

*THE LOWELL EXPERIMENT: PUBLIC HISTORY IN A POSTINDUSTRIAL CITY*, CATHY STANTON.  
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PHOTOGRAPHS, ILLUSTRATIONS, NOTES, BIBLIOGRAPHY, INDEX; PAPERBOUND (US) \$24.95.

Lowell National Historical Park was established in Massachusetts in the United States in 1979. It was part of an experiment which drew on a new economic industry – cultural tourism – to rehabilitate a former textile city, once held up as an exemplar of capitalist industrialisation, that had been devastated by late twentieth-century de-industrialisation. In her highly readable and original book, *The Lowell Experiment*, Cathy Stanton explores the politics of public history on a number of levels using this National Historical Park (NHP) as a rich case study. Public history's role in facilitating change, rather than simply recording or reflecting it (pxiii), is treated as are divisions within the public history movement in the USA and the contested nature of the term 'public history'.

Stanton's book is split into three parts. The first locates the Lowell NHP in the context of the American public history movement. Employing an ethnographic approach which draws on theories of cultural performance, this part broadly investigates contestation over the many practices of history making. Part two examines guided tours of Lowell while providing an historical geography of the region. Importantly, it develops a critique of the ways in which professional public historians and historical practices have operated in the Lowell experiment. And it looks at attempts to make critical connections between the present and the past. Part three considers the overall failure of these attempts at historical connectivity.

Perceived tensions between history and heritage provide a major theme to the work. Stanton takes issue with heritage detractors such as Frans Schouten who sees heritage as 'history processed through mythology, ideology, nationalism, local pride, romantic ideas or just plain marketing into a commodity' (p26). But the main thrust of *The Lowell Experiment* centres on the question: 'How can places be made attractive as tourist sites without trivializing or erasing difficult and complex histories?' (p7).

Stanton's work places her squarely in the progressive – some would say radical – camp of the public history movement in the United States. She notes that the American movement 'is rooted *in part* [my emphasis] in a politically progressive, socially democratic impulse to link scholarly historical inquiry with broad public participation and a critical questioning of the status quo' (pxiv). But in a conservative political climate, and given the corporatisation of public history, she is forced to ask: 'how much room is there for the progressive component of the public history movement?' (p28).

Most if not all public historians would reject the proposition that their work was a mere product of post-industrial capitalism. But it is clear from Stanton's incisive analysis that the very nature of the Lowell Experiment, being state sponsored and aimed primarily at economic revitalisation, tended to promote 'celebratory multiculturalism' and a

reversioning of the grand theme of wealth and progress. Stanton, indeed, concludes on a personal note that contemporary developments in Lowell ‘simultaneously dismay and feeds me’ (p237).

Perhaps most importantly, *The Lowell Experiment* keeps alive debates over the definition of public history, despite discussion of these in her book being confined to the United States. At one point, Stanton muses that “public history” is not the same as “history in public” (p8). But her sophisticated reading of the field indicates that ‘public history’ is often indistinguishable from ‘history in public’. Public historians are at times participant observers and their work often becomes history in public arenas. Ultimately, she concedes, public history is ‘an open-ended concept’ (p17). Stanton’s stimulating and reflective work is a timely and welcome contribution to a small but growing body of work that critically examines public history.

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