

Book Reviews

Behind Barbed Wire by Anita Buck. North Star Press, P.O. Box 451, St. Cloud, MN 56302, paper, 126 pp., \$15.00.

Those interested in the history of World War II will find this book of interest though it speaks in detail only of the seventeen internment camps in Minnesota. As of September 15, 1945, there were 262,170 German prisoners of war in the United States plus 49,784 Italian and 5,080 Japanese. More than 500 prison camps were scattered through this country, with some in every state, including Alaska. We may assume the behavior in most states would duplicate the Minnesota experience.

Life in the camps was given variety by employment of the POWs in agriculture and industry. As there was an extreme shortage of labor in the United States because of the war, prisoners were of immense help. They got in crops when it would have been impossible without them, and they kept up production in many factories.

As we would expect, the prisoners were on the whole decent people. All save a few determined Nazis were conscripted and were glad to be out of the war. Here, they were out of danger and well fed. This country observed strictly the Geneva Convention about treatment of prisoners even when it was known Germany did not observe the Geneva Convention and could not because of the poverty in countries Germany controlled. Few prisoners escaped and those who attempted it did it for a lark as there was little possibility they could find their way to and across the Atlantic Ocean.

Repatriation of the prisoners took three years for many. When they did return to Germany or Italy it was to a country of devastation far removed from the beautiful lands of their youth. Sadness was piled upon tragedy.

—Angus MacDonald

Cultural Amnesia: America's Future and the Crisis of Memory, Stephen Bertman. Praeger Publishers, 2000.

The six Regents universities in Kansas host a summer academy for the top high school graduates before they go on to college. It rotates among the universities, and comes to Wichita State University, where this reviewer teaches, every six years.

During the summer three years ago, I was invited to be one of the academy's speakers in a panel on "Racism in America." In my opening talk, I sought to place the racial experience of the United States into historical context. My message essentially was that the presence of slavery, brought in by the slave trade, had run counter to the central ethos of American sensibility, which was powerfully oriented toward the Enlightenment. It was Britain, with its navy, that abolished the slave trade, responding also to the classical liberalism that predominated in its thinking.

It wasn't long before slavery itself was abolished. The century and a third since that time has not been easy, but has marked the efforts of a society, again moved predominantly by humane instincts, to grapple with difficult human issues.

My remarks were followed by those of a vivacious, highly articulate "black activist." She excoriated virtually everything about "a racist United States," and was eloquent in her complaints of "victimization." She was followed by a black state senator, who mildly seconded her point of view and devoted most of his attention to refuting mine. The fourth panelist was a conservative from Pakistan who did a much more effective job than I did of countering the charges of American "racism."

During the question and discussion period, the response by the thirty or so students present was revealing. Unanimously, they were vehement in support of the activist's attacks on the United States; and no one voiced any sympathy whatsoever with the perspective I had presented. The three or four black students among them were asked by the activist whether they thought of themselves primarily as black or primarily as American, and they all answered, "black."

What this episode illustrates is the enormity and success of the ideological attack that has been made on American institutions and ideals by the alienated intellectual culture that has, virtually without rebuttal, reached this generation of students through the schools they have attended. The image of the United States that I grew up with is not only obsolete; it is held in contempt. There is no "cultural memory" of the United States as a decent, humane and classically liberal repository of the best aspirations of humanity. The emphasis is entirely on negative factors, seen with hindsight, without any historical context, and with an outraged, alienated emphasis.

In any discussion of the loss of cultural continuity and consensus in the United States today, it is indispensable to take into account the profound alienation of the artistic-literary culture from as far back as the 1820s. The alienation against mainstream America began long before the counter-cultural years of the 1960s. Another factor, of increasing importance, is the role of immigration. Within the past few weeks, three delightful students in my classes—two from Vietnam and one from China—have obtained their American citizenship. It is highly doubtful that they are steeped in alienation, but one thing is bound to be true: that their cultural associations and memories have no deeply set continuity with the American past. Vast immigration brings in new memories, new cultural associations, and thus discontinuity so far as a unified American culture is concerned.

Stephen Bertman, in his book *Cultural Amnesia*, does not discuss these things, but enriches our understanding by pointing to other more existential forces that are at work to shatter what was once the cultural consensus within the United States. He says that "each day, fewer and fewer of our nation's long-term memories survive." The causal factors that he discusses are summed up when he says:

The long passage of time, the urgent call of the senses, the accelerating power of technology, the lure of materialism, and the newness of our

nation have all collaborated in obscuring the past and its meaning.

Science, he says, challenges the validity of age-old traditions, while technology shows that antiquated things deserve to be replaced. Materialism “demeans subjects that can’t be converted into cash.” Education is focusing on job-preparation, which forces out the humanities.

As in his book *Hyperculture: The Human Cost of Speed* (Praeger, 1998), Bertman, a professor of Language, Literatures and Cultures at the University of Windsor in Canada, makes the account especially interesting by classical references and relevant background information. He begins and ends the book by telling of Homer’s Ulysses, whose memories of his experiences during the ten years following the Trojan War, and his longing for return to his home and family in Ithaca, were recounted in *The Odyssey*. Bertman also spices the discussion of cultural amnesia with a detailed review of how memory works within the human brain, telling of the brain’s physiology and about the various forms of amnesia. Perhaps most relevant is his account of how civilization establishes memory through oral traditions, language, writing, books, libraries, ruins, statues, and the like. He finds disturbing the rapid loss of monuments around the world because of pollution, and the deterioration of films.

The fact that Bertman seems unaware of the ideological “culture war” could be reason to discount his writing, but it would make better sense to listen to what he has to tell us about the forces that he does see at work. They are themselves of sufficient weight to make problematic the entire continuity of culture, not just of American culture but of any culture that is subject to the same forces (as all are, to one degree or another, today). We are “as the flies of summer.”

—Dwight D. Murphey

Lost Minnesota: Stories of Vanished Places, by Jack El-Hai. University of Minnesota Press, 111 3rd Ave. S., Suite 290, Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520, 160 pp. \$19.95 paper.

Believe it or not, Minnesota’s architectural landscape has included a house made from the fuselage of a B-29 bomber, a hotel that spent its final years as a chicken hatchery, a Civil War cemetery, a treehouse built and occupied year-round by an eccentric university professor, and a railway that once carried passengers up Duluth’s steep incline from Lake Superior.

They are all gone now, along with countless houses, parks, bridges, theaters, sports stadiums, courthouses, and farm buildings in which Minnesotans have worked, played, and lived their lives. Though other books have looked at the lost architecture of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Jack El-Hai’s *Lost Minnesota* is the first book to tell the stories of buildings and landmarks from rural and smalltown Minnesota, as well as those of the residential and suburban areas of the state’s largest cities.

From Rochester’s Hotel Zumbro and the Charles H. Mayo House to the Hastings Spiral Bridge and the Lyceum Theater of Duluth, El-Hai rediscovers a lost landscape and the values and lifestyle of a bygone era. He tours not only Twin

Cities buildings, such as the Fair Oaks mansion, the Wilder Baths, and the Beyrer Brewery, but also its sites, such as the Wonderland amusement park, in order to recreate not only where but how Minnesotans lived.

Lost Minnesota presents eighty-nine beautifully illustrated stories about these fascinating places and those who built them, lived in them, and tore them down. This is a book sure to delight the Minnesota history enthusiast and anyone who is curious about the state's changing urban, smalltown, and rural landscapes.

Jack El-Hai is a freelance journalist and columnist for *Architecture Minnesota*, and the author of *Minnesota Collects* and (with Barbara Degroot) *The Insiders' Guide to the Twin Cities*. He lives in Minneapolis.