

Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Towards a New Genealogy of Public History. Denise D. Meringolo. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-55849-940-9.

Academic history and public history are, at least up to a certain degree, two aspects of dealing with the past that are not only normally institutionally separated, but often compete with each other. With public history often understood as the 'little sister' of academic history. Despite this divide, that seems to be in particular, characteristic for North America – by contrast, for example, in Europe, many national museums are at the same time national research centers directly or indirectly affiliated with various universities -some of the best known and most relevant historical memory institutions in the US belong to the public history field, most notably the Smithsonian Institution with its various museums, and the National Park Service.

Denise Meringolo provides in her book not only a helpful overview of how public history became an independent academic history, and how public history emancipated itself from traditional academic history, but more importantly she analyses how the US government established these public historical memory institutions and how, in particular, the National Park Service contributed not only to the development of a new understanding of public history but, more important to the development of an identity of a new type of historian, the public historian within the National Park system.

By providing a short history of the National Park Service, as well as of the Smithsonian Institution, she highlights the discussion within the US government and society about which institution should be responsible for which kind of public collections, and, more importantly, the question of whether or not

building up all kinds of historical collections should be a responsibility of the government at all. In what follows, in the main part of the book, Meringolo describes the development of the profession of historians within the context of the National Park Service, and how and why historians within the National Park Service became a different breed of historians; not only with a unique identity, but also with a different tool-box than that of the traditional academic historian. Meringolo especially emphasizes the relevance of the New Deal for this development including the fact that the CCC provided the National Parks a unique opportunity to expand the National Park system. Also New Deal policies resulted in history and historical museums and exhibitions becoming a subject that was no longer limited to an intellectual elite, but became available to the average American. According to the sub-title, the book is written to be a genealogy of public history, and, without any doubt, Meringolo delivers when she discusses how public history did not only find a home when the National Park Services history programs were developed, but also explains how this home shaped the profession of public history.

The strongest, and at the same time the weakest, point of the book, is definitely the exclusive focus on the developments in the US. While on the one hand this exclusive focus provides Meringolo an opportunity for a very detailed study, it limits at the same time the opportunity to put the US specific development into a wider or global picture. With the development in the US, being, up to a certain degree, unique or at least very different to many other countries, a limited international comparison would have helped to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the American system much better. In addition,

as public history is today at least as internationalized as traditional academic history, a short section on the development of public history outside the US would have been most definitely helpful for young scholars entering the field of public history in the US and abroad to understand why public history in the US is not always compatible to public history abroad. Also, it would help them grasp why public historians often face at least some challenges when they are cooperating with colleagues abroad, or why foreign historians interested in public history, often face problems when interested in working for, or cooperating with, public history institutions in the US. Continuing this line of thought it also comes to mind that Meringolo fails to discuss the relationship of public history institutions in the US and international organizations such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM) or the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). A short analysis of this relationship might have been particularly helpful for understanding why the genealogy of public history in the US is not only unique, but also a direct consequence of the political and societal settings within the US, and in particular, various New Deal policies.

Despite of this critique, which might be understood mainly as a recommendation for future work and not a real criticism on the book, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks* needs to be recommended not only to students and practitioners of public history, but also to traditional academic historians as the book will definitely help to understand that public history is no longer the 'little sister' but an equally important and fully developed field of historical studies. Of course, it's different, but by no means less relevant, and with public history as well as academic history both moving towards more interdisciplinary

approaches, the divide between the two historical fields might be understood in the future as not only less or no longer relevant, but rather as just a temporary result of certain developments in a certain country in the past.

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