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A Short History of Wisconsin

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A Short History of Wisconsin, by Erika Janik. Madison. Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2010. 251 pp. Illustrations, maps, essay on sources and suggestions for further reading, index. \$18.95 paper.

Reviewer John D. Buenker is professor of history emeritus at the University of Wisconsin–Parkside. His books include volume four of the Wisconsin Historical Society's multivolume *History of Wisconsin*.

Erika Janik has written a fascinating introduction to Wisconsin history by employing two ingenious devices. The first is to intertwine, in each of her 22 chapters, the chronological and the topical in a manner that is mutually reinforcing and intellectually stimulating. The second is to give readers the tools to satisfy that intellectual stimulation by linking each chapter to a specific section of her 30-page "Essay on Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading." Each section is deliberately limited to the time period and topics covered in the corresponding chapter and "focuses for the most part on items that I found most reliable, useful, and representative" (209). Although her suggestions appear only in the section in which they are first relevant, "many of the items pertain to issues in multiple chapters" (209).

By way of example, the second chapter, titled "Fortunes Made of Fur," encompasses the years from the "discovery" of Wisconsin at Green Bay by Jean Nicolet in 1634 to the Peace of Paris in 1783, which made Wisconsin part of the United States, at least on paper. The pervading theme is the profound impact that the French and British fur traders had upon the land and on the Native Americans, to whom they brought "war, disease, and new technology" (13). The relevant section of the bibliography leads readers to the *Wisconsin Historical Collection*, the *Jesuit Relations*, and the journals, diaries, letters, and other accounts of explorers and fur traders. To pick a more recent time period, the chapter on World War II links the wartime economic boom, women in the military and the workforce, the 320,000 Wisconsinites who served in the armed forces, and "civilian sacrifices," while the attendant bibliography leads readers to official surveys of the home front, collections of letters and recollections, both print and electronic, as well as several relevant secondary works. Because each chapter has a topical title, industrious readers can also trace long-range trends, such as economic development, ethnic and cultural conflict, and the ongoing political tug-of-war among Progressives, Socialists, Democrats, and Republicans.

Easily the most original parts of the book are the last seven chapters, which analyze developments during the last six decades. Chapter 16, "The Culture of Fear," links the impact of the Korean War, the rise and fall of Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy, and the pervasive

anxiety over Communism and the potential for nuclear warfare. The next chapter, "Migration and Civil Rights," covers the story of African American migration to Wisconsin, the resulting residential and educational segregation, and the contentious struggle over civil rights in Milwaukee. The chapter titled "Vietnam" focuses on the antiwar movement and the Sterling Hall bombing. The "Greening Wisconsin" chapter emphasizes the state's ongoing commitment to conservation, environmentalism, and historic preservation from territorial days to the present. Chapter 20, "The Changing Face of Immigration," examines the influx of Hispanic and Asian immigrants to Wisconsin resulting from the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965. The author acknowledges that "some Wisconsinites, like many white Americans, are troubled by these new groups, even if those who are fearful are not under any particular threat" (186). The chapter "Indian Treaty Rights" surveys the impact of the federal government's schizoid policy toward Native Americans and the conflicts over Indian spearfishing and gaming rights. The last chapter, "Postwar Politics and the Conservative Revolution," examines the rebirth of the Democratic Party out of the ashes of the Progressive and Democratic parties and the emergence of "a new generation of conservative leaders with different ideas about the role and place of government in daily life" (198).

Although the author asserts that Wisconsin's history "is also part of a larger American narrative of development and change" (3), she does not elaborate on how the Badger State fits into that narrative, or how its history compares to that of its neighboring states. In fact, she argues that the drawing of Wisconsin's boundaries made its inhabitants "aware of who they were, where they were, and how they were different from people in other places, even just across the border in Illinois, Minnesota, Iowa, and Michigan" (203). She even acknowledges that, as a newcomer from the Pacific Northwest, she found that Wisconsin's "idiosyncratic charm . . . grabbed hold and never left me" (2). To her credit, however, she also asserts that Wisconsin's story is still being written and rewritten, folding in the customs and traditions of Europeans, Indians, Hispanics, Asians, and African Americans, "and all who call Wisconsin home." In that, certainly, Wisconsin stands resolutely with its sister states.