Review Essays

LOCAL HISTORY IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

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What does local history publishing mean in this era of globalization? What roles do or might local history knowledge play in an age of constant mobility? At the turn of the twenty-first century, the publishing industry is itself in flux, having become simultaneously more and less accessible to a wider range of authors; meanwhile, new technologies, and particularly the explosion of mobile apps as means of sharing place-based information on the ground, have transformed the ways in which content about historic sites is shared and accessed. Yet, as the volumes under review here demonstrate, the impulse to gather and share local history narratives in traditional forms remains strong.

As many readers of this journal know, the first heroic age of local history publishing in the United States unfolded in the middle decades of the nineteenth century; some sixty local history titles appeared between 1825 and 1875 in Massachusetts alone.¹ Many towns refer to these magisterial volumes by the surname of their author: residents of Hadley, Massachusetts read “Judd”; in Amherst, they consult “Carpenter and Morehouse”; and as we learn from Joyce Butler, in Kennebunkport, locals have long depended on “Bradbury.” In most


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cases, ensuing developments that gave rise to an expanding historical profession alongside shrinking audiences for this form of local history writing, as well as developments in the publishing industry, meant that the vast majority of these narratives were never succeeded by another volume.

Today, in town after town, city after city, that absence is felt, particularly as communities approach milestones—bicentennials, tercentennials, and in the case of my own town of Hadley, Massachusetts, not long ago (and many New England towns just about now), its semiseptcentennial, or 350th anniversary. Residents, particularly on those anniversary occasions, feel the need for accounts of their community’s past that bring existing narratives to the present and align them more closely with what we have come to recognize as sound historical scholarship. But the learned men of leisure who authored most of those nineteenth-century tomes have few counterparts in our contemporary communities, while historians based on college and university campuses, who generally tend to see the past as messy, multivalent, and contradictory, shy away from local history writing that favors a unified narrative. Landmark anniversaries continue to spark desire for the production of local history volumes, but in many cases, a synthetic, sweeping narrative is beyond a community’s reach.

When my own town approached its 350th anniversary, we concluded we could neither find nor compensate an author who could draft a successor volume to Sylvester Judd’s 1863 *History of Hadley*. Instead, our historical commission chose to produce an edited collection of existing published and unpublished scholarship, *Cultivating a Past: Essays on the History of Hadley, Massachusetts*—itself modeled after Kerry Buckley’s anthology *A Place Called Paradise: Culture and Community in Northampton, Massachusetts, 1654–2004*, a collection of previously published articles brought out on the occasion of that city’s semiseptcentennial. In some ways, this approach—while sometimes seen as a fallback option when more synthetic treatments cannot be had—can also offer a more hybrid and inclusive option for

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*Full disclosure: I was the editor of the Hadley volume, which included new writing, previously published articles, and completed but never published research on the history of the town, as well as work published in academic journals that residents were unlikely to otherwise discover; *Cultivating a Past: Essays on the History of Hadley, Massachusetts* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009). Kerry Buckley, *A Place Called Paradise: Culture and Community in Northampton, Massachusetts, 1654–2004* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004).*
local history efforts and conforms to prevailing scholarly sensibilities about the past as disjointed and contradictory rather than cohesive and seamless.

Whatever the format, demand for place-based history nonetheless flourishes, and local history thrives across a range of media and formats. Almost every community, it seems, and even neighborhoods, campuses, and local parks, have a sepia-toned volume from Arcadia Publishing, a wildly popular series, *Images of America*, which offers “chronicles” (in this case, largely in the form of photos and captions) “that accurately capture the essence of what gives each American small town, neighborhood, and downtown its unique flavor.” The site’s claim that Arcadia is among the largest “publishers of local interest literature in the entire country” is likely correct; Arcadia and its sister imprint, The History Press, together produce 900 books each year.

Meanwhile, websites and apps aiming to make this kind of knowledge mobile have blossomed everywhere, a phenomenon that has also made much local history more “bottom-up,” and user-generated. For instance, “PhilaPlace” (http://www.philaplace.org/) “weaves stories shared by ordinary people of all backgrounds with historical records to present an interpretive picture of the rich history, culture and architecture of our neighborhoods, past and present.” In New York, the “Place Matters” project (http://placematters.net/) seeks to document “places that are vital to New York City’s history and traditions but not necessarily architecturally distinguished.” Mobile apps like *Next Exit History* and *Clio—Your Guide to History* allow developers to share information with users in the field, and also, in those cases where the application allows users to submit their own sites to mark and stories to tell, making users both authors and audience. In New England, these tools have enabled historical societies and commissions as well as small museums (see, e.g. Wistariahurst’s guide

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6*Next Exit*, offered by Historical Research Associates, engages professionally trained historians to create content, while *Clio* “provides institutional accounts to libraries, historical societies, museums, and other institutions so that their staff can create, expand, and update entries. *Clio* also provides special accounts for educators that allow them to create and vet entries with their students.”
to the streetscapes of Holyoke, Massachusetts, or Wiscasset, Maine’s Museum in the Streets) and to share place-based content with local and distant audiences.7

In this environment, where the continuum of options is much broader, projects like those under review here take up the mantle of classic local history publishing. Joyce Butler’s two-volume study, Kennebunkport: The Evolution of an American Town, offers readers the synthetic, up-to-the-present narrative that so many communities wish for, while Maycock and Sullivan’s Building Old Cambridge provides tangible treatment of the city’s history through the streets, buildings, and landscapes of its oldest neighborhood.

Like many New England towns, Kennebunkport was the recipient of one of those characteristic local history volumes in the middle decades of the nineteenth century: Charles Bradbury’s 1837 History of Kennebunkport From Its First Discovery. Born in 1799, Bradbury traced his New England lineage to the 1630s; a schoolteacher, state legislator, and county commissioner, he was also an avid historian. When his History of Kennebunkport first appeared, a reviewer called it, with just two exceptions, the “largest and most important town history that has appeared in Maine.”8 Over 160 years later, as Kennebunkport—today a community of around 3,500 residents—approached its 350th anniversary as an incorporated town of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, residents wanted a “comprehensive history of the town that would continue from 1837 into the twenty-first century.” The result is a two-volume, rich narrative that most towns can only dream of.

Certainly, Butler was well positioned to tackle this task. Aside from being Kennebunkport’s longtime town historian and, for fifteen years, the curator of manuscripts and exhibitions at Kennebunkport’s Brick Store Museum, Butler was also the Curator of Museum Collections at the Maine Historical Society from 1996 to 2002. Not only is this definitive town history aware of relevant academic scholarship, it is also enriched and informed by hundreds of images from a range of repositories as well as excerpts from archival sources.

While many communities choose or find it expeditious to tackle their complex histories thematically, Butler notes that she “believed

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7 For Wistariahurst (where this technology allowed the content to be shared in a way that is simultaneously bilingual), see http://wistariahurst.org/walk-holyoke/. For Wiscasset’s Museum in the Streets, see the app Wiscasset’s MITS.

strongly that it was important to tie all these aspects of town life together to show cause and effect in order to explain the evolution of Kennebunkport” (14). Toward that end, she “culled federal, state, county, and town records; newspapers and books; letters, diaries, and farm journals; the records of organizations and businesses; and transcripts of oral history interviews that had been conducted under the auspices of the Kennebunkport Historical Society” (15) to craft this well-researched narrative. After a forward by the town’s most famous residents, George H.W. and Barbara Bush (as well as a preface by Richard D’Abate, director emeritus of the Maine Historical Society), Kennebunkport chronicles events in the history across its full sweep since the onset of European settlement. It is weighty in every sense of the word: substantive in content, these two volumes together tip the scales at fully seven pounds.

The book opens with a prologue that recaps Bradbury’s 1607–1839 narrative (described as an “abstract” of that work “with the addition of information not available to him and the scholarship of later historians”); the text moves through time in chapters arranged largely by decade until 1890 and then in smaller increments of time. Volume I covers the town’s history through 1923, and Volume II continues the story until 2003. The aim is to show “cause and effect” notwithstanding, that structure—driven by the village’s steady trips around the sun, rather than watershed moments or turning points in Kennebunkport’s history—tends to compress foreground and background in one steady narrative stream that traces Kennebunkport’s evolving economy, from the West Indian trade to farming, fishing, and ship-building, to tourism and recreation, and along the way considers the community’s evolving social and cultural history as well. From time to time, the discussion gestures outward to state, regional, and national events; but on the whole, the narrative maintains an inward focus, on lives as they unfolded in the village proper. Butler does not shy away from difficult subjects: for instance, a 1923 meeting of the Ku Klux Klan (mobilized against the rising population of French Canadians) that filled the town hall to capacity (1:433) gets the same straightforward treatment as the coming of the trolley or the opening of a new hotel. Clearly a labor of love, the prose throughout is well crafted and attends to the sorts of human detail that make such volumes so absorbing. In this aspect, then, the strictly chronological arrangement is particularly compelling, tacitly replicating for contemporary readers the steady, onward march of time as centuries of Kennebunkport residents experienced it.
Butler acknowledges, however, that most readers will not tackle these volumes cover to cover, but rather dip in according to their needs and interests. That is likely true and would be made easier by a more effective editorial apparatus, as the date-driven organization and broad headings do not signal the specific topics treated within. The book’s chronological arrangement puts additional pressure on the volume index, as casual readers and future researchers interested in particular themes will naturally want to be able to head straight to passages that engage their subject rather than scan through every chapter. But that content is not necessarily easy to locate. For instance, the book contains some discussion of the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy peoples through the years, but these terms are not present in the book’s index. Locals may be pleased to find easily references to “Indian Canoe Landing,” but readers interested in native histories of coastal Maine will have to work harder to locate that content in these pages. Likewise, the creation of Freedom Farm—a home for European refugees from World War II—is fascinating (2:235), and relevant to contemporary conversations about refugees in Maine, but neither the term “refugees” nor “immigration” appears in the index (though “Freedom Farm” does); one would already have to know that Kennebunkport’s story included this intriguing detail to find Butler’s discussion here. The issue speaks to tensions inherent in the genre and the wide-ranging needs of diverse audiences; choices like these often cause more academic readers to overlook such volumes as sources of place-based knowledge, but more casual, and perhaps local, audiences may well not miss these additional points of entry into the narrative.

In contrast to Butler’s chronological approach, the authors of Building Old Cambridge take a different tack and aim to help their readers understand Cambridge through histories of its built environment and some of its cultural landscapes. Few authors are better equipped to do so. Charles M. Sullivan has been Executive Director of the Cambridge Historical Commission (CHC) for more than forty years, and Susan E. Maycock is an architectural historian and CHC Survey Director. This volume, grounded in the streets and buildings of Cambridge, Massachusetts, presents in narrative form information compiled in hundreds of cultural resource surveys and other documentation generated through the CHC’s work, creating a whole that is far greater than the sum of its parts.

Established in 1963, the CHC maintains a robust and impressive publishing program; Building Old Cambridge joins a series of book
projects that draw on oral history to narrate themes in the community’s history, and several volumes that explore in great depth the city’s various neighborhoods. Grounded in the some 13,000 Cambridge structures inventoried by the CHC, the book publishes over 1000 images of structures and landscapes; it is more than two inches thick and, like Butler’s pair of companion volumes, weighs over seven pounds. The volume, its size notwithstanding, treats not the whole city, but just one section of it—the first English-American settlement to develop. Early chapters chronicle the European community’s origins and development; these are followed by successive thematic treatments of changing patterns of land use, parks, residential architectural styles, institutional and commercial architecture, and transportation and industry. Its thoroughgoing treatment of the city’s evolution takes in both “Lost Cambridge” and “Unbuilt Cambridge,” features that should prove especially engaging to the city’s current residents.

The text is in many ways quite comprehensive. The chapter on residential architecture, for instance, at 156 pages, offers a substantial survey of house styles as they appeared across the sweep of Cambridge’s history; it could almost be a publication in and of itself. And indeed, this reference above to the book’s size and heft is not an incidental observation; a different sort of product could be carried to these places and allow readers to toggle between historic maps and photographs and the present-day environment. But that is not the intent here.

Building Old Cambridge is a fascinating read on a variety of subjects beyond the history of Cambridge per se and will be of interest to students of architectural history, urban planning, urban history, historic preservation, and public history. Historians of education will surely find the long, entangled evolution of town and gown illuminating, and much content here will engross researchers engaged in

histories of transportation. Certainly, the book models beautifully the wide range of research methods necessary to documenting and understanding built environments. Lucius Paige’s 1877 History of Cambridge does not loom over this volume in quite the same way that Bradbury informed Butler’s work, likely because there is so much other scholarship on the history of Cambridge upon which the authors can draw. Surveyors, investors, regulatory impulses, and financial environments—this book seeks to help readers understand why Cambridge developed as it did, tracking political and economic interests, social and aesthetic forces, commemorative impulses, and other drivers of tangible change.

In his book, Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life, David Glassberg notes that “If individuals can experience a sense of place, they can also experience a sense of placelessness—the feeling of belonging in no particular place.”10 Maycock and Sullivan seem alert to that threat and hope that Building Old Cambridge can help newcomers find a place in the long history of Cambridge. Observing that “in 2010 the census bureau determined that 36% of owner occupants and over 70% of renters had arrived within the previous five years, while only 17% of owner-occupants and 2% of renters had lived here for more than twenty years,” the authors fear that “As a result, Cambridge in the 21st century is a community in danger of losing its collective memory” (emphasis added).11 “The purpose of this new book,” the authors continue, “is to be an owner’s manual for all Cantabrigians.”

“Collective memory,” of course, is not a fixed entity, but rather a cultural construction that is ever changing. It is true that a certain “collective memory” of Cambridge is fragile and transitory, and may in time be replaced by, or at least now sits alongside, others more reflective of the city’s most recent past, with no single through line. The impulse to settle a community’s collective memory reflects a larger, uneasy tension present in both projects under review here. Given the increasingly diverse population of Cambridge, for instance, can any “collective memory” be neatly packaged for new arrivals? Cambridge as a municipality is decreasingly homogeneous. In 1990, 75% of residents were white; in 2000 that figure fell to 68% and in

11 Building Old Cambridge, xvi.
In that last federal census, while two-thirds of Cambridge residents classified themselves as white, 11.7% identified as black, and 15.1% Asian or Pacific Islander; 6.6% reported being some other race or a member of two or more races. Hispanics—who can be members of any racial group—comprised 7.6% of the city’s population. What is more, the “owner’s manual” describes a city in which home ownership is increasingly unattainable: in 2015, the median market rate sales price of a single-family home was $1,253,000, and $600,000 for a condominium.¹²

Building Old Cambridge, the text asserts, is not meant to be a “detailed social or political history.” But for readers who like to consider places from their margins rather than any center, approaches that adopt the perspective of owners, institutions, and builders can sometimes feel limiting. For instance, I found myself mesmerized by Figure 2.12 (46), an 1862 photo showing thirteen women employed by Harvard College as cleaners. Given controversy over the compensation of janitors there (and longer histories of dining hall workers and other employees), one can imagine prose here and elsewhere that considers those structures not from the point of view of the men who funded and designed them or who studied there, but rather the people who maintained and worked in them. Though scattered references appear to some of the people of color who lived and worked in Old Cambridge, again the index is challenging for readers searching for an understanding of how marginalized communities have made their own space in “old Cambridge,” or how public policy facilitated, challenged, or obstructed those efforts.¹³ In this, such authoritative volumes replicate authority inherent in the built environment itself, as both local history writing and historic preservation on the whole have traditionally favored the perspectives of the establishment. Unlike their nineteenth-century predecessors, such books today exist in a more expansive epistemological milieu, as one of many expressions of local history knowledge in their communities. Yet, as seemingly comprehensive works foreground some stories over others, they can


¹³There are no entries for African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, or other groups; it took me some time to discover the entry for “racial and ethnic groups,” where African Americans and other groups and topics receive subentries. To find “Waiters” one must turn to “Memorial Hall Waiters” as a subentry here as well.
lead readers who may not be aware of or have access to the larger scholarly conversations in which such volumes are necessarily situated to conclude that these other histories are absent, or unrecoverable.

Nonetheless, these well-written chapters, on the subjects they engage, are deeply substantive, engaging, and enjoyable, offering significant insight on urban history, architectural history, and a wealth of other subjects. The text is an excellent source for students and residents eager to understand how developments in cultural history, social and economic policy, and other forces tangibly shape the built environment around them, and those are important lessons to learn. And the numerous images here, as in Butler's work, are a pleasure in and of themselves, implicitly reminding audiences of the many generations whose lives have unfolded on this ground before we arrived on the scene.

Both projects look inward rather than outward, which might seem obvious given their aims, but—as in their nineteenth-century counterparts—they tend to keep larger contexts at arm's length and do not fully parse the many ways in which the global and the local are mutually constitutive. Butler, quoting her predecessor Bradbury, asserts that “because every resident of a town has a responsibility for its management, 'the history of his own town ought to become his first study [because] in attending to this, he necessarily becomes acquainted with the history of his own state and country which ultimately leads him to the knowledge of the history of the whole world’” (15). Butler could have pursued Bradbury’s insight—that local and global history are inextricably entwined—still further, as the narrative contains ample evidence that Kennebunkport, especially in its maritime past, was well connected to the world at large, though the volume tends to emphasize images of the quiet, inward-looking village. Cambridge, too, is obviously connected to global developments, in the sources of wealth that funded the landscapes described, the people who encountered them, and in the flow of ideas that shaped both design and policy. Communicating a “sense of place” in local history can and perhaps should situate a given landscape within its many geographies—how it has embraced, resisted, absorbed, and understood developments at a distance.

These comments aside, both of the volumes reviewed here provide welcome examples of local history publishing that is deeply researched, well-written and richly supported by visual sources, and informed by broader scholarship. In some ways, traces of the audiences, purposes, and priorities of those older chroniclers remain
visible in these works. It is easy to imagine readers in the lobby of the still-thriving Nonantum Resort, or the Cape Arundel Inn, perusing Butler’s pages, and Building Old Cambridge will not only be enjoyed and read with profit by city residents but could and should become a text for students in Cambridge and Boston studying historic preservation, cultural landscapes, and/or urban planning. But in both Cambridge and Kennebunkport, where (like everywhere) audiences are diverse, multi-layered, and mobile, readers will bring to these books needs both anticipated and unpredictable. Works like these in practice serve multiple constituencies, from local educators and their students, to avocational readers of history, to researchers who will find in these pages evidence and leads that support scholarship on topics we cannot even yet imagine. Perhaps an enterprising historian or two will propose mobile applications that take this content on the road, to the streets of these places, amplifying the deep local knowledge here in new ways for a wider variety of uses and occasions. Until then, these volumes should and will find receptive audiences.

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“AM I GAGGED”? JOHN QUINCY ADAMS AND PRINCIPLED LEADERSHIP

JOHN M. BELOHLAVEK


“A M I gagged?” the old man defiantly roared over the cacophony of voices surrounding him. That question and the image of