

Snyder, Robert W. *The Voice of the City, Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. \$19.95

John C. Lehr

Volume 19, numéro 1, juin 1990

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017585ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017585ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Lehr, J. C. (1990). Compte rendu de [Snyder, Robert W. *The Voice of the City, Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. \$19.95]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 19(1), 69–70. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017585ar>

Perhaps most stunning about this discussion of culture is its range; within his model, Borsay can discuss both the growth of theatre and the fears that that growth had gone too far, both the importance of games as areas of competition for status and the notion that many of those games (such as cock fighting or gambling) were antithetical to true urban civility, both the harmonizing effects of newspapers, clubs, etc. and their tendency to promote factionalization.

This, of course, is not a perfect book. Such things are unlikely, if not impossible. A perfect book would perhaps have discussed the interaction between the metropolis and these provincial towns; Borsay acknowledges, but does not develop, the importance of London as a centre both for fashion and for "urbanity." A perfect book would also have distinguished between urban styles, if such existed, within England. Was there a "northern" style or a "resort" style? What was the role of gender in this new culture of consumption and what changes, if any, occurred in this sphere over the century covered by this book? Though not unimportant questions, perhaps posing them is carping. Borsay's book is a splendid example of what clear and imaginative thinking and scholarship can accomplish. He is to be congratulated for what he has done.

Donna T. Andrew
Department of History
University of Guelph

Snyder, Robert W. *The Voice of the City, Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. \$19.95.

Like most successful things, vaudeville was based on a simple idea: a variety stage show which gave something for everyone. Vaudeville — literally, the voice of the city — was much more than a theatrical phenomenon, for, as Robert Snyder points out in *The Voice of the City, Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York*, it was also an

agent of assimilation, a bridge between cultures in the new world and a venue for the mixing of the classes. It transformed the performers and their audiences by exposing them to the music and humour of many cultures; through vaudeville the common elements of the immigrant experience were affirmed and the underpinnings of a new North American culture were laid down. Without vaudeville, one wonders, would North American entertainment and popular culture have evolved as it did?

Snyder's book provides a well written and carefully documented history of vaudeville. He traces the evolution of this entertainment genre from its antecedents in the rowdy concert saloons frequented mostly by working and middle class males — places described by one report in the 1860s as "the most abominable nuisance and vilest disgrace of the metropolis [of New York]" — to the more decorous and respectable variety theatres "made tasteful for middle class women and men and their families by removing the smoky, boozy, licentious male atmosphere."

This metamorphosis was engineered by showmen who managed to produce an entertainment refined enough to attract the middle class Victorian family, yet one which still maintained an element of raciness in order to attract the patrons of the old concert saloons. Among them, Tony Pastor played a leading role in forming and guiding the new form of theatre. He and other theatrical entrepreneurs showed an astute appreciation of social psychology, audience demands, marketing strategy and the crucial nature of theatre location.

Of course, although entertainment, vaudeville was also big business. Snyder chronicles the formation of the "Vaudeville Trust" which grew out of a syndicate of theatre owners and booking agents, and which came to exercise a virtual monopoly control, regulating performers' salaries, taking a five per cent commission on each booking and

blacklisting entertainers who booked acts at theatres owned by independent entrepreneurs who remained outside the booking syndicate.

Not surprisingly, managerial control generated opposition from the ranks of the players who formed a union *cum* fraternal order, one clearly influenced by British union actions. The "White Rats" traced their lineage to the Grand Order of Water Rats, a society of British music hall artists. The confrontation between artists and managers followed the usual path of early union fights for recognition: employment of strikebreakers, establishment of company unions, police protection for theatres, firing of all non-company-union members and blacklisting of union activists, and eventual victory by the forces of monopoly capital.

Vaudeville was, as Snyder contends, a social barometer. Its history reflected social change, of which it was itself both a part and a catalyst. This book is therefore more than a narrative history of a theatrical phenomenon. It is also a social history, and a most enlightening one too. Nevertheless, it has a couple of minor but irritating shortcomings. A persistent question running through the book was the difference between "vaudeville" and "music hall." Were they synonymous American and British terms or were there significant differences? To those familiar with the topic the answer may be obvious but the casual reader will not readily be enlightened. The author also assumes an easy familiarity with New York and its neighbourhoods. The inclusion of a map showing theatre locations, neighbourhood boundaries, and the placement of streetcar lines, subway routes and stations would make much of the argument more easily comprehensible to the non-local reader; so too would a map illustrating the various "booking routes" among theatres within and beyond the New York area.

Like the concert saloons they replaced, vaudeville theatres fell victim to changing times. The advent of motion pictures led

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

vaudeville houses to soon incorporate them into their bills, but by the 1920s vaudeville theatres were closing and converting to movie theatres. The vaudeville audience, like the performers they applauded, simply embraced the new technology. Sophie Tucker, Milton Berle, and George Burns and Gracie Allen all moved from vaudeville to movies and finally made the transition to television, a medium which seems to be the vaudeville of the post-war generation.

John C. Lehr
Department of Geography
University of Winnipeg

Thompson, Dorothy J. *Memphis Under the Ptolemies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988. Pp. xiii, 342. 8 plates, 10 figures, 5 tables, index. \$37.50 (U.S.)

The Greek papyri from Egypt provide an incomparable source of information about everyday life in the Greco-Roman period. Contracts, private letters and tax records can shed light on the past in a way that the work of the historical writers cannot. Regrettably few classical scholars have seen the rich possibilities of this kind of documentation as a window on the ancient world. Dorothy J. Thompson is one of a small number of ancient historians who has chosen Greco-Roman Egypt as an area of concentration, and her work stands as a model of the intelligent use of primary source material to construct historical analysis. Her first book, *Kerkeosiris: An Egyptian Village in the Ptolemaic Period* (Cambridge 1971), is unquestionably the best historical study of an Egyptian village that has been produced by a classical scholar. Her new book contains all of the virtues of the first, in terms of skilled interpretation of individual papyri and attention to minute points of detail, but moves beyond this sort of monographic approach to encompass a range of sources and methodologies which include archaeology, iconography, religion, epigraphy, literature,

anthropology and sociology. This book was deservedly the winner of the American Historical Association 1989 James H. Breasted Prize for the best book in English in any field of history prior to A.D. 1000.

Memphis proved to be a much more challenging site for study than Kerkeosiris. Although the latter was much smaller and less significant, several extant archives of papyri provided easily accessible raw material for historical inquiry. In the case of Memphis, on the other hand, the papyri are proportionately less numerous and more random; they therefore do not in themselves provide enough evidence to tell us all that we might want to know about Memphis in the Ptolemaic period. For this reason the author had to draw on a wide variety of sources for her study, and it is her dexterity in doing so that is one of the main strengths of this book.

Memphis, the modern site of Cairo, was after Alexandria the most important city in Ptolemaic Egypt. It is partially for this reason that relatively few papyri from the site are extant; it is one of the paradoxes of papyrology that the more successful a site was, the fewer of its documents have survived, since continuous habitation causes the destruction of the past whereas neglect and abandonment create ideal conditions for the preservation of papyri. The eight chapters of this book cover a number of topics in the social and economic history of Memphis. The importance of Memphis as a religious center of the country is the subject of a number of chapters (esp. 4: Ptolemies and Temples, 5: The Undertakers, 6: Apis and Other Cults, 7: Between Two Worlds: The Sarapieion). The role of Memphis in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds is the focus of the first (The Second City) and last (Roman Memphis: An Epilogue) chapters. The relationship between the indigenous inhabitants and the ruling minority, an inescapable issue in Egyptian history, is considered particularly in two chapters (3: Ethnic Minorities, 7: Between Two Worlds: The Sarapieion). Perhaps nowhere is the author's ingenuity at gleaning historical

information from assorted scraps of evidence more amply demonstrated than in the two chapters which deal with economic life; in the one (2: Economic Life in Memphis), documentation from the Pharaonic period to present-day Egypt is pulled together to assist in developing a picture of economic activity in the country during the Ptolemaic period. A more focused approach is taken in a chapter on an interesting archive of papyri belonging to a family of undertakers (Ch. 5: The Undertakers).

Memphis Under the Ptolemies is an outstanding example of classical scholarship at its best, distinguished by a synthesis of documentary expertise and historical imagination. Although it is written with full attention to papyrological detail so as to be indispensable to the specialist, it does not presuppose a knowledge of Greek, and thus would be equally informative to the nonspecialist.

Deborah Hobson
Division of Humanities
York University

Martin, Virgil. *Changing Landscapes of Southern Ontario*. Erin, Ontario: The Boston Mills Press, 1988. Pp. 240. Illustrations.

There is a tradition within Geography and its systematic branches, Cultural and Historical Geography, which treats its subject matter in terms of the "evolution of landscape" or "the changing landscape." The tradition is holistic, seeing landscape as the expression of Man's values, or "ways and works," to use the Philbrickian terminology. Most working in this genre present their insights in simple descriptive prose, in the literature of the area and period and in the cartographic and photographic heritage.

The photograph is rarely central, functioning often as a sort of theatrical back drop against which the action is played. That is what