

The Public History Reader, edited by Hilda Kean and Paul Martin. Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2013. Paperback ISBN 978-0-415-52041, casebound ISBN 978-0-415-52040-9.

REVIEWED BY MEG FOSTER

When confronted with the question, ‘what is public history?’ many students and practitioners alike find themselves struggling for answers. Is it ‘the employment of historians and historical method outside of academia’, as Robert Kelley famously declared in *The Public Historian*? Perhaps it describes ‘practices that communicate and engage with history in public areas’, as Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton assert in their book *History at The Crossroads*? Following Raphael Samuel, does it refer to an ever changing, social process, the work at any one time of ‘a thousand different hands?’

As Paul Ashton has written in the *Public History Review* (2010), ‘Public history is an elastic, nuanced and contentious term. Its meaning has changed over time and across cultures in different local, regional, national and international contexts.’ Even the leading body of public history in America, the National Council of Public History (NCPH), has been forced to confront this issue. In their introduction to the subject, ‘What is Public History?’, the NCPH argues that the most apt definition is perhaps the simplest; people should know public history when they see it. For students who are relatively unexposed to the area, and for public historians who are faced with the ever-changing contours of their field, even this description is inadequate. Hilda Kean and Paul Martin’s recent collection *The Public History Reader* helps to address this uncertainty. In an accessible and engaging way, this book shows readers some of public history’s many faces.

The Reader is structured thematically, and revolves around three different sections. Part One sets the tone of the book by detailing the

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connection between the past and the present. Although its chapters vary in topic and scope, all demonstrate the ways in which history is constructed by the public and public historians alike. In *The Public History Reader*, the social contours of history making are explored, and these foundational chapters provide reflective studies on the creation and use of history. Part Two delves deeper into this process, as it focuses on the materials needed to construct these different pasts. The authors featured here examine both the physical objects and methodological tools required to bring the past into the present. Finally, Part Three tackles the complex issue of tangible and intangible presentations of the past.

Intangible elements of the past, are, by their very nature, controversial. The study of emotion, memory and subjectivity is still seen by many historians as the antithesis of 'true history' – that profession based in the 'solid' realm of facts. These chapters are to be particularly congratulated in their treatment of such a fraught area. While none of these articles shy away from the difficulties of using intangible sources, they also illustrate these sources' potential. They show the how tangible sources – such as places and objects – can elicit intangible memories and ideas of the past in the present. They also demonstrate the danger of ignoring intangible sources; some histories will never be told if these new avenues are not explored.

The chapter written by Sandra Prosalendis et al about the District Six Museum in South Africa illustrates this clearly. 'Coloured people' were forcibly removed from the District Six area of Cape Town during Apartheid, and the physical traces of the community were subsequently obliterated by the government. Almost the entire district was raised to the ground. As the authors explain, in this context 'the memories of District Six are precious because in reality we have few authentic artefacts from the district... The museum continues to be about abstract issues, about loss, memory and recovery' (p296) because it is only through these means that the area's story can be told.

The chapters of this reader demonstrate the depth and nuance of public history through their extensive scope. There are many international pieces, which take the reader from the streets of London to the world of print in rural North China and the state of public history in contemporary Australia. Although each piece is so different and can easily be read alone, they are all conceptually linked. If the content of the chapters do not make this apparent enough, the introductory chapters by Martin and Kean at the beginning of each section of the book make this connection explicit. Each Part begins with an outline of that section and

the issues that will be covered to help the reader navigate the chapters to come.

While this book is a superb text for investigating the complex realm of public history, it is, inevitably, not completely comprehensive. It must be noted that this text is heavily influenced by the British tradition of public history. It concentrates on 'history from below' and portrays public history as a site of conflict, cooperation, collaboration and even emancipation that regards the lives of ordinary people. This is a perfectly valid point of view, but it is not the only way that public history is imagined. In an American context, for example, there is a much greater emphasis on the professionalisation of the field; on the public historian as an authority, and their role working with corporations as well as ordinary people.

Apart from one chapter on digital history by Daniel Cohen, *the Reader* also does little to explore how Web 2.0 has changed public history making. This is a considerable absence given the proliferation of web based mediums, such as blogs, online data collections, and other platforms that are shaping the way that both historians and the public are able to access the past. Considering the breadth and controversy of the field, absences such as these are understandable. One book can only do so much. I do feel, however, that these absences need to be stated, especially when this text has called itself *The Public History Reader*.

This book does a remarkable job of portraying public history. What becomes apparent as one reads, however, is that neither this, nor any other book, can be *the* definitive text on the field. It is too varied and slippery a terrain to pin down. Instead, *The Public History Reader* is an achievement because it describes this complexity; it shows its readers some of public history's many faces.