graduate fellow and curator. Yet it highlights the reality of the Smithsonian’s politics. Curators and exhibit designers work for the secretary who serves at the pleasure of Congress. Politics rather than scholarship determine what history is told at the museum and how it is told.

Perhaps the most disturbing part of Post’s narrative comes in his discussion of exhibit critics dating back to the Bell family’s dissatisfaction with the presentation of Alexander Graham Bell’s contribution to the invention of the telephone. Unhappy with the Smithsonian’s inclusion of other inventors in the story of the telephone, the Bell family threatened to pull their donation of artifacts if the Smithsonian did not display the items in a way that reflected family history even if that conflicted with the knowledge of experts. Far from an anomaly, the Bell episode represented the first of many battles over interpretation that culminated in the infamous Enola Gay controversy. Forced to bow to political pressure in order to keep the doors open and the lights on, the Smithsonian has abdicated its leadership as an educational institution and today serves merely as the “Nation’s Attic.”

Who Owns America’s Past serves as an important and timely update to Edward Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt’s History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past (Macmillan, 1995) and reminds us that the culture wars are not necessarily over, nor were they unique to the 1990s. Tracing the history of controversy in the museum from its founding, Post places the Enola Gay story in a much broader context familiar to all practitioners of public history. Not only must we question who owns America’s past; but also who owns history and whom do we serve? Rather than provide answers as “America’s Museum,” the history of the Smithsonian demonstrates that no institution is immune from the criticism of donors, visitors, and funders. Ultimately Post has uncovered a story of the failure of the historical profession to explain to the general public what we do and why we do it. The burden is on all of us to advocate and educate.

Lee M. A. Simpson
California State University, Sacramento

A Living Exhibition: The Smithsonian and the Transformation of the Universal Museum by William S. Walker. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013. xi + 291 pp.; images, notes, index; clothbound, $80.00; paperbound, $27.95.

Ink pens, telephones, typewriters, radios, phonographs, film cameras, even museums and books: all these are still in use, but with the triumph of the impalpable universe stored at subatomic densities on the world’s digital servers, all stand on an uncertain ontological foundation, glowing with the twilight hues of residuality. Perhaps that is why in 2013 a history of the Smithsonian Institution has finally become plausible, and, as an affirmation of the reality of concrete objects, newly interesting and important. For as
William Walker reports in his conclusion to *A Living Exhibition: The Smithsonian and the Transformation of the Universal Museum*, even the Smithsonian has begun to open access to its immense holdings through online collections and exhibitions, “where visitors can scroll through thousands of pages of materials without visiting a single museum” (229).

Assistant professor of history at the Cooperstown Graduate Program, Walker has written a judiciously researched and shapely narrative history which strides bravely into the Smithsonian’s overwhelming plenitude to discover how its directors, assistants, curators and staff have absorbed the urgencies of successive decades to preserve its role as the National Museum while extending its footprint into race, ethnicity, community, and politics.

Walker’s story has a central character, Yale ornithologist S. Dillon Ripley, who, sensitive to the spirit of the 1960s, recognized that the Institution needed an extensive reorganization—which over the twenty-years of his tenure as director (1964-84) he very nearly achieved. The problem, rooted in nineteenth-century epistemology, and made more resistant by the sheer materiality of the Institution’s buildings, collections, and exhibit halls, was its separation of European and Euro-American materials, technological, social, and cultural, mounted as a paean to enlightenment, modernity, and progress, from its anthropological materials, which culturally freeze-dried the world’s peoples of color in the Museum of Natural History, a few steps away from the mollusks and the butterflies, where it literally gathered dust until Ripley arrived to bring the museum into the twentieth century.

For Ripley’s monument we have merely to look around us. Today the great Museums of American History, Natural History, Air and Space, African Art, the Freer and Sackler galleries, the Hirshhorn and the new National Museum of the American Indian, to be joined in 2015 by the National Museum of African American History and Culture, as well as the old Arts and Industries building and the Smithsonian Castle, dominate the National Mall.

Yet to his considerable credit Walker discerningly locates the beginnings of Ripley’s revolution in “open education” not in any of these museums, but on the “hot and dusty” Mall itself. Here the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, inaugurated in 1967 by musician, impresario, collector, entrepreneur, folklorist, and exhibition pioneer Ralph Rinzler, suggested a way to overcome the inertia of museum objects by reuniting them with their creators in intimate performance and demonstration venues where visitors might encounter music and craftwork in a context of face-to-face human communication. Folklife studies, as Walker writes, had “suggested that anthropological ideas and methods might be applied to the study of non-Native, or Euro-American, traditions” (99).

The entire Smithsonian, of course, could not be hauled outside for a summer airing—but the deeper lesson of the festival, for Walker, was that it opened the possibility of “active engagement among real people to circumvent stereotyping, ignorance, and ethnocentrism” (103). Ripley understood that as the museum evolved from exhibition to education, from education to
advocacy, it would reverse direction; that objects taxonomically paralyzed could be reanimated by the human stories in which they have their meaning. In such pioneering exhibits of the 1980s as Nation of Nations, From Field to Factory, and A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and the United States Constitution, the Smithsonian embodied the idea of unity in a structure of diversity, difference, and division. Rising in lofty display cases out of eddies of light and shadow, along winding switchback passageways, they brought the outside in, launching unlikely objects by the hundreds into a whirlwind of context-building film montage, photography, lucent floating text panels, music, ambient sounds, and speaking voices. Walker treats the Nation of Nations patiently and thoroughly, from its inception in the mind of Daniel Boorstin, the University of Chicago historian who became director of the Museum of History and Technology in 1969, through a complex internal dialogue with sociologist Nathan Glazer and the design firm of Chermayeff, Geismar, & Associates, to the many academics, curators, staff, and volunteers involved in its actual creation, and finally to an exacting account of the exhibit itself, with its many sections and subsections and its “staggering” quotient of objects, texts, images, and sounds.

Walker’s principal political landmarks are the Cold War and the Civil Rights and American Indian movements; his scholarly terrain is mainly the Smithsonian’s archive of memos, reports, letters, speeches, interviews, recordings, clippings, and the like, primary sources without which, and, it seems important to add, without access to which, a reliable institutional history could not be considered. Hence, A Living Exhibition records the ways in which the Smithsonian thought about its museum, and characterizes its work over time in ways largely determined by the museum’s ideas of itself. What it does not address, supposing any book really could, is whether those ideas took hold; whether, in Ripley’s phrase, its generations of visitors, “with eyes that see and ears that hear,” could see and hear, if not actually touch, the palpable past.

Robert S. Cantwell

University of North Carolina


Assassination and Commemoration: JFK, Dallas, and the Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza lives up to the promise of its title. It not only painstakingly chronicles the creation of the Sixth Floor Museum, but also provides an eclectic history of JFK’s assassination and the lingering impact that tragedy has had on the city of Dallas. If Assassination and Commemoration may be at once too fine-grained and insufficiently detailed for some