

REVIEWS

Robert C. Williams. *The Historian's Toolbox: A Student's Guide to the Theory and Craft of History.* Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003. Pp. xv, 170. Paper, \$18.95; ISBN 0-7656-1093-0.

Actually, this task of scholarly reviewing isn't so burdensome or complicated after all, especially if you follow the formula given in "the seven deadly sins of historical writing." The first and certainly the most menacing, that of claiming, or, as we remorsefully tell our students, of proving your thesis, snares Robert Williams's gracefully written *Historian's Toolbox*. The subtitle, *A Student's Guide to the Theory and Craft of History*, seems to indicate that this will be a practical guide to the methods and skills of history. In the preface, Williams declares that "The purpose of this book is to help history students, and even other historians, understand the *tools* of the intellectual process and craft that is history." To that end, "The tools ... provide a number of techniques common to reading, research, and writing, as well as some current controversies in the historical profession." Indeed, Williams does all this, but his "toolbox" provides only basic instruments that would allow elementary historical constructions more appropriate to an apprentice and not a craftsman.

The tasks given only after the first seven chapters almost seem an afterthought, as if the author enjoyed telling you so much about his subject but much less about its practice. Many seem generic. For example, straightforward exercises such as "take notes on this chapter" and "write a draft of your paper" smack more of busywork than of disciplinary engagement. While excellent at explaining necessary and sufficient causation in historical writing, Williams leaves out other historical determinants such as final, conditional, and true causes. The same could be said for the scant attention paid to footnotes, a tool essential for the burden of proof in history. Additionally, the "For Further Reading," section at the end of chapters seems very limited and cursory. Other works, such as Conal Furay and Michael J. Salevouris's *The Methods and Skills of History: A Practical Guide*, give students a more critical, in-depth "toolbox" that allows greater engagement with such thorny and interesting historical problems as analysis of evidence, multiple sources and types of footnotes, interpretations of history, research exercises in libraries and on the web, and differences between types of primary and secondary sources.

Yet Williams's *Toolbox* perhaps has a greater and more appropriate usage for students in general survey courses rather than those in more historiographical, specialized, upper-division classes. Well-written with delightful and enticing anecdotes, adept at explaining themes and concerns of history, and with an enthusiasm only made greater by the author's forty years of engagement with the discipline, *The Historian's Toolbox* easily could supplant many of the dreary supplements that now abound.

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