

***On Doing Local History*, by Carol Kammen,
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This essay collection by Carol Kammen, in its second edition, is not only a useful resource for local historians in the United States, its primary target, but also has much insight to offer to those interested in history generally. In the United States, local history has seen considerable boom since the 1970s, and it is amateur historians, or those without formal training in history, who are most often involved in the field. Kammen, a prominent local historian herself, states that while she has no intent to “disparage amateur local historians,” there are persistent problems in how they engage with the past (9). The book aims to “identify (these) problems, open discussion of them, and point at ways the practice of local history in the United States might be improved” (7, 9). The central themes of the book are methods and epistemology of history that have “constrained” the potential of local history, but that, with some rethinking, could brush up the works of amateur historians who love what they do.

In Chapter 1, Kammen outlines the chronicle of local history in the United States. The genealogy of the genre is important because “older histories established patterns that amateur historians and the public have accepted as suitable for the genre” (32). In the 19th century, local history was produced by locally prominent men. Their narratives concerned principally the beginning and the core members of their communities. Stories of “hardy pioneers” who founded the communities were considered a source of “didactic lesson” (14). Commercial press fueled interests in local history. Newspapers in the 1930s featured popular columns on local history that were intended to “amuse or entertain readers” (31). The commonality in these writings is the attitude that local history is “a source of local entertainment, as well as a source of local pride” (32). Moreover, in order “to present a community’s past in the most favorable light” local historians exercised “self-censorship” (22). They excluded the people who were marginalized, such as “African-Americans, transients, women…laborers and tenant farmers” (16).

The field has become much more inclusive today but there are subjects that local historians collectively tend to ignore. These include topics that reveal “divisiveness” within the community or cast shadows over the community’s past, including politics, labor disputes, failed ideas or industries, and incidents that put to shame area residents or make them uncomfortable (61-67).

Inquiring on these sensitive subjects can be “self-defeating” because doing so infringes upon the public expectation that local history should promote the locality. The consequences could be serious since local historians could lose public trust and access to documents. Because they are usually residents of the community that they research, local historians are more susceptible to this type of social pressure than academic historians who have the benefit of distance. Nevertheless, Kammen maintains that local historians accede to this pressure and, as their predecessors had done, romanticize the past as an idyllic place that never in reality existed.

A problem is attitude and understanding toward history or epistemology, a term that Kammen does not use perhaps because of her intent to keep the book jargon-free and hence approachable to non-academic readers. In the second chapter, titled “Thinking about History,” she urges local historians to rethink what history is and approach it with more intellectual rigor. Referencing the American historian Carl Becker, she stresses “that history is two things: it is the past, and it is what happens in the minds of historians who bring to the documents their own interests and concerns, as well as the interests, concerns, and historical understandings of their eras” (45). For Kammen, the dictum entails at least two warnings. On the one hand, because history is human creation, historians need to approach it critically, knowing full well that their “evidence is

skewed right from the start” and that their endeavors are indeed fragile (99, 57). At the same time, because history is intellectual creation, historians need to be open-minded. They need to be receptive to ideas by reading a wide range of sources, including the history of other places and literatures in other disciplines—something that they rarely do, and pose new questions against the past in order to interpret it in innovative ways. Kammen wants to shake local historians out of their habit of settling in established paradigms and compel them to take on history as critical yet creative practice.

The book gives glimpses of the complex matrices of historical representation in which local historians conduct their work and where facts and fictions are seamlessly interfused. Popular historical narratives in the United States, as in any other country, portray the best out of the past. In doing so, events are taken out of their contexts and reshaped in accordance to the concerns of the present. A case in point is the myths surrounding the mid-19th century Underground Railroad activities in which people lent a helping hand to fugitive slaves on the run (71-76). Myths abound on the righteous citizens who defied the law for a morally commendable cause, but generally ignored is the reality of the mixed and often hostile attitudes toward such deeds. This is but just one example of the past being transfigured, in this case, to “soothe” the “long national anguish over race.” But precisely because the past is distorted,

local historians must represent it in an accountable manner. The major strength of the book is the rich repertoire of tools, deliberated in Chapters 4 to 7, that enable them to do just that.

First and foremost, historians must accept “the fact that the past was as controversial and complicated as we know the present to be” lest they fall in the trap of antiquarianism or unreflective adoration of the past (63). On a technical level, she stresses the necessity of footnotes in producing credible works. Many local historians neglect footnotes and, combined with their lack of discretion in the use of source materials, feed the reproduction of unverifiable knowledge (105-113). Separating facts from fictions is essential, so is examining past events or people in their contexts. She emphasizes “thorough research,” “general knowledge of the area and the period,” and “contemporary knowledge or judgement about the place.” But because documentary evidence is often limited, she also calls for “an imaginative, intuitive response to the past based on knowledge of place and time” (99). Kammen not only encourages local historians to ask new questions, but also lists for them suggested topics that could yield fruitful studies, including strikes, child labor, debt, festivals, shopping patterns, the elderly, and so on (68-69, 81-84, 103-104, 181-184).

The book does a commendable job in providing guidance to amateur local historians. It also contributes to the connections between serious history and the ordinary American people who,

in spite of their interests in the subject, “are woefully ignorant of (their) national past” (171). Kammen urges local historians to take on the role of community educator and communicate to the public what they have learned. To that end, she suggests using various media, including pamphlets, videos, newspaper columns, and writing nuanced plays and historical fictions, through which historical knowledge can be disseminated in ways that are accessible to the general public (125-132).

The book does have limits and shortcomings. The point on the social pressure on local historians to avoid sensitive subjects is convincing, but readers may look in vain for strategies that will overcome the dilemma of inquiring worthy themes that run counter to the public’s expectation of what local history should be. Perhaps this is a result of Kammen’s attempt to limit the discussion of the political implication of history. History, especially when done critically, could be controversial and even subversive. Kammen does mention instances of controversies over history on the national scale, including the so-called “History Wars” that erupted when Lynne Cheney forestalled the movement to revise history education in schools (170). But readers are left wondering how historical controversies may play out in local context and how local historians could deal with them. These issues are left to the discretion of individual local historians, which is not necessarily problematic.

However, the book’s failure to address the following fundamental

question is problematic: How should local historians deal with nationalistic sentiments? The boom of local history accompanying the centennial celebrations of the American Revolution, both in 1876 and 1976, reveals an intimate relationship between popular historical curiosity and nationalism. Yet, nationalism has too often distorted human experiences of the past in many societies. Cautions about nationalistically inspired history by a discerning scholar in the field would contribute to the advancement of the exciting field of local history in the United States.

