

Comptes rendus — Book Reviews

Lynn Abrams — *Workers' Culture in Imperial Germany: Leisure and Recreation in Rhineland and Westphalia*. London and New York: Routledge, 1992. Pp. ix, 214.

Since the 1970s, the study of past leisure activities has made the transition from antiquarian pursuit to recognized component of social and cultural history. British historians have been at the forefront of this development, focusing in particular on the fate of traditional popular amusements in an ever more urban and industrial setting, the successes and failures of campaigns to induce workers at play to forsake the disreputable for the respectable, and the proliferation of innovative commercial ventures launched by increasingly influential entertainment entrepreneurs. In her concise and informative first book, Lynn Abrams takes insights garnered from British research and applies them to the German past.

In her study, Abrams emphasizes activities German workers chose for themselves over those prescribed for them by governmental authorities, bourgeois reformers, or the labor movement. Indeed, a central theme of her work is the limited effectiveness of many pre-World War I efforts — including those of self-proclaimed labor leaders — to reshape proletarian culture to fit the expectations and preferences of others. Abrams, setting herself the task of writing history from below, stresses the distinction between workers' culture and the culture of the labor movement, and makes clear that the former is the central focus of her investigation. She returns repeatedly to the unwillingness of unorganized workers to adopt the labor movement's enthusiasm for cultural improvement.

In her investigation of working-class amusements, Abrams concentrates on Prussia's western industrial provinces of Rhineland and Westphalia. Within those provinces, she pays particular attention to developments in two cities: Düsseldorf and Bochum. She draws extensively upon official reports from the municipal archives of the two towns as well as from the state archive located in Düsseldorf. For Abrams' purpose, Düsseldorf and Bochum offer the advantage of possessing working populations that have been the focus of substantial earlier historical studies. In addition, major differences in the economic and social structure of the two cities permit Abrams to comment upon working-class access to and experience of leisure activities under varied circumstances. Düsseldorf, the more diverse of the two municipalities, was a former princely residence and had an economy based upon the finished-goods industries of the Rhineland. Upstart Bochum — an obscure market town at the beginning of the nineteenth century — rose to prominence as a center of Ruhr heavy industry.

Abrams begins her account of workers' leisure with an inquiry into the survival and transformation of popular festivals from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. She emphasizes the economic and ideological importance of such festivities and the flexibility demonstrated by both celebrants and organizers who adapted these events to their changing needs in the context of industrial class society. Neither

employer displeasure nor the disdain of labor leaders was markedly successful, Abrams notes, in dissuading large segments of the urban working class from indulging in the attractions offered by the numerous fairs and popular festivals that survived in mutated form into the twentieth century.

From festivals, Abrams turns her attention to the recently much-studied topic of taverns and working-class drinking. After considering how much and what workers drank and why, she focuses on efforts by enterprising publicans to keep and expand their clientele by offering an augmented range of tavern-based activities. Increased provisions for dancing, musical and theatrical entertainments, as well as associational meetings and celebrations not only insured the continued centrality of the tavern in the lives of working-class males, but also, Abrams adds, facilitated over time the inclusion of more of their female counterparts. Because Abrams' book deals primarily with those leisure activities workers enjoyed apart from home and family, discussion of women's pastimes remains limited and is confined largely to the concluding chapters.

Given Abrams' insistence upon the independence workers demonstrated in their choice of recreational activities, she has a particular interest in the multiplicity of voluntary leisure associations laborers formed. Why, she asks, have socialist-sponsored recreational, educational, and cultural organizations been studied so much more extensively than have their more numerous counterparts without party affiliation? In the proliferation of associations catering to such interests as those of small-animal breeders, pigeon-fanciers, and gardeners, Abrams sees evidence of vital working-class social-cultural milieus beyond both middle-class intervention and socialist direction.

Workers resistance to social control resulted, according to Abrams, in meager returns for advocates of rational recreation. Abrams gives particular attention to campaigns to establish libraries and public parks. More often than not, she stresses, workers responded to efforts to encourage them to join in what others deemed more wholesome or uplifting activities with either indifference or adaptation of such activities to their own needs and wishes. The presence of workers in city parks, for example, proved more likely to lead to conflicts over how public space was to be used than hoped-for proletarian adoption of a more decorous lifestyle.

While Abrams emphasizes the resistance of workers to the efforts of bourgeois reformers, she stresses the transforming impact of innovations in commercial entertainment such as spectator sports, day excursions, and, most importantly, the cinema. By the early decades of the twentieth century, profit-seeking entrepreneurs, sensitive to the needs and tastes of city dwellers, were acquiring the kind of influence over working-class leisure that had remained beyond the reach of those who had striven for reform from above. Abrams sees the emergent commercial mass culture of the new century as at least partially transcending older class, religious, ethnic, and gender differences, while heightening differences between generations. By the 1920s, she concludes, a new escapist popular culture of the masses, shaped primarily by supply and demand, had come into existence.

Abrams' wide-ranging account, beginning with parish fairs and ending with motion pictures, represents a useful addition to the historical study of German workers' everyday lives. The book also illuminates the changing priorities of certain non-proletarian segments of urban society as they related to festivals and amusements.

The limited insight of both bourgeois reformers and labor leaders into the leisure preferences of unorganized workers is effectively highlighted. Less sharply defined, however, are governmental policies and how and why these changed over time. Perhaps the relative neglect of the interaction between interests of state and the leisure options of individual workers is understandable in a work intended to present history from below and to emphasize the choices of ordinary people, but the subject is important enough to deserve more attention than Abrams gives it. If we are to fully understand popular resistance to elite dictates, we need to be aware of the changing determinants of those dictates and to recognize successes as well as failures on the part of those who struggled to reshape working-class lifestyles.

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Félix Albert — *Immigrant Odyssey. A French-Canadian Habitant in New England*. Orono : University of Maine Press, 1991, 178 p.

Immigrant Odyssey est l'autobiographie de Félix Albert, un Canadien français qui émigra à Lowell, au Massachusetts, en 1881. Analphabète, Félix dicta l'histoire de sa vie à un lettré, peut-être un membre du clergé. Bien que l'histoire de la vie de Félix soit racontée à la première personne, il est impossible d'estimer la part du scribe dans l'élaboration du récit. C'est à l'historienne Frances H. Early, spécialiste des Franco-Américains de Lowell, que nous devons cette édition bilingue du texte d'Albert, originalement intitulé *Histoire d'un enfant pauvre* (1909). Dans une introduction d'une vingtaine de pages, Early met en contexte les données essentielles de la vie de Félix. Arthur L. Eno fils, avocat et érudit lowellois, a fait une traduction anglaise convenable, bien que se soient glissées çà et là des erreurs et qu'il ne rende pas toujours la saveur du texte français.

Félix Albert naquit à l'Isle-Verte en 1843 dans une famille de cultivateurs-bûcherons qui avait peine à joindre les deux bouts. À l'âge de quatorze ans, Félix déménagea avec ses parents et un frère aîné à Saint-Éloi, une paroisse de colonisation située à quelque dix kilomètres de l'Isle-Verte. Les Albert, on s'en doute bien, y connurent une vie difficile, mais avec l'aide de leurs enfants, ils purent éviter plusieurs fois la faillite. En 1866, Félix se maria et établit sa propre maisonnée. Grâce à son éthique du travail et à sa sagacité, il prospéra. Ses récoltes étaient bonnes, son cheptel grossissait et la jeune famille faisait des économies. Pendant la décennie de 1870, Félix devint producteur laitier et engagea même des journaliers. C'est alors qu'une série de déboires, gelée hâtive, prix agricoles à la baisse, sécheresse, l'incitèrent à passer l'hiver dans les chantiers de Caribou, dans le nord du Maine, où son épouse avait un cousin. Toujours entreprenant, Félix apporta avec lui des articles de maison pour vendre sur son chemin. De retour à Saint-Éloi avec l'argent en poche, il vit cette fois son blé ravagé par la rouille. C'en était trop. Comme beaucoup d'autres familles avant et après eux, les Albert, qui étaient au nombre de onze, décidèrent de tenter leur chance en Nouvelle-Angleterre et choisirent comme destination Lowell, un centre textile qui comptait déjà 11 000 Canadiens français.