

REVIEWS

Let the Record Show: Practical Uses for Historical Documents. Slide/audio cassette or videotape (VHS or U-Matic). 16 minutes. Free for one week. (Order from Terri Sewell, New York State Archives & Records Administration, Cultural Education Center, room 10A46, Albany, NY 12230.)

How could historical records help the Dance Theatre of Harlem, a fourth grade class, a botanist, and homeowners lobbying for a new bridge? This fast moving videotape shows us that "these people needed information from the past" and concludes, "It may be hard to foresee now, but at some time historical records are sure to be useful to you too."

The videotape uses interviews, narration, and good organization to make its point. It begins with its interviewees explaining what they need to know about the past, then pauses to discuss historical records, how they are produced, where they are located, and the role of archivists in their preservation and use. Then we hear the success stories. The dance group, for example, saves time and money because its own archives can show how it has staged past productions or if it can expect problems on the road. The fourth grade teacher wanted to bring history to life and helped her students use a nineteenth-century child's letters, old photographs, and historic buildings to enact a Victorian Day. The botanist used botanical journals and specimens in the Buffalo Museum of Science to demonstrate the impact of a century of tourism on a site's flora. A proud member of a homeowners association tells how his work in historic blueprints and correspondence in the Erie Canal Museum helped produce a well-documented case that convinced the highway department to build a new bridge.

The tape is well executed. Visually, it consists entirely of still images, mostly photographs of the interview subjects and their projects mixed with a few historic views. Scenes from the Victorian Day are delightful, but the first section on the Dance Theatre of Harlem needed more pictures. The sound uses people telling their own stories, music, and brief continuity and analysis provided by the narrator, Diane Ward.

Who could use this tape? In the classroom it could challenge college and advanced high school students to think about the basic questions of history: What can we learn from the past and how do we do it? The tape could also inspire teachers to design innovative class projects, and the successful Victorian Day project demonstrates that elementary students can put historic records to good use. Finally, much of the tape seems aimed at convincing a general adult audience of the value of historic research and work of archivists. If it can find that audience, its argument should prove persuasive.

Eastern Oregon State College

Charles Coate

Robin Blackburn. *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848.* New York: Verso, 1988. Pp. 560. Cloth, \$47.50.

Robin Blackburn's work is an extraordinary study of anti-slavery throughout the Western hemisphere. It offers a sweeping investigation of the complex origins of anti-slavery, giving attention not only to abolitionists but also to political crises in imperialist powers, to slave resistance and rebellion, and to social and political pressures that impelled "metropolitan decision makers" to accept anti-slavery.

Beginning with the medieval origins of anti-slavery, the volume treats emancipation acts in the United States, the violent overthrow of slavery in Haiti, independence and emancipation in Spanish America, Cuba, and Brazil, and British and French abolitionism. The author pursues such a wide ranging study because, for him, slave systems were "integrated," each affecting the other in various political, economic, and social ways. Understandably, the book focuses on Great Britain because that nation, more than any other, reversed its own policies regarding slavery and the slave trade.

Teachers and students of anti-slavery will want to give this book much attention not only because of its geographical breadth of coverage but also because of its argument. Blackburn points out an important contradiction in previous historical assessments regarding anti-slavery: "If slavery developed in the wake of capitalism," how can historians also argue that the "capitalist advance also prompted anti-slavery impulses?" For Blackburn, economic explanations for the demise of anti-slavery are insufficient, because they do not take into account the boost that capitalism gave to various forms of industrial slavery. Blackburn also rejects traditional explanations that emphasize the

role of religion, because "manifestly slavery often received strong sponsorship from religious enthusiasts," including Quakers and Methodists. In fact, for Blackburn abolitionism had no "one-to-one correspondence" with the emancipation of slaves. Blackburn qualifies his argument, observing "not that anti-slavery was purely secular in inspiration, but that its achievements required a secular setting."

To construct his own "Marxist narrative" concerning "the essential working of capitalism, racialism, colonialism, and slavery," Blackburn draws upon David Brion Davis's *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1776-1823*, and Eugene Genovese's *From Rebellion to Revolution*. Although slavery may have arisen for economic reasons, it was overthrown not simply because it was economically unprofitable but because of a broad spectrum of largely political reasons. He finds, for example, that North American and British patriots "did incline" to anti-slavery because of the "discourse of freedom" that emerged so prominently in the eighteenth century. Yet, anti-slavery often amounted to little more than "mild benevolence or mere political rhetoric" because it "often crumbled at the first contact with an opposing material or 'patriotic' interest." Other opponents of slavery, particularly lower classes, fought slavery because they themselves had often endured some form of bondage or servitude. Opposition to the metropolis came not only from within but also from without. The rise of slavery created and empowered "a class of planters and colonial merchants that was unlikely to remain for ever content with metropolitan tutelage." In sum, slavery perished only when "there was a protracted accumulation of problems for the slave order and a concentration of diverse forces opposed to it."

Although a sequel with much more attention to the United States is promised, this particular volume is superficial in its treatment of the U.S. In fact, Blackburn's chronological focus on the U.S. in the early nineteenth century permits him to overlook the role of bourgeois reformers and the role of religion. One interesting point, briefly treated, is that the United States recognized that Haiti's independence of European powers in 1804 was a "signal demonstration" that North America could be economically independent as well.

Students would profit from this book's careful and balanced account. The difficulty is that this text requires sophisticated reading skills and knowledge. The enormous complexity of the argument, the amount and density of the information, the treatment of many countries and provinces, often shifting from colonial to imperial politics, will likely daunt, if not confuse, all but the best undergraduates.

Earlham College

Randall Shrock

Alan Sked. *Britain's Decline: Problems and Perspectives*. New York: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1987. Pp. 90. Paper, \$7.95.

Perhaps it is inevitable that the nation that gave us Edward Gibbon should have a preoccupation with "decline." In this slender pamphlet, Alan Sked summarizes what three dozen social scientists have said about contemporary Britain's economic and moral decline. Sponsored by the Historical Association, the pamphlet is designed to inform the average citizen and lift the level of public debate on such issues as the power of trade unions, the Welfare State, crime, drugs, sexual behavior, the Church of England, and low economic productivity. Sked tries to be even-handed in his evaluations, neither attacking nor endorsing the controversial policies of Mrs. Thatcher.

Both Tory and Labourite can find useful information in this inexpensive and readable pamphlet. Can the same be said for American students? The answer is probably not. The American undergraduate should not attempt Sked until he or she has read at least the last couple of chapters in a good survey textbook such as Roberts and Roberts. If the student has a strong interest in history he or she would likely derive more benefit from studies by Arthur Marwick and Anthony Sampson. Sked's pamphlet would be useful in a social science methods course or in a comparative government class. To the general American reader, it is nearly useless.

Britain's decline is relative, as is that of the United States, and it may prove temporary. In recent years, British industrial productivity has shown improvement, and British scientists have won 35 Nobel prizes since the end of World War II. The problems of stagflation, persistent poverty, and racial tensions are universal, not exclusively British.

Somerset Community College

Roger Tate