and crushing fate, are, mainly, initiated by risk and given constancy by loyalty, duty, and work. Children, a home, a good job, a store or business, and the formation of an Italian club, parish, church group, or union are the fruit of a lifetime. The book's chapters take up, in succession, work and earning one's bread; women's work; boarders; religion, the supernatural, and folk medicine; life cycles and calendar events; leisure and recreation; food and "foodways"; and Italians on stage and performing.

Mancina-Batinich's voices arise out of everyday experience. They narrate days of stark necessities, good fortune, and miracles. Small things had great meanings. Lives turned on single acquaintances and endured because of exceptional sacrifices and extraordinary steadfastness. At the same time, the collection gives voice to fresh, idiosyncratic, insightful, and humorous speech. One respondent, drawing on experience brought from the Old Country, compares evening and morning sex with drinking evening and morning wine, and several give newly learned English phrases a new meaning.

The work convincingly demonstrates that the culture of these immigrants and their children (not so dissimilar from the cultures of other European immigrants at the time) was local and oral, not yet essentially national, literate, commercial, and mass. Life for them at the start of the last century was still face-to-face and on foot. It played out along the streets and paths of towns and the surrounding landscape. Talk and gossip counted for more than newspapers and radio—and nicknames still identified the principal players in one's own life. The ways of folk medicine and the advice of the local fortuneteller counted as much as the prescriptions of the doctor and the opinions of the priest.

Although these lives were still moved by ties and connections to other regions in the United States and Italy, they were intensely local. They found their center around the kitchen table. "My family is what make me happy here—most of all my children," reported one interviewee. Others vouched for the primacy of gardens, can cellars, and ice boxes and noted that families knew themselves by their own sauces, cheeses, beans, berries, greens, mushrooms, dandelions, pasta, pizza—and, of course, homemade wine. "*Un giorno senza vino e un giorno senza sole.*" (A day without wine is a day without sun.)

Excessive behavior in public cost one respect. A favorite proverb declares, "Drunkenness, not poverty, makes a man an ass!" While men were permitted do almost any job for the

sake of the family, women were kept away from public labor and particularly forbidden to work in the homes of others, which aroused the suspicion and challenged the honor of their fathers, brothers, and husbands. In the first decades, few Italian immigrants entered the public world. Rather, they and their sons and daughters, as these interviews show, socialized in local and neighborhood organizations: the church, church societies, unions, and Italian clubs. These were the social worlds of the villages they had left behind—places in which they defined themselves, practiced their philanthropy, worshiped their God, found their entertainment, showed off their talents with cooking, voice, or instrument, and trumpeted their opinions about the new society and their place in it.

Most Italians left the Old Country because, in the words of one interviewee, of "Poverty, poverty, poverty." Many voices, offering their primary reasons for emigration, declared, "*America per me!*" (America is for me!) Pasquale Fedo, grandfather of Duluth mayor John Peter Fedo, affirmed that \$1.50 an hour, pre-World War I, was a wonderful wage compared to what he could have earned in the Italian countryside. Others buttressed their choice of America by declaring it was a good place, where one had rights and could fight for them.

However, arriving took a thousand forms and many, if not most, were distressing. One immigrant recollected her introduction to this miserable, sunless, northland: "I cried for a few winters. I thought the snow would never go away, that I'd never see the ground." Few newcomers left any doubt that America meant hard work. Prevalent racial and religious prejudices led one immigrant to say, "The only good friend one had was another Italian." At the same time, the majority of voices testify to rapid assimilation to mass, popular, democratic American culture thanks to work, opportunity, and freedom.

Readers must turn to other books to differentiate the variety of Italian Americans and their assimilation. They were diverse by region, class, period of immigration, and migration chains. Their mentalities were at various stages on arrival, depending on the array of circumstances and transformations in the world they left. Yet a discussion of all this belongs to another occasion. We must take what is before us—a rich Italian meal, a la Minnesota. I know of no better introduction to the voices and variety of Italian Americans. *Bravo!*

Reviewed by Joseph Amato, the author of numerous books, including Jacob's Well: A Case for Rethinking Family History (2008, Minnesota Historical Society Press), excerpted in this magazine issue.

OUR READERS WRITE:

Jerry Ganfield, who grew up in Onida, South Dakota, was surprised and pleased to learn more about an old neighbor from Christopher Welter's article, "Voices Cast Upon the Sea: Minnesota's Titanic Passengers" (Fall 2007).

"I thoroughly enjoyed your article on the *Titanic* passengers. Of special interest was the information on Oscar Hedman. Though I always knew he was a *Titanic* survivor—he was my neighbor across the street when I was a child—I didn't know of his bringing fellow Swedish emigrants over and the loss of many of them. I really was too young to know the details, if he indeed shared them, although the local paper did several stories on him. Male survivors often had survivor guilt. . . . I enjoyed seeing his picture, though his hat affects any recollection I might have of him physically. I knew his wife, Tillie, better, and she lived longer. I believe Dr. Hedman shared the same story as most men—being called upon by a boatload of women and children to row, and therefore he was saved. I really appreciated the article with the added surprise of having known him."

■ The Solon J. Buck award for the best article published in *Minnesota History* during 2006 has been won by Mark H. Davis for "Market Hunters vs. Sportsmen on the Prairie: The Case of William Kerr and Robert Poole," which appeared in the Summer issue of the magazine. Focusing on a landmark court case with comic-opera aspects, the article chronicles the transition from subsistence hunting through market shooting to sport hunting, taking into account regional economics and ethnicity as well as the era's rising interest in resource conservation.

The Theodore C. Blegen Award for the best article by a Minnesota Historical Society staff member goes to exhibit developer Brian Horrigan for "Of Generations and Greatness" (Winter 2006–07). An extension of his work on the upcoming History Center exhibit about Minnesota's Greatest Generation (2009), this essay draws on developmental psychology, sociology, history, popular culture, and Horrigan's own considerable research to probe beyond nostalgia to the meaning, affect, and effects of the term "greatest generation."

This year's judges were Ayesha Shariff, a history instructor at Saint Paul College, and Hampton Smith, a reference associate at the Minnesota Historical Society. Each award includes a prize of \$600.

■ Minnesotans, it is said, make an uneasy peace with their winters. We either hunker down and wait it out or we get out and embrace it with as much gusto as we can. The skaters among us fall into that second group, and for us Moira F. Harris's new book, *Wonders on Ice: Figure Skating in Minnesota* (Lakeville: Pogo Press, 2007, 191 p., paper, \$17.95) is about as refreshing as the first skate of winter. Figure skating was an enormously popular sport in the late-nineteenth century, and by the middle of the next century it achieved a professional status with its own cast of celebrities, big traveling reviews, and professional and Olympic competitions. Harris gives it all to us in this visually engaging scrapbook of figure skating—the press photos of skating starlets, rink tickets, and carnival and folly programs. Because it focuses so heavily on the ephemera of performance, *Wonders on Ice* portrays skating as primarily a spectator sport and overlooks its more democratic roots. Though we love to watch our skating impresarios, Minnesotans have known for generations the personal joy of gliding across the ice as if to deny the inevitability of both inertia and winter.

■ Back in print again is Return I. Holcombe's *History of the First Regiment Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, 1861–1864*

(Hudson, WI: St. Croix Valley Civil War Round Table, 2006, 508 p., \$35.00 plus \$3.50 shipping). First published in 1916, the book remains a classic regimental history. Its 53 short chapters cover organization and discharge, battles, battle preparations, camp life, and changes of command at the top. A regimental roster is one of the six appendixes.

■ Emerging from the din of first-person accounts that formed the narrative spine of Ken Burns's World War II documentary, *The War*, was a single clear voice that dominated the film's 14 hours. It was that of Al McIntosh, the editor of the *Rock County Star-Herald*. During the conflict, McIntosh used his weekly column to rally the people of Luverne, to apprise the boys on the front of local news, and to cajole the citizens of Rock County to do their part in that global fight. *Selected Chaff: The Wartime Columns of Al McIntosh, 1941–1945* (St. Paul: Zenith Press, 2007, 272 p., paper, \$14.95) collects the editorials of this remarkable and little-known newspaperman who used his warmth, wit, and keen-eyed observations to bring his community together in time of national crisis. In McIntosh's chaff it is easy to spot the kernel of journalistic heroism.

■ Any way you look at it, *The American Midwest: An Interpretive Encyclopedia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007, cloth, \$75.00) is impressive. With 1,917 pages and over 350 photos—weighing in at a mere nine lap-crushing pounds—it is what you might expect from a book that covers the wide swath of geography from Ohio to Nebraska, Minnesota to Missouri. What is unexpected, though equally impressive, is the breadth of information available on these 12 states that hang together under such names as "the heartland," "the middle border," or more derogatorily, American's "fly-over country." As an interpretive encyclopedia, essays are clustered not by state, but by broad categories: landscapes and people, society and culture, community and social life, economy and technology, and public life. Within each



category are subcategories and articles on lesser topics, specific places, and representative people. The arrangement makes it harder to find single entries (although this is solved with a stop at the exhaustive index), but much easier for the browser to wander the intellectual back roads of this encyclopedia. However you approach this sprawling work, you'll come away with an appreciation for the variety and complexity of this great place in the middle.

■ *Historic Photos of Minneapolis* (Nashville: Turner Publishing, 2007, 206 p., cloth, \$39.95) is a compilation of striking images from the mid-1800s to about 1970. Heather Lawton, a special collections librarian at the Minneapolis

Public Library, tapped into several archive collections to choose an array of more than 200 photos, some of which have never been published before. The exceptional clarity of the photos, combined with her informative captions, provides a glimpse into the changing Mill City. Four chronological chapters portray city life, government events, familiar and long-gone buildings, and the people who were important to building Minneapolis. This would make a great gift for history enthusiasts as well as long-time residents of Minneapolis.

■ A landmark study now back in print, *The White Pine Industry in Minnesota: A History* by Agnes M. Larson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007,

456 p., paper, \$17.95) tells the story of lumbering in the North Star State. Old-growth forests once covered 70 percent of Minnesota's land, and Larson recounts the development of the region, paying particular attention to the building of railroads and bustling mill towns, the daily lives of lumberjacks, river drivers, and jam-breakers, and the final devastation of the forests. A foreword by Bradley J. Gill argues that this work, originally published in 1949, remains an essential source for scholars and others interested in the lumber industry.

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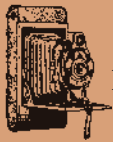
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MHS COLLECTIONS

Hull-Rust Mine



FOR MOST SUBJECTS, there is nothing wrong with a picture postcard and its miniature, hold-it-in-your-hand window onto the world. In fact, when it comes to depicting the mining landscapes of northern Minnesota, no photograph is ever going to match experiencing such a sight (and site) in person.

The great open-pit mines of the Iron Range can be all but invisible from not that far away—they do not rise up like mountains but go down into the ground—and are often screened by trees and topography.

The incongruity of coming upon them in a realm of lakes and woods adds to their dramatic effect. So does the realization that they are products of culture, not nature, man-made marvels unlike Niagara Falls or the Grand Canyon.

The Range, with its rich stew of ethnic traditions and social customs, its hockey mania, polka masses, and civic boasts painted on water towers, in effect began with what is shown here, the extraction of iron ore. Scrawled beneath one postcard image of a mine in the MHS collections are these words: “It is all iron

ore. Dug up like so much dirt.” This 1929 postcard of Hibbing’s Hull-Rust open-pit mine presents that basic process, an epic encounter between men and machines and the land. The outcome was a landscape punctuated by awesome glimpses of industrial America, revelations of power, not prettiness. Yet for me the photograph is a reminder that the mining landscape offers its own sublime beauty: raw, brutal, and unforgettable.

—ROBERT SILBERMAN

Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities.



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