

Jacob's Well: A Case for Rethinking Family History

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Opie has produced an important book and a new framework for understanding the story, one that is all the more relevant the more virtual our reality becomes.

Jacob's Well: A Case for Rethinking Family History, by Joseph A. Amato. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008. xvi, 279 pp. Illustrations, genealogical chart, notes. \$32.95 cloth.

Reviewer Marjorie L. McLellan is associate professor of history at Wright State University. She is the author of *Six Generations Here: A Farm Family Remembers*.

Reading Joseph Amato's *Jacob's Well*, I realize how rarely I do justice to everyday experience in relation to historical developments and patterns. Amato argues, "Unless we would deny the humanity of our family and the humanistic goal of history, we must not sacrifice families and the individual lives of their members to impersonal laws and generalizations." He describes, for example, the intergenerational experience of first rural and then urban poverty — "they yoked themselves to the perennial condition of the rural poor: never having adequate land or sufficient money until death did them part" — and he imagines the psychological toll of that precarious way of life (135). His research draws on genealogy and local history, along with national and international histories, but he also looks inward to "reconstitute the emotions, sensibilities, motives, beliefs, and metaphors that moved and guided family members" (12).

Cultural historians, sociologists, and folklorists concerned with ethnicity, class, gender, and family will find much to consider here. Of his own grandparents, for example, Amato writes, "Frances and William brought no ethnicity to serve as a social compass and direct them to preferred neighborhoods and churches. Frances's ethnicity, a mixture of English, old American, and Acadian, had long been erased by a succession of migrations, intermarriages, and isolations in the remote countryside" (60). The author circles back to the same characters, the most recent generations, and the individuals who touched his life most directly. At times, his effort to call forth individuals in the round, to evoke their rich personalities and experiences, becomes a bit tedious. On the whole, however, he has brought together the storytelling, characters, contexts, and events in a compelling meditation on the history of the family.

In each chapter, Amato drops a pebble, such as a family photograph, into the stream of memory, and the ripples evoke stories around a theme ranging widely across place — from Sicily and the Canadian Maritimes to rural Wisconsin and then Detroit — and time.

"A Memorable Death, a Common Lot" begins with the image of a young couple, James Boodry and Ellen Frances Sayers, on their wedding day in 1867. Boodry, just turned 19, stares at the camera, eliciting this personal response from the author:

Take him out of his high leather work boots and his baggy, ill-fitting coat, and put him in my high school prom tuxedo, stand him in front of my father's 1956 Chevrolet, and we are one and the same person. Our faces, hands, body, and posture match, although I imagine below his baggy clothing he was far more muscular than I and felt more confident about getting married and taking up a life with a woman, children, horses, sawmills, and the poor fields of central Wisconsin than I had at the same age (128).

Amato seems to shiver as he tells the story of Boodry's violent death; then he goes on to tell of other lives and deaths.

Family stories drive *Jacob's Well*, but, ever the historian, Amato analyzes each life, event, circumstance, and personality trait for organizing themes and explanations (147). In introducing "Jacob, the Rise and Fall of a Plebian Patriarch," Amato reflects on the constraints of writing narrative history. "I am forced," he writes, "to tell the story of this distinct family, composed of unique individuals and different ethnicities, which experienced the formation of modern industrial society and the birth of mass popular culture, principally as a simple story: the rise and fall of an immigrant" (147). We are "born out of our biological inheritance and made of material conditions, local circumstances, and historical change" (244). In his portrayal, wider economic change, as well as the family's poverty, pressed all around the struggling Boodry family: "the city came to them before they went to the city. It entered their hearts and lives in the form of new needs, fresh wants, and novel and unimagined innovations. It came by the medium of the Sears catalogue" (139).

Amato's account is deeply personal and reflective: wrapping up this project, he was both ecstatic and exhausted. The lived experiences of his family, embodied in family stories and ingrained in personalities, have shaped and given meaning to his own life. This is particularly evident when he calls forth the threads of religious faith woven through past and present. Angered by James Boodry's life and death, Amato shouts, "God, why do you let us, our kind, die the worst of deaths!" (145). While he presents a well-documented family history, Amato acknowledges that, "in effect, I had to discover and invent them, remember and resurrect them" (12). In *Jacob's Well*, Amato makes the case for rethinking how we look at our own family stories as well as rethinking how we conceive of the diversity of family experiences in American history.