

REVIEWS

Roy Swanstrom. *History in the Making: An Introduction to the Study of the Past*. Lanham, NY and London: University Press of America, 1991, Pp. 137. Paper, \$9.75.

Roy Swanstrom offers a clearly written introduction to the study of history in this reprint of a 1978 publication. Unfortunately, the title is misleading, for this book is not for just any student. It was written for, and will be meaningful only to, students who are practicing Christians. In particular, it would be useful for seniors taking history in Christian high schools and students taking an introductory history course in Christian colleges.

In *History in the Making*, Swanstrom combines his knowledge as a historian with his Christian perspective. He begins with discussion of history as a field of study. He provides good argument on the importance of studying history, stating that "few aspects of the present hold much significance or can be genuinely understood apart from their historical past."

He then discusses the relationship between Christianity and historical inquiry. Next he examines responses that have been offered to answer the question: Is there a pattern or meaning to the past? He then discusses how the Christian perspective helps one study history. And finally, he suggests how studying history might enrich one's life as a Christian.

The book includes sections here and there that will be of interest to the general reader. For example, he provides a good discussion of the uses and problems of primary and secondary sources. Moreover, he makes a good argument for the validity of the Christian perspective by placing it in the context of differing historical perspectives. But taken as a whole, this book will be meaningless to non-Christians and to Christians who do not agree with the author's particular religious beliefs. Swanstrom writes, for example, that "we must take into consideration the peculiar and perhaps imponderable work of the Holy Spirit" and "We realize that nations and civilizations are under the judgment of God. . . ."

Swanstrom has a conversational writing style that makes the book highly readable and easy to understand. Given the particular audience for which the book was written, evangelical educators and history instructors in Christian senior high schools and colleges should find that the chapters will generate a lively discussion in the classroom.

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Neil R. Stout. *Getting the Most Out of Your U.S. History Course: The History Student's Vade Mecum*. Lexington, MA and Toronto: D. C. Heath & Co., 1993. Pp. v, 81. paper, \$4.00.

Jules R. Benjamin. *A Student's Guide to History*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991. 5th edition. Pp. xiii, 160. Paper, \$9.50.

Donald W. Whisenhunt. *A Student's Introduction to History*. Boston: American Press, 1993. 2nd edition. Pp. v, 64. Paper, \$3.95.

The problem of new college students not only ignorant of history, but indifferent and even hostile to it, has spawned a sub-industry of "how to" books as supplements to the traditional survey course. These works usually have two aims: to explain to students just what history is (and is not) and to give them practical guidance in navigating their way through a history course—note-taking, reading, coping with exams, producing a research paper, and the like. Here are three of the best.

Getting the Most Out of Your U.S. History Course comes as a "free" supplement with D. C. Heath's U.S. history text *The Enduring Vision*, or it may be purchased alone. Stout, who has taught at the University of Vermont for many years, has produced a pithy, practical guide. He admits in his preface what many of us would also confess, that as a brand new freshman "I didn't

have a clue about how to study, take exams, write papers, or much of anything else." His first chapter, the best to this reviewer, wisely begins by explaining how high school and college history courses differ. He then tackles reading a textbook (including graphs and charts), taking notes properly, and taking examinations. There is even a short section trying to humanize history instructors as real people. The only nonsense here is when Stout discourages marking up one's own books ("defacing," he calls it); the student should rely instead on note-taking and the student guide to the textbook. Note-taking is fine and I encourage it; but proper marking up of a book (such as the SQ3R method) is also perfectly acceptable, especially when students pay a fortune for books. As for the student guide, it too often becomes a substitute for the textbook. Chapters two and three cover researching and writing book reviews and papers. Students groan at writing assignments, but Stout makes a strong case for them, noting that "writing is the one skill gained in a history course that is most likely to pay off in the 'real world.'" There is useful guidance on writing with a computer, and sensible cautions about plagiarism. All in all, a valuable little book. *Vade mecum*, incidentally is Latin for "go with me"—a useful item such as a reference work that one always carries.

Benjamin's *A Student's Guide to History* is a venerable old standby, now in its fifth edition (although the changes from the fourth are difficult to detect). It is about twice as long as Stout's and more of a straightforward narrative. Where it differs is in the first chapter; in fourteen packed pages Benjamin explains what historians do, how they work, how the past is around us everywhere, different schools of historical interpretation, methods of historical research, and how history can help one in daily life and on the job. Most of this could probably be grasped fairly easily by the neophyte history student, although a somewhat higher skill of reading is demanded here than with Stout's book. Benjamin then covers much the same ground as Stout, although in more depth; he also gives excellent examples of well- and poorly-written essay exam answers, as well as a ten-page example of a well-crafted research paper, broken down to illustrate its organization. The longest part of the book is a 44-page appendix of "Basic Reference Sources for History Study and Research."

Donald Whisenhunt's work is not a "how-to" book, but a brief, generally well-written, down-to-earth essay on the nature of history, what historians do, and what can be learned from history. As he admits early on, his ideas "are neither numerous nor profound. They are basic answers to the questions that every student has, whether articulated or not." He is aiming at the reluctant college student pressed into a required course who will likely never take any more history. He explains what history is not (genealogy; the other social sciences; a "blueprint" for the future), and concludes sensibly enough that history "is the study of the past with the goal of providing meaning for the contemporary world." Accountants, lawyers, physicians, indeed all people use history to navigate through work and life. He emphasizes that a better knowledge of history by American policymakers might have made Vietnam somewhat less agonizing, and warns students that ignorance of history makes them vulnerable to charlatans denying the Holocaust and the Great Depression. A new chapter not in the first edition, "Schools of History," describes the progressive and consensus schools, the New Left, and recent social history. Writing to a student audience, Whisenhunt gently chides them for being "semi-literate in history," a more charitable assessment, perhaps, than many history instructors would grant privately. Chapter 7, "How is History Studied?" wisely points out that reading, reading, and more reading is the best way to really learn history. This book has few flaws beyond an occasional clunky phrase such as ". . . the complex issues in the larger societies and centuries."

Books of this genre won't create history majors, nor are they intended to. Only an enthusiastic instructor and a well-crafted, well-taught course have a chance of doing that. But they can make the going easier in the survey courses that are the daily lot of most teachers.