

Michael J. Salevouris and Conal Furay. *Learning American History: Critical Skills for the Survey Course*. Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1997. Pp. xii, 178. Paper, \$21.95; ISBN 0-88295-920-4.

This book is designed, the authors tell us, as a supplementary text and workbook for college and university students, introducing them "to the nature of history and historical thinking, the methods of historical inquiry, and the elements of effective historical writing." Varied materials are provided that allow instructors "to insert relevant skill-development and skill-assessment exercises at appropriate points in a particular course." The book's aim, they say, is to help undergraduates "attain a deeper understanding of how history is made and what it means to think 'historically.'" Salevouris and Luray are professors of history at Webster University, St. Louis. Their writing style is notable for its clarity and simplicity.

At the outset the authors disabuse their readers of the idea that history is concerned with human experience over the whole span of historical time. "The key challenge faced by any historian," they believe, "is that the past is lost forever." They define history narrowly as studying and writing about the past with the help of the written record as set down by eyewitnesses or participants. This definition limits history to time elapsed in the past two or three thousand years. Not all written records survive, and those that do are "flawed and incomplete." Writing history, the authors conclude, "is an act of personal creation, ... as much a product of the historians who write it as the people who actually participated in the events it attempts to describe. Small wonder that written history is subjective."

Salevouris and Luray nonetheless make a radical distinction between historical literature and fiction. Accounts based on relevant evidence, they affirm, do give us valid information about the past "in a living and evolving dialogue about ... the human experience." This critical distinction between historical literature and fiction is the single most important philosophical issue that the book confronts. To demolish the frontier between fact and fiction and to reduce historical writings to a collection of texts not differing qualitatively from other literary texts is to overthrow the claim of history to rank as an independent scientific discipline.

The authors of *Learning American History*, in my opinion, ought to have elaborated their position on the objectivity of history more fully. Otherwise their students might be thrown into the arms of radical subjectivists like Hayden White, who argues that works of history are nothing more than literary texts or mythologies, entitling us "to conceive 'history' as we please, ... [and] to make of it what we will." (*Metahistory* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1973], 433.)

Salevouris and Luray might well have cited a dramatic example of history as a struggle for objective, scientific truth offered not only to Americans but to the whole world in September 1991. At that time a glacier high in the Alps gave up the body of a Neolithic shepherd-hunter who died over 5,000 years ago. Konrad Spindler,



chairperson of early history at Innsbruck University, organized a team of scientists and historians from a dozen disciplines to undertake an investigation. His report--published in the United States in 1994 under the title *The Man in the Ice* (New York: Crown Trade Paperbacks)--is a thrilling historical work. Spindler and his colleagues deserve the thanks of the world not because they "made" history, but *because they were its devoted servants*. Theirs was a collective struggle to search for and scrutinize fresh evidence; to fling back the frontiers of the unknown; to bring to birth new truth about human life and human creativity. Their written report is already a part of our historical heritage.

Committee on History in the Classroom

John Anthony Scott

**Stephen G. Weisner and William F. Hartford, eds.** *American Portraits: Biographies in United States History*. Blacklick, OH: McGraw Hill, 1998. Vol. I. Pp. x, 321. Paper, \$25.43; ISBN 0-07-069141-X. Vol. 2. Pp. x, 317. Paper, \$25.43; ISBN 0-07-069142-8.

Teaching historians often assign biography to supplement reading lists for the introductory survey classroom, even though selecting which life to share might be a difficult process. Biography represents a unique form of history and literature, inviting a reader to come to terms with the significance of human agency. Indeed, a biography possesses the potential to reveal how a particular person influenced and was influenced by broader historical forces. Personal stories allow the student to identify with the subjects of history, that is, the people who made the past. *American Portraits*, however, fails to make these fundamental connections.

Stephen Weisner, a teacher at Springfield Technical Community College, and William Hartford, an independent scholar, have brought together a number of biographical profiles in this two-volume collection. The work is packaged as a supplemental reader for the U.S. history survey classroom, with nineteen selections in the first volume and eighteen in the second. Written by a number of different authors, the essays introduce the lives of noted Americans. While including preliminary material, bibliographic discussion, and primary sources, the editors also provide a few questions to accompany each selection. A picture of each biographical subject appears with the profile.

These texts, though inviting the reader to learn more about a diverse cohort of Americans, do not present the interconnections that create an effective biographical project. The editors' introduction provides no criteria for selection of the various subjects, only suggesting that the brief profiles in this anthology have been selected "not only for their readability but also for the interest they are likely to generate." Furthermore, the excerpts from primary sources seemed awkwardly juxtaposed to the