

Making American history great again



Washington Times, Book Review By Michael Taube, August 13, 2019,

“Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story,” Encounter Books, By Wilfred M. McClay \$35, 259 pages

In May, The Wall Street Journal published an intriguing interview between Naomi Schaefer-Riley and intellectual historian Wilfred M. McClay.

The University of Oklahoma professor’s goal for his then-upcoming book was to be the “antidote” to Howard Zinn’s “A People’s History of the United States” (1980). In his view, Mr. Zinn’s leftist book had been “greatly oversimplifying the past and turning American history into a comic book melodrama in which ‘the people’ are constantly being abused by ‘the rulers.’” Previous accounts were “unedifying and lacking in larger perspective,” he told Mrs. Schaefer-Riley, which meant “Zinn’s sweeping melodrama looks good by comparison. Zinn’s success is indicative of our failure. We have to do better.”

To Mr. McClay’s credit, he does just that — and more.

“Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story” is a literary triumph on the rise of the American phoenix as a champion of democracy, liberty and freedom. The author explains in his introduction, “Hope has both theological and secular meanings, spiritual ones as well as material ones.”

Readers shouldn’t be surprised “to discover that many of our heroes turn out to be deeply flawed human beings,” and a “land of hope will also sometimes mean being a land of dashed hopes.”

Nevertheless, he feels “nothing about America better defines its distinctive character than the ubiquity of hope,” and “[e]ven those who are bitterly critical of America, and find its hopes to be delusions, cannot deny the enduring energy of those hopes and are not immune to their pull.”

The rich, detailed moments of U.S. history will be familiar to academics and enthusiasts alike. What’s remarkably refreshing is the author’s ability to describe these events with honesty, integrity and, in the appropriate moments, hope and opportunity.

There have been moments of darkness in America’s path to greatness, including racism and a bloody civil war that tore apart families. Mr. McClay doesn’t varnish the truth, but shows how Americans were able to overcome these obstacles, learn from past mistakes and ultimately march on the right path.

In chapter after chapter, history is depicted through a clear lens rather than rose-colored glasses.

For instance, the French and Indian War was won by the British in 1763, but the “waging and results had produced a surge of pride among American colonials.”

Indeed, the “shared experience of war generated in many of them the first stirrings of American national sentiment, the feeling that there was something more than just their shared British language and cultural heritage that bound them together.”

Mr. McClay notes that “Slavery is as old as human history.” It was a horrible practice, but “not exclusively a southern phenomenon” since it was once permitted in every state. He acknowledges the huge contradiction in Thomas Jefferson and George Washington owning slaves, and correctly notes the former “agonized over his complicity with slavery” until he opposed it late in life. Why did this happen?

In the historian’s view, “each of us is born into a world that we did not make, and it is only with the greatest effort, and often at very great cost, that we are ever able to change that world for the better.”

The Old South is portrayed as a “deeply baffling picture.” While it had “many elements of beauty and graciousness, learning and high culture, piety and devotion,” the problem was the mixture also included “elements of ugliness and brutal dehumanization.” He also puckishly includes the prominent pro-slavery Virginian apologist George Fitzhugh’s assessment that capitalism and liberalism were bad for American society, and “slavery is a form, and the very best form, of socialism.” There are many other fascinating assessments in “Land of Hope.”

Abraham Lincoln is described by Mr. McClay as an “uncommon common man born to humble frontier circumstances who rose in the world by dint of his sheer determination and effort.” There’s admiration for immigrants and the “enormous courage, or desperation, to make the step into something completely unknown.”

He praises the Great American Songbook, “which would be, with jazz, one of the surpassing musical achievements of American culture.” He suggests calling the United States “isolationist” during World War II wasn’t accurate, but rather it was “reverting to a traditional policy of acting selectively and unilaterally, with the national interest foremost in its mind.”

The American essence has been brilliantly captured and portrayed with wit, charm and elegance in Mr. McClay’s book. Hence, it’s a welcome replacement for Mr. Zinn’s tired, negative apologia that has incorrectly defined the United States for too long.

Michael Taube is a frequent contributor to The Washington Times.

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