

## REVIEWS

## VIDEO REVIEW

*The Renaissance: The Origins of the Modern West* (1994). Six videocassettes. Order from Barr Media Group, 12801 Schabarum Ave., Irwindale, CA 91706. 1-800-234-7878 ext. 707. \$810.00 for the series, \$150.00 for each 55 minute videocassette. *The Renaissance: The Origins of the Modern West* (1993). A PBS telecourse consisting of 17 half-hour programs and one one-hour program. Faculty Guide and Study Guide available. To order or to request preview materials and to find out more about telecourse utilization options and their cost, contact the PBS Adult Learning Service, 1320 Braddock Place, Alexandria, VA 22314. 1-800-257-2578.

Right up front this reviewer has to make a confession. While "channel surfing," my first impression of the original five PBS hour-long programs upon which the longer telecourse is based was a negative one. Admittedly I only saw bits and pieces of the programs, but I particularly remember an actor wearing a black turtleneck sweater dramatically reading the words of Jan Hus. A film technique no doubt intended to render his words more meaningful to contemporary audiences, but which struck me at the time as being incredibly phony and pretentious. But initial impressions can be quite erroneous.

In fact this series, really the brainchild of Theodore K. Rabb of Princeton University, does have a lot going for it in the increasingly competitive field of telecourse instruction. To begin with it sets forth a remarkably simple thesis: The origins of our own world lay in the ages we call Renaissance and early modern times. The telecourse examines six major, and by now quite familiar, changes that took place in western society during this time: the rise of central governments, the gunpowder revolution, the diversity of religious belief caused by the Reformation, the rise of trade and new capitalist structures, the creating of new artistic forms and the growing prominence of artists, and finally the rise of science. But instead of proceeding in a traditional chronological or teleological fashion, the telecourse moves topically centering on "The Prince," "The Warrior," "The Dissenter," "The Artist," "The Scientist," and "The Merchant." I find this technique innovative and useful as it moves students away from entrapment in pure chronological periodization. Anything that gets students to think in terms of *mentalités*, the common reference points and symbols of an historical era, will reveal the essential artificiality of periodization in history. And no era in history needs further reconsideration in terms of periodization than the Renaissance and Reformation. The telecourse employs the standard recreations of historical events—Galileo building a telescope, Jan Hus in his cell awaiting execution, etc.—without becoming tedious and overly solemn. On-location filming and documentary footage of the art of the time enhance the production quality of the series. Initially I was put off by actors, in some cases the same actors, reciting the words of Machiavelli, Cromwell, Michelangelo, Rubens, Copernicus, Newton, and of course Jan Hus. But such a device does at least focus attention on what these figures had to say. The traditional interviews with historians are also employed, but a distinctive feature of the series consists of the inclusion of contemporary equivalents of "The Warrior" (Admiral William Crowe), "The Dissenter" (Betty Friedan), "The Artist" (George Segal), and "The Scientist" (Steven Weinburg). Although it may sound like a cliché, this production technique does make history appear at least relevant to current problems. Also both versions of the series contain a final program in which Rabb provides a traditional narrative and chronology of the period. Rabb along with Sherrin Marshall prepared an accompanying text, *Origins of the Modern West: Essays and Sources in Renaissance and Early Modern Europe* (1993) for the telecourse, but it is good enough to stand

on its own. The six-tape format available from Barr Media goes particularly well with this text and can even be used profitably in upper-division courses.

But there exist problems and some minor irritations with what for the most part is a very praiseworthy series. Rabb's entire premise behind this production can be challenged. What exactly is the link between these changes and the emergence of the "modern west"? The answer to that question depends upon one's definition of modernity. One can plausibly argue that the world we now inhabit—the world of nation states, of mass politics with strong democratic and egalitarian impulses, of industrialized economies based upon a consumer culture, of science and technology, of secular culture—emerged in the late nineteenth century and any connection to the Renaissance remains tenuous at best. Rabb has stretched the continuing relevance of the Renaissance to the breaking point. On the somewhat frivolous side, in the long telecourse version the announcer's introduction to Rabb's discussions strikes me as being overly pretentious, flowery, and trite, and the set and props look kitschy and tacky, all of which detracts from Rabb's remarks. And I still have some lingering suspicions about actors in black turtleneck sweaters acting like members of an ancient Greek chorus. But the production does employ some innovative techniques and ideas that move it beyond the documentary or talking-head approach to telecourses, so it rightly deserves the attention of not only those interested in long-distance learning or the Renaissance and Reformation, but anyone teaching in a number of academic disciplines.

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**J. Kelly Sowards, ed. *Makers of the Western Tradition: Portraits from History*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994. Sixth edition. Vol. I: Pp. xiv, 338; Vol. II: Pp. xiv, 336. Paper, each volume \$19.99.**

Social history ("history from below," "the history of daily life," or, as George M. Trevelyan described it better than half a century ago, "the history of a people with the politics left out") is scarcely a new field. Its antecedents may be discerned in the works of the Father of History, Herodotus, who enlivened his story of the struggle between East and West with wonderful if not always accurate accounts of the eccentric habits and curious mores of the various ethnic groups who populated the Persian Empire. Even so, social history along with such affiliates as women's history and ethnic studies now seems to be entering a veritable golden age. Any western or world civilization textbook worth its salt today has sections on the treatment of women and the lifestyles of the more humble social orders in the past. Some surveys even use social history as an organizing principle. A recent example of this genre devotes twice as much space to the significance of foot-binding in Sung China (968-1279) as to the unification of Italy and Germany combined.

The challenge facing J. Kelly Sowards, Professor Emeritus at Wichita State University, was to create a sixth edition of his highly-successful readings book that adapted to the currency of social history without abandoning the distinctive character of his anthology's earlier editions. This was quite a challenge. *Makers of the Western Tradition*, as the title suggests, is built on the inveterate assumption that elites in politics, thought, and culture are the basic stuff of history; Sowards's "portraits from history" focus on prominent individuals who dominated, shaped, or personified the elements composing their eras. How could such a collection of biographies be