

North American Odyssey: Historical Geographies for the Twenty-first Century. CRAIG E. COLTEN and GEOFFREY L. BUCKLEY, eds. Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. Pp. xiv + 445, maps, diagrams, index. \$65.00 paper. ISBN 978-1-4422-1585-6.

The history of historical geography has been marked by the regular appearance of books reassessing the subject and pointing toward the future. Nearly all such retrospectives, including the present volume, begin with Carl O. Sauer's, "Foreword to Historical Geography," which was his presidential address to the Association of American Geographers given at Baton Rouge in 1940. By the sixth sentence Sauer had revealed his purpose. "We can hardly claim to be getting our chief intellectual stimulus from one another," he wrote, "waiting impatiently on the research of colleagues as needed for our own work." And he continued, "So long as we are in such a condition of uncertainty about our major objectives and problems, attempts must be made from time to time to give orientation to ourselves along a common course." *North American Odyssey* continues this tradition of seeking a common course just as it illustrates Sauer's observation regarding "uncertainty about our major objectives."

In the usual application of the labels we all use, Carl Sauer is rarely called an historical geographer. As perhaps the only American geographer who needed no label, Sauer delved deeply into the past to find satisfactory answers to the questions that interested him. James J. Parsons once recalled that Sauer's North America course at Berkeley was "relentlessly historical," and "had Daniel Boone 'peeping over the crest of the Appalachians' at the term's final lecture" (*Annals*, AAG, March, 1979, p. 11). Ralph Brown's classic *Historical Geography of the United States* (1948) made no mention of a Civil War for the simple reason that it took place after the period Brown wrote about. Did historical geography require a buffer, a gap in the record of a century or more, between its own focus and that of, say, the economic geographer whose research only extended back to the previous Census? It is a foolish question, but one that I suspect has been the subject of heated discussions in doctoral examinations and faculty meetings.

No answer to the "what is historical?" question will be found in this volume, nor is there much interest in it nowadays. Instead, Editors Craig E. Colten and Geoffrey L. Buckley sensed what they call "the need for a fresh tack" and asked their authors to prepare chapters "based on topical and methodological approaches." The result, predictably, is an amplification of the uncertainty about objectives that Sauer identified.

Both the old and the new are included among these twenty-two essays and more than a few echo what geographers wrote about in times past. Karl Raitz brings back the free-wheeling urban system models developed by John R. Borchert. Michael Conzen's essay is reminiscent of what once interested James E. Vance, Jr. Geoffrey Smith and Andrew Sluyter present graphical models of diffusion and flows reminiscent of the many contributions made by Terry Jordan-Bychkov and Donald W. Meinig. Land survey systems have survived the test of time and are illustrated in the chapters by Timothy Anderson and William Wyckoff.

New directions include chapters on urban planning by Edward K. Muller and Jasper Rubin who add a perspective that surely belongs under the heading of historical geography. African-Americans are brought into the picture by Derek Alderman, Joshua Inwood, and E. Arnold Modlin, Jr. Tourism, Native Americans, gender, wilderness preservation, wildlife, labor, and environmental justice add still more chapters to the already broad array of subjects. But apart from a brief mention in the chapter by Mona Domosh, house types seem to have disappeared from the geographer's landscape, as have barns, fences, and nearly everything rural and agricultural. A focus on images and icons, supported by black-and white photographs of the sort found in numerous archives, has replaced the former emphasis on data and maps. Material culture, once regarded as a key to tracing historical lineages, is reduced to icon status as well.

Broad though the scope of this collection is, there are some puzzling gaps. One gets the sense that historical geography has become more of a teaching subject than a research orientation and that “themes” have taken the place of research questions. Historical geographers in times past were proficient data manipulators, but the authors of *North American Odyssey* make little use of the routine data analysis techniques that are now clickable on everyone’s computer. What would historical geographers of old been able to accomplish had the Excel spreadsheet been available to them? (One can imagine the delight Andrew Clark would have had using a spreadsheet to calculate sheep-swine ratios in Nova Scotia.) Historical data are available to all of us, free of charge, and in downloadable form that can be copied, cut, and pasted straight into a GIS mapping program, but there is little hint that this matters in historical geography. Advances in biological genetics made possible by genome mapping have answered questions about agricultural origins and dispersals that intrigued Carl Sauer and his students. That research should interest today’s historical geographers, but none of it is mentioned in this volume.

One has to agree with the editors (p. 1) that *North American Odyssey* proves that historical geography is “alive and well,” but it seems to have been shorn of the big questions that once guided it. Will reorganization around popular themes in current geographical scholarship guarantee the subject’s future? One will have to wait another decade or two – for the next volume in what has become something of a series – to learn the answer.

John C. Hudson
Northwestern University