

PEOPLE AND THEIR PASTS: PUBLIC HISTORY TODAY, PAUL ASHTON AND HILDA KEAN (EDS).

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'Public History' is a term that continues to elude a commonly accepted definition. This may be due in part to the relative newness of the term as well as the very broad nature of the concepts of both 'public' and 'history'. At the very least, the term public history suggests that the general public does have a vital role in making, observing and interpreting history in all of its forms and meanings. Certainly, academic public historians as well as those working as archivists, in museums or other related fields are in a unique position to greatly influence how the public perceives history. But public history is a broadly defined field that connects both the academy, non-academic professionals and the general public. Through the broad lens of public history, we can view more clearly the role of the general public in making and understanding history.

In People and their Pasts: Public History Today, Paul Ashton and Hilda Kean examine through an international perspective the current status of public history. This volume consists of fourteen essays which were based on presentations made at the 'People and their Pasts' conference on public history at Ruskin College, Oxford, in 2005. The premise of this book is deceptively simple: 'that people are active agents in creating histories' (p1). The contributors represent a wide array of perspectives, from anthropologists and archivists to museum professionals, and public history faculty members. Their essays are organized into three sections titled: 'The Making of History', 'Presenting the Past in Place and Space' and 'Material Culture, Memory and Public Histories'.

The first section, true to its name, explores a variety of ways that historical consciousness is constructed in Australia, New Zealand, Europe and the United States. In their leadoff article, Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton examine how Australians understand their own history. Ashton and Hamilton conducted a national survey patterned after the one that Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen used in the United States during the mid-1990s and analyzed in their book, *The Presence of the Past*. The Australian survey results to some extent

are summed up by one participant's statement: 'history is not just ancient history or famous people... the everyday person has more interesting history' (p36). Bernard Eric Jensen's essay continues this analytic theme and explores the concepts of 'past' and 'history' from an international perspective while also providing a brief analysis of memory function. He reminds us that culture greatly influences how we approach and value historical consciousness. In her case study of US National Park Service work, Cathy Stanton discusses the concept of 'cultural repair' with a focus on the interaction of the state, public historians and the audience. And she notes 'the producers and audiences... are very similar to each other' (p71). Bronwyn Dalley also looks at the role of the state by tracing the development of public history and its interaction with the state in New Zealand.

In Section 2, the collective essays examine how history can be organized and presented within the context of a particular place or space. Darryl McIntyre addresses the changing role of museums through his study of the Museum of London and the National Museum of Australia. He examines how museums are challenged with the task of integrating stories of traditional national history with more recent history, multiculturalism and new interpretations while incorporating the draw of discovery and even entertainment into their displays. Paul Gough's essay examines a different type of space for remembrance in the National Memorial Arboretum that is both a fascinating site of national memory and a location of sometimes conflicting and contested remembrances while also serving as an arboretum. Historical significance of public monuments and statues in London is at the center of John Siblon's essay. He discusses how these monuments tell an incomplete history, one that has left out the black and Asian presence in British history. From a different perspective, Meghan O'Brien Backhouse addresses how the process of performing history through re-enactment can lead to new narratives of historical understanding and identity.

The final section of the book includes an interesting collection of essays that approach public history from a variety of perspectives. Jon Newman's study of the complexities of archival practice examines the challenges of maintaining the integrity of a unique community photo gallery originally developed by a professional photographer; professional archival practice can assure preservation of a collection but inevitably changes its original meaning. From archives to oral history, Toby Butler relates how he used audio

recordings, including oral histories, to create a 'sound walk' along the Thames River in what he calls a 'river-based oral history trail' (p227).

Three essays in this section focus on the intersection of personal and family history within the larger context of immigration, education and identity. Hilda Kean and Brenda Kirsch carefully examine surviving documents from a working-class primary school in east London left by their former teacher. They confront not only their own personal remembrances of their early school years but their place in the 11+ testing process that determined whether students moved on from primary to grammar school. In an even more personal set of essays, Mary Stewart's study of her great-great grandfather tells a story important to her family but also one that evokes broader themes in the larger story of migration from Scotland to New Zealand. In perhaps the most personal essay, Martin Bashforth examines the history of absent fathers in his own family as he conducts careful research on those fathers through the development of a personal archive.

People and their Pasts provides a fascinating collection of perspectives on public history. The essays are thought provoking and insightful, and they admirably cover the wide range of topics that are public history. This book will be particularly useful in public history courses at both the graduate and undergraduate level, but its essays hopefully will serve also as guideposts for people interested in learning more about the many ways in which we all both create and experience the past.

CHRISTOPHER J. CASTENADA
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO