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 academicians, 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
audiences—undergraduates may think its tight focus on the Sixth Floor Museum is inside baseball; serious students of Kennedy’s murder will likely be disappointed by its lack of attention to bullet trajectories, studies of murky audio recordings, and frame-by-frame analyses of home movies—Stephen Fagin’s monograph should be of real interest to public historians, scholars of the politics of memory, and readers fascinated by the production of historical narratives.

Having just witnessed the tawdry spectacle of the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination, there is something refreshing about a book on the subject that is neither exploitative (obsessed with the slain president’s kinky sex life) nor breathless (filled with false promises of new insights into an event that has been picked clean through the years). Instead, Fagin writes in a sober, scholarly voice. And yet, *Assassination and Commemoration* is marked by a number of personal touches. Fagin notes that he was born too late to have experienced Kennedy’s murder firsthand. He relates to the tragedy through flashbulb memories: of the *Challenger* disaster and his experience of the September 11 attacks. And he makes his status as a participant-observer clear. As an oral historian at the Sixth Floor Museum, he had extraordinary access to sources. That is all to the good. But it would have benefitted readers in the fields of public history and museum studies if Fagin had spent a bit more time considering his cultural positioning, especially with regard to some of his subjects.

Although Fagin’s passion for the Sixth Floor Museum and Dallas may leave some readers wondering if he maintains enough critical distance from his work, his study of collective trauma in the wake of the assassination remains one of the book’s most compelling sections. Fagin writes, “John F. Kennedy was not the only victim in Dealey Plaza on November 22, 1963. The killing of the U.S. president haunted the City of Dallas for years” (xxv). And later he adds, “Though the Warren Commission concluded that a left-leaning, lone assassin with a Marxist background murdered the president, many people considered Dallas a haven of right-wing extremism” (18). Those people were right. Dallas, a Republican island in a sea of southern Democrats, boasted a collection of Birchers and supported newspapers that, on the eve of the president’s arrival in the city in the fall of 1963, raised questions about his patriotism and fitness to serve. After JFK’s murder, Dallas was pilloried around the nation as a city of hate. As a result, local residents, and especially the city’s elites, preferred to forget rather than remember the episode that had so tarnished their reputations.

Despite that desire for collective amnesia, just two years after the president’s murder, activists began calling for a memorial at Dealey Plaza. The members of a counter movement then sought to demolish the Book Depository building. So began a decades-long memory fight, a struggle Fagin documents with evenhandedness and clarity. In the early 1970s, Dallas officials bickered over the fate of the building: preservationists wanted a museum there; their opponents warned that any such institution would become “a shrine” to Kennedy’s killer (43). The preservationists won, but another decade
passed before a committee crafted a plan for exhibits. Then an economic downturn, tepid support from the Kennedys, and an attempt on President Reagan’s life that picked old scabs in Dallas all hamstrung the process. The Sixth Floor Museum only opened its doors on President’s Day 1989.

Unfortunately, *Assassination and Commemoration*’s weakest section details the contents and consumption of exhibits. Fagin notes in passing that the Sixth Floor Museum has a complicated and occasionally difficult relationship with the conspiracy theorists who are drawn to JFK’s murder. But he fails to offer readers analysis of what drives those people, of why, decades after the fact, so many onlookers remain convinced that federal authorities covered up the facts surrounding President Kennedy’s assassination. He explains that Oliver Stone’s *JFK* provided the Sixth Floor museum with a huge boost, generating interest in the president’s murder among a younger generation of filmgoers. But he spends little time considering why the film captured the imagination of such a huge audience. And though he does an admirable job setting the scene elsewhere—especially in his first chapter on the assassination itself—he misses an opportunity to convey to readers the haunting ambiance that suffuses the Book Depository’s sixth floor.

Despite its flaws, *Assassination and Commemoration* is a rare beast: a page-turner focused on planning meetings, fund-raising campaigns, and local political battles. As Ed Linenthal observes in his introduction, “Fagin demonstrates how often the most important work is not in the ‘grand decision’ but in the day-to-day work of civic culture: cultivating influential individuals and convincing members of boards and committees of the importance of preservation and interpretation. This is the art of democracy at work” (xix). In the end, because it reveals so much about the workings of democracy at the intersection of history and memory, *Assassination and Commemoration* is a valuable addition to the literature on public history.

Ari Kelman

University of California, Davis


We don’t ordinarily think of living history museums and sites as sweatshops, if we think of them as workplaces at all. There seems to have been little systematic inquiry into the well-being of living history’s frontline workforce, yet one would think the costs of replacing burnt-out cases would interest management in the subject. This lacuna leaves us in the dark about the relationship between the visitor experience and the lives of those who catalyze that experience. Amy Tyson’s *The Wages of History* seeks to fill this gap.