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## Book Review of Christopher Collier, Connecticut's Public Schools: A History, 1650-2000

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## BOOK REVIEWS

CHRISTOPHER COLLIER. *Connecticut's Public Schools: A History, 1650-2000*. Orange, CT: Clearwater Press, 2009. Pp. xxii, 873, illustrations, bibliography, index, \$200 (ISBN 978-0-578-01661-0)

Though the heft of this volume may be daunting, reading it is well worth the effort. Collier's self-described "monstrous tome" (651) tells a compelling story of elementary and secondary public schooling in Connecticut. Spanning nearly four centuries, the book does an admirable job of weaving together tales from external political debates with the lives of teachers and students inside classrooms. While Collier writes that his intent was "to help the general public learn how our public school developed," this is not a celebratory history (xx). Unlike so many institutional accounts that merely offer a glorified tale of a long steady march toward educational progress, Collier directly challenges popular historical myths of Connecticut's allegedly superior public school system. In doing so, his book also achieves a secondary goal of questioning whether leading historians of education have correctly interpreted the evolution of schooling in this state, relative to the entire New England region.

Collier delivers over twenty-three topical chapters organized in a chronological framework, with a recurring theme: "the refusal of [Connecticut] voters to put their money where their mouths were" (20). He interprets the Code of 1650, which allowed towns to charge property taxes and/or tuition to support local teaching arrangements, as an "unfunded mandate" that deserves less credit than it earned outside the colony (16). "Thrifty—indeed, parsimonious—Connecticut taxpayers overlooked nothing that might save themselves taxes to support schooling" (19). Similarly, the state's 1795 school fund, which supposedly would generate school revenue from western land sales, "was the basis for both Connecticut's unique reputation for fine public schools and the root cause of the degradation of those schools," because small locally operated districts deluded themselves into believing that higher quality education could be achieved without taxing themselves (53). In contrast to historian Carl Kaestle and others who found some merit in the local democracy of nineteenth-century common schools, Collier points to the "miserly penny-pinching of close-fisted Yankee yeomen" (58), and partisan politics that frustrated Henry Barnard, Connecticut's first education commissioner. Although Connecticut eventually adopted tuition-free schooling in 1868, the state board of education typically blamed

immigrant parents for failing to comply with compulsory school laws, rather than directly challenge businesses that employed minors to reduce operating costs. Progressive-era state education officials consolidated rural districts and created comprehensive high schools in the name of efficiency, yet one-room schoolhouses, and their romanticized views of quality education, died a very slow death.

In the post-World War II era, Collier's book reveals how fiscal disagreements took on new forms. Labor disputes over collective bargaining rights between nascent teachers' unions and local boards of education grew out of the 1945 Equal Pay Law that prohibited gender discrimination. Connecticut's reliance on property taxes, "the nightmare of every rural legislator" (582), created steeper inequalities with increasing suburbanization and racial segregation. Despite an apparent legal victory for school finance equity with the 1970s Horton cases, the Connecticut General Assembly "continued to shortchange" the education funding formula, even during the large budget surpluses of the 1990s (610). The author concludes that, contrary to outward appearances, Connecticut citizens "rarely had the excellent schools they believed they had and were reputed to have around the country" (657). From the 1820s to the 1920s, Connecticut spending per pupil fell behind neighboring New England states, as well as many Midwestern and Western states. Although Collier concedes that his book is not a detailed comparative study, he argues that "the shameful condition of public education throughout most of [the state's] history is notable," and the severe underfunding of public schooling across nearly all towns is "the dominant fact of Connecticut's educational history" (658). As a reader, I had hoped that Collier might further explore an important shift that appears to have taken place during his study. In place of nineteenth-century "closefisted Yankee yeomen" who refused to fund public schools, in the late twentieth century we begin to see homebuyers who willingly pay higher private housing costs (and property taxes) to gain access to public schools in elite suburban districts. How has Connecticut's history of public school funding battles responded to these changes in the post-war housing market?

While fiscal battles represent the "externals" of schooling, the "heart" of Collier's story is the quality of teaching and learning that occurred inside classrooms. Selected chapters and sections delve as far into this topic as permitted by his source materials: archival curricular materials and first-hand recollections by teachers and students. But the author's ability to draw rich connections between external forces and internal processes of schooling reaches limits. Furthermore, the book does not paint as vivid a picture of tensions between immigrant families and public schools as does a related work of Connecticut history by Steven Lassonde, *Learning to Forget: Schooling and Family Life in New Haven's Working Class, 1870-1940* (2005). Nevertheless, Collier has brought together what may be the most extensive collection of primary and secondary source materials for any single-state educational history of this scope. Librarians will need to decide whether to place it in the stacks or on the reference shelf. The book includes over 150 pages of bibliographic source material and detailed notes, drawn from Collier's work as Connecticut's State Historian from 1984 to 2004, and also his role as an expert witness in the *Sheff v. O'Neill* school segregation lawsuit.

Collier also inserts an autobiographical sketch into the text that offers a personal context to his historical interpretation. Readers see a 1947 photo of the author, the sole male student (and only aspiring high school educator) in his local Future Teachers of America club. Collier dedicated the book to "all those real professionals in Connecticut's public school classrooms" and readily acknowledges "my teacher bias" (xxi). Moreover, he concludes his book with a very personal call of praise for the classroom teacher, "the heart of our system," for transforming students into educated citizens first, and gainfully employed workers second. While teachers remain absolutely central to public education and any attempts to reform it, Collier expresses his deep concern that teachers' work has been "severely disadvantaged by a centuries-old tradition of underfunding our public schools," particularly in major cities that have been "negatively impacted by social forces beyond the control of government" (651). In the last two pages, the author briefly proposes a model for the professionalization of teacher training: an undergraduate liberal arts degree, followed by a three-year graduate program and mentored practicum "as rigorous as that found at a good law school" (659). While Connecticut's Public Schools stands out as a classic text that will be consulted by future generations of scholars, historians, school leaders, and lawyers, it remains to be seen whether such a weighty volume will find its way into the hands of Collier's ideal audience: classroom teachers at the early stage of their careers.

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BRIANN G. GREENFIELD. *Out of the Attic: Inventing Antiques in Twentieth-Century New England*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009. Pp. 266, 31 illustrations. \$26.95 paper (ISBN: 978-1-55849-710-8). \$80 library cloth (ISBN: 978-1-55849-709-2).

Family heirlooms, emblems of national accomplishment, symbols of personal status, or clues to our regional identities—what is the value of those antiques that have preoccupied antiquarians, decorators, and market-makers throughout the twentieth century? Briann Greenfield, associate professor of history and coordinator of the Program in Public History at Central Connecticut State University, takes readers on a journey through the evolving perceptions of "antiques" in American life. While focusing on household furnishings, this is not a history of the study of "decorative arts" or house museums, although the book offers some delightful insights into these topics. This is, instead, a consideration of the changing dynamics in collecting and exhibiting American antiques.

This story matters, Greenfield reminds us, because "decisions about which historic artifacts a museum should save and celebrate and which it should allow to decay and be forgotten are political ones, reflecting judgments about who and what matters most." Early collectors, including an important circle of collectors in the Hartford area late in the nineteenth century, prized historic American objects as "memory markers," valuable because of their association with leaders in a family or community's past. Early in the twentieth century, these objects were transformed into commercial commodities through the efforts of collectors, curators, and dealers who emphasized the object's visual attributes, rather than its family association.

This separation of the object from its historical association allowed aesthetic properties to determine the cultural, political, and financial value of the antique. Greenfield argues that the resulting rise in the market for American antiques in the mid-twentieth century was congruent with the increasing nationalism of the United States and part of a growing consumerism in American society. A burgeoning retail structure, including antique shops and trade associations and a new era of middle-class collecting reinforced the separation of historic objects from their local associations, "making way for a new nationally based, patriotic culture," based on the household furnishings of a powerful elite. The apotheosis of high style furniture for the elite was realized when an eighteenth century secretary desk made for Rhode Island merchant John Brown was sold at auction for \$12 million. In contrast, by the 1960s, the exhibits of Malcolm Watkins at the Smithsonian Museum of American History re-defined the value of historical objects with a new focus on the contributions of ordinary Americans, ethnic diversity, and craft traditions.

Greenfield begins with an analysis of the shift from associational value to aesthetic value in the early twentieth century, drawing on a wealth of primary materials including ads and dealer inventories. Her thesis is then explored through chapter-long "case studies" of dealers, collectors and curators who were active in establishing notable collections and public displays of American antiques.