

Reviews

***Forging America: Ironworkers, Adventurers, and the Industrious Revolution.* By John Bezis-Selfa. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004. xiv, 279 pp. \$39.95.)**

John Bezis-Selfa has made a significant contribution to understanding the development of American ironworkers from the industry's beginnings in Colonial Virginia, until well into the era of the Early Republic. He starts with a succinct description of the various steps in making iron: converting wood into charcoal, quarrying iron ore and limestone, separating "pig" iron from the ore's impurities in charcoal fueled smelting furnaces, hammering the somewhat brittle pig iron into malleable bar iron at a forge, and finally selling it to local blacksmiths and other consumers or shipping it to England. He concludes this section by tracing the principal technological changes in iron production into the 1830s.

Turning to his main subject – the evolution of the iron industry's workforce in America – Bezis-Selfa's approach is broad. He includes the adventurers who launched the enterprises, amassed the starting-up capital, built the forges and furnaces and assembled the industry's workers. Also the founders, moulders, forgemasters, colliers, and other skilled workers whose talents used those facilities to turn iron ore, charcoal, and a little limestone or oyster shell into iron pigs, castings, and bars. So, too, are the unskilled woodcutters, miners, teamsters and helpers whose strong arms, legs and backs supplied the essential muscle-power. The chief issues were: 1) recruiting workers to engage in the hard and often unpleasant work of ironmaking, 2) training laborers who previously had labored individually at their own pace to work together in coordinated teams at a pace set by the machines, 3) motivating the workers to produce as much iron as possible as carefully as possible when they did not directly use or consume the product they made; and 4) once trained, how to keep them from leaving to work for other firms or to leave ironmaking altogether.

These problems and their solutions were not uniform either geographically or over time. Accordingly Bezis-Selfa compares and contrasts them in three geographic regions: The Chesapeake (Virginia, Maryland and Delaware), The Middle (Pennsylvania and New Jersey) and New England (principally Massachusetts), and through three time periods, the Colonial Era, the American Revolution and the Early Republic. In addition to changing ironworkers' attitudes and work habits (the so-called "Industrious Revolution"), the author weighs the industry's impact on their family lives, their psychology and their religion.

To my knowledge, no one has examined more of the usual obvious sources (time-books, tonnage and casting records, company-store accounts, individual firm archives, and letters and papers of early ironmasters). But Bezis-Selfa has probed even further, combing through extensive local court records, state archival collections and hard-to-find local publications of early iron-community historical societies. From these sources he caught rare glimpses of obscure ironworkers (almost none of whom left letters or memoirs) as family members, at leisure, or interacting with their employers, fellow workers and others among whom they lived. The thirty-six pages of citations should be helpful to others researching this or related fields. *New Jersey History* readers will appreciate the thorough index, useful for locating information on the iron industry in their state (see "New Jersey: ...," "Batsto Iron Works," "bloomingery forges," "Middle Colonies: ...," "Mount Hope Furnace," etc.

Space allows for brief summaries of two of the many themes discovered or enriched by this study. From the initial settlement at Jamestown onward, iron was in great demand. Native Americans produced none and iron imported from England was costly and hard to obtain. Adventurers attempting to produce iron in America found among the settlers few if any experienced ironworkers or people willing to engage in that work. In Virginia an attempt was made to use indentured servants, but they ran off to easier work growing tobacco. Next Native Americans (presumably to Christianize and “civilize” them) were coerced into iron-making. That ended with the general massacre of white settlers in 1622. African slaves worked out best, and a few of them had previously worked in iron in Africa. In New England the Puritan settlers were chiefly farmers or former tradesmen with no desire to work at iron furnaces or forges. It was proposed to employ converted Indians and later Scots and Irish prisoners of war. Both failed. Finally, in desperation, New England adventurers enticed with special favors, experienced ironworkers from England. But they were rough, crude, foul-mouthed, hard-drinking, non-Puritans who did not fit in, as many court entries show. Ultimately, with some compromising, Puritan society edged the ironworkers towards a more Puritan life-style.

The coerced slaves, as they became familiar with iron furnace and forge work, also were gaining in status and increased freedom. Ironmasters, who wanted and needed their services without the cost and problems of owning slaves, began hiring slaves with iron-making ability from their owners, usually on a year-to-year basis. If they abused or angered the hired slave, the slave would complain to his or her owner and object to being rehired by that employer the next year. As these practices became more common both north and south, the skilled ironworking black bargained more like his white counterpart.

Forging America is well-written. Given that each problem in each area and time period was resolved in various ways by different ironmasters, could have resulted in a tangle of “this happened, and then that, etc. . . .” Instead the author arranged the incidents into meaningful themes. His frequent quoting of words and phrases from these early periods adds richness and flavor. Reading the book is both interesting and informative. Only in his eight-page “Conclusion: Legacies of Anglo America’s Industrious Revolution” does the author over-reach. He argues, with too little explication, that there are lessons from how American ironworkers developed between 1620 and 1830 that might well be applied to the current debates over industrial globalization. That far-fetched notion in no way invalidates an otherwise excellent book.

Gerald G. Eggert, Professor of American History, Emeritus, The Pennsylvania State University

***The Making of Princeton University: From Woodrow Wilson to the Present.* By James Axtell. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. xxxii, 614 pp. Illustrations, notes, selected bibliography, index. \$35.00.)**

James Axtell’s *The Making of Princeton University: From Woodrow Wilson to the Present* is an elegantly written and superbly researched history of Princeton University since 1896. Although Axtell is best known for his prize-winning scholarship in ethno-history and Colonial American history, he has also published several works in the history of education, and his love for this area of scholarship is quite apparent. Indeed, this book is a joy to read, chock full of surprising insights, splendid anecdotes, and careful analysis of nearly every major area of the University. Even the footnotes are fun to read.



Reviews

After that opening, you may wonder if (a) I work in the Princeton alumni office; or (b) I am Axtell's son-in-law; or (c) I spend my life reading college histories for fun. I can assure you that nobody in my family has ever attended or worked at Princeton and I am not related to Professor Axtell. On the other hand, I have written a two-volume history of Middlebury College (and loved doing it), and I have read countless institutional histories. So I can say with some authority that Axtell's work is much better than almost every institutional history I have read.

The reasons for the superiority of his work are due only in part to the outstanding quality of his writing and research, and the fact that he is a first-rate historian. To begin with, this is not a "house" history. Axtell was trained at Yale and Cambridge, and brings to his task the advantages of an outsider, particularly objectivity and the knowledge of other similar institutions. Comparative analysis is absolutely critical if one is to determine what is peculiar to an institution, and Axtell does an excellent job of distilling Princeton's uniqueness by numerous comparisons with other appropriate leading American universities.

Second, he has consciously rejected the manner in which college histories are usually organized. Rather than writing a chronologically linear history based on successive presidential administrations, he has, instead, written a series of distinct, but related, thematic chapters that present the most important aspects of the University's history: the creation of a world-class faculty; the evolution of the modern Princeton curriculum; the changing demographics, extracurricular interests, and cultural expression of the student body; the history of the Library; and the founding and development of the Museum, the Graduate School, and the Princeton University Press. In this way, the thematic histories are not split up into small parts of each President's administration, and Axtell has no qualms about wandering back and forth chronologically as he explicates a particular theme. It is true there is some repetition and the reader may feel a little lost at times, but this is, on the whole, superior to other methods.

Third, he has utilized to good effect his skills as an ethnohistorian to examine, among other things, the customs of the students. He has lively sections, for example, on the changes in student dress, speech, religion, activism, and pranks.

Fourth, Axtell gives Princeton lots of plaudits and credit, which it richly deserves, and he very much admires the school and the great majority of its leaders over the past century. But that does not keep him from chronicling the less laudatory parts of the school's history: the long history of racial and religious quotas in admissions; the deleterious effects of the "bicker" system employed through much of the twentieth century by the powerful upper-class eating clubs in choosing its members; and the difficult problem Princeton continues to face in finding men and women who can uphold Princeton's athletic superiority and still perform at least adequately in the classroom.

Finally, Axtell effectively ties the many themes of the book together by presenting Woodrow Wilson's vision for the University, and then testing throughout the book to what extent that vision has been realized. This device focuses the reader's attention on important long-term changes. The traditional view is that Wilson lost two critical battles during his Presidency of Princeton (1902-1910): his plan for the residential quads that he dreamed would democratize the undergraduate college was blocked; and the graduate school he hoped would bring an intellectual seriousness to the entire institution was built, against his wishes, far away from the undergraduate campus. But while

some of his short-term goals were not reached, his over-arching objective of making Princeton into a university of distinction (not just excellence) has been fulfilled, and Axtell does a superb job of telling us how Wilson's dream came true.

I have just a few quibbles with this outstanding book, and I'll mention two of them. First, Axtell gives the school's leaders a good deal of credit for the relative lack of disharmony (compared to other major universities) during the student rebellions of the Vietnam era. Although he mentions the conservative nature of the student body, relative to other schools, I don't think he assigns that variable enough importance. Those of us who were involved in the national student and anti-war movements at that time were very aware of how relatively conservative Princeton's student body was compared to Harvard, Yale, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Chicago. There were some excellent administrators at those schools, too, but they faced much more radical student leaders. I believe if the Princeton leaders had been forced to deal with the students at, say, Chicago, Michigan, or Wisconsin (where I did my undergraduate and graduate work at that time), I suspect they would have been no more successful.

My second complaint is the relative lack of information on town-gown relations. Princeton is an internationally renowned institution, but its growth and success have certainly had an impact on central New Jersey. I don't sense that Axtell was particularly interested in that question, or in related questions such as the view local residents might have had of the college over time, the relations between lower-paid staff (who may live nearby) and the rest of the University's employees, or how students interact with the community.

But those are minor concerns. This is a terrific book, and I highly recommend it. Princeton University Press has done a commendable job, as well, and should be congratulated on publishing this handsome volume. But, just to be clear, this is not a coffee table history: there are relatively few illustrations, and it's pretty long. It is not meant to be thumbed through quickly; rather, it is meant to be read, and it should be.

David M. Stameskin, Franklin & Marshall College

***Mysteries of my Father.* By Thomas Fleming. (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2005. x, 341 pp., illustrations. \$24.95.)**

An author of more than forty books of history and historical fiction, Thomas Fleming has now given his readers an insightful memoir of growing up in Jersey City with a tough father who was one of the lynchpins of Frank Hague's political organization. As the Democratic boss of the Sixth Ward, Teddy Fleming served the machine successively as chairman of the Hudson County Board of Freeholders, as a judge of criminal court (even though he only had an eighth-grade education), and as sheriff of Hudson County during the 1940s. Flemington's narrative, based upon archival sources as well as on memory, traces three generations of Flemings and Dolans, the family of his mother Katherine.

Fleming's memoir of growing up amid the trials and tribulations of a sometimes dysfunctional family will remind readers of *Angela's Ashes* by Pulitzer Prize winner Frank McCourt. They are about the same age having been born right before the start of the Great Depression. McCourt's family, recent



immigrants, returned to Ireland, while Fleming's father and mother were both born in the United States. McCourt did not return to New York City until he was 19.

For an historian, the most interesting parts of *An Irish American Memoir* deal with Teddy Fleming's relationship to the Hague machine. From before World War I until several years after World War II, Frank Hague ran Jersey City with an iron hand and on several occasions extended his rule to the state of New Jersey, helping to elect several Democratic governors and becoming the main coordinator of New Deal aid to the state. Fleming describes the machine through the eyes of his father and mother. For Teddy, who was one of the most successful of the ward leaders in getting out the vote, Hague provided a chance to provide a middle-class lifestyle for his family despite a limited education and a failed athletic career. Katherine, an educated school teacher, felt Hague was everything she hated: a barely literate corrupt politician who gave respectable Irish a bad name.

Thomas Fleming, whose father was able to give him the education he never had, spent many years of his adulthood trying to work out this conflict between his parents. Only gradually did he come to realize that Hague was part of the process by which the Irish gained acceptance in America and won a place for them among the dominant Protestant society which had done much to keep them in a subordinate position. So in the end, the author lovingly accepted his father's participation in the corrupt politics of the Jersey City of Frank Hague.

In writing about an important chapter in New Jersey history, Fleming has combined his memories of his father with a historian's search for meaning in the past. For me he has succeeded in adding an interesting and useful account of urban New Jersey. As a child a few years younger than Fleming growing up in Jersey City, I was a recipient of the aid often dispensed by the Frank Hague to the poor living in the city. At age five, I had a ruptured appendix with peritonitis and was saved from death in the Jersey City Medical Center, one of the most modern facilities of its kind in the United States. Because my father was an active Democrat, his cost for the six weeks I spent in the hospital was only a few dollars. This incident left me with as warm a spot in my heart for the working of the Hague machine so often attacked by historians of urban America.

Herbert Ershkowitz, Temple University