

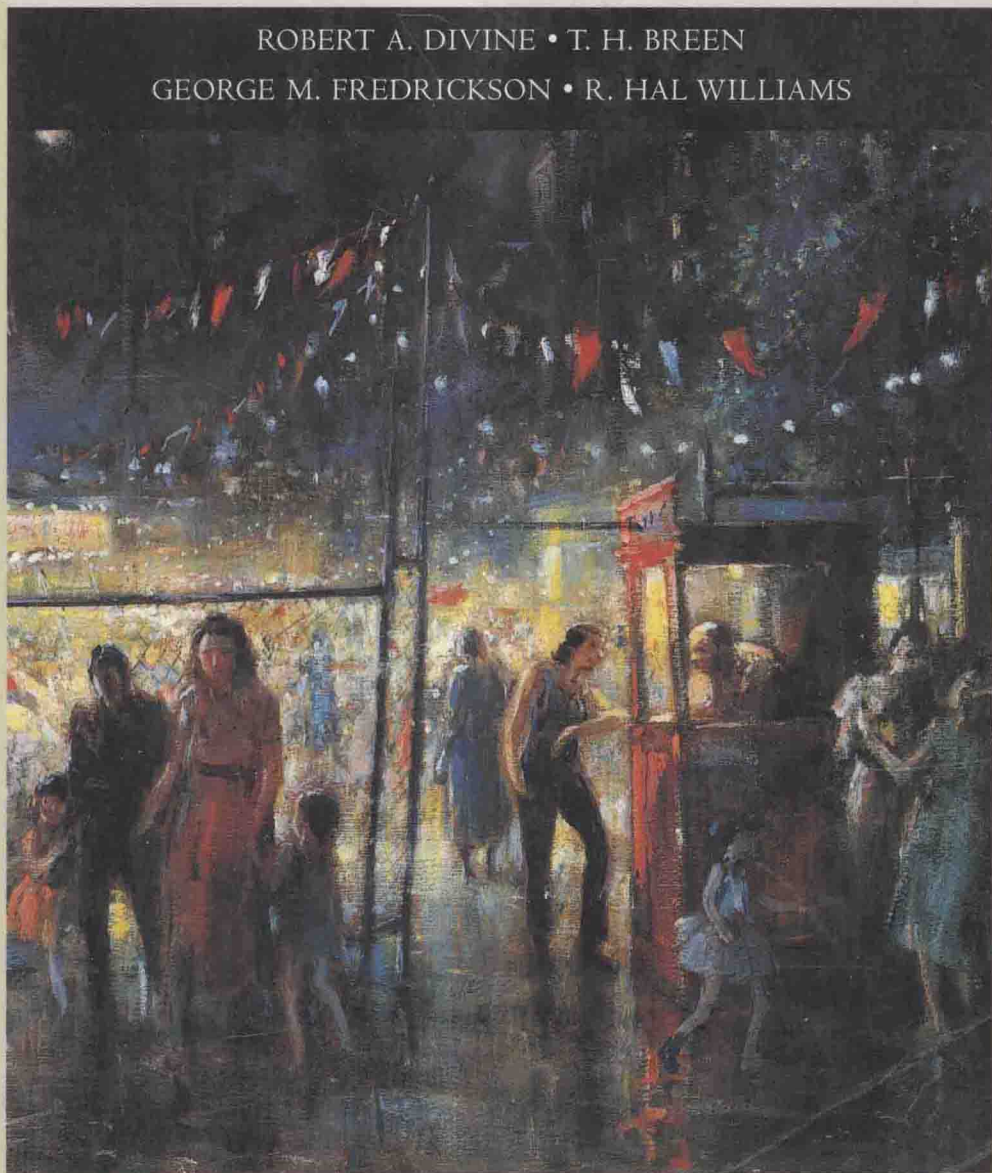


PENGUIN ACADEMICS

THE AMERICAN STORY

Volume Two ♦ Since 1865

ROBERT A. DIVINE • T. H. BREEN
GEORGE M. FREDRICKSON • R. HAL WILLIAMS





Penguin Academics

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VOLUME TWO: SINCE 1865



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PREFACE



For many decades the traditional narratives that framed the story of the United States assumed a unified society in which men and women of various races and backgrounds shared a common culture. In recent years, however, a good many historians have come to believe that traditional narratives stressing the rise of democracy or the advance of free enterprise undervalue the complexity and diversity of the American story. This research makes it hard to sustain a perspective that presumes the inevitability of progress for all men and women and that allows one dominant group to speak for so many others who have struggled over the centuries to make themselves heard. Nevertheless, an awareness that the past is as much about controversy as agreement, as much concerned with diversity as with unity, does not preclude the possibility of a coherent narrative. To create such a narrative while still paying attention to the differences of race and class, ethnicity, and gender is the goal.

The authors of this volume accept the challenge, believing strongly that it is possible to craft a coherent story without silencing difference. We start with the conviction that to tell this story it is essential to listen closely to what people in the past have had to say about their own aspirations, frustrations, and passions. After all, they were the ones who had to figure out how to live with other Americans, many of them totally unsympathetic, even hostile to the demands of others who happened to march to different drummers. Readers of this book will encounter many of these individuals and discover how, in their own terms, they tried to make sense of everyday events connected to family and work, church and community.

We have done our best to avoid the tendency to lump individuals arbitrarily together in groups. It is true, for example, that many early colonists in America were called Puritans, and presumably in their private lives they reflected a bundle of religious values and beliefs known as Puritanism. But we must not conclude that an abstraction—in this case Puritanism—made history. To do so misses the complexity and diversity masked by the abstraction, for at the end of the day, what for the sake of convenience we term Puritanism was in fact a rich, spirited, often truculent conversation among men and women who disagreed to the point

of violence on many details of the theology they allegedly shared. The same observation could be made about other movements in American history—unions or civil rights, political parties or antebellum reform, for example. A narrative that sacrifices the rough edges of dissent in the interest of getting on with the story may propel the reader smoothly through the centuries, but a subtler, more complex tale is more honest about how people in the past actually made events.

Even as we stress the significance of human agency, we resist transforming the long history of the peoples of the United States into a form of highbrow anti-quarianism. The men and women who appear in this book lived for the most part in small communities. Even in the large cities that drew so many migrants after the Industrial Revolution, individuals defined their daily routines around family, friends, and neighborhoods. But it would be misleading to conclude that these people were effectively cut off from a larger world. However strong and vibrant their local cultures may have been, their social identities were also the product of the experience of accommodation and resistance to external forces, many of them beyond their own control. Industrialization changed the nature of life in the small communities. So too did nationalism, imperialism, global capitalism, and world war. In our accounts of such diverse events as the American Revolution, the Civil War, the New Deal, and the Cold War, we seek the drama of history in the efforts of ordinary people to make sense of the demands imposed upon them by economic and social change.

It was during these confrontations—moments of unexpected opportunity and frightening vulnerability—that ordinary Americans came to understand better those processes of justice and oppression, national security, and distribution of natural resources that we call politics. The outcome of international wars, the policies legislated by Congress, and the decisions handed down by the Supreme Court must be included in a proper narrative history of the peoples of the United States since these occurrences sparked fresh controversies. They were the stuff of expectations as well as disappointments. What one group interpreted as progress, another almost always viewed as a curtailment of rights. For some the conquest of the West, a process that went on for several centuries, opened the door to prosperity; for others it brought degradation and removal. The point is not to turn the history of the United States into a chronicle of broken dreams. Rather, we seek to reconstruct the tensions behind events, demonstrating as best we can why good history can never be written entirely from the perspective of the winners.

From the start of the project, we recognized the risk of treating minorities and women as a kind of afterthought, as if their contributions to the defining events of American history were postscripts, to be taken up only after the reader had learned of important battles and transforming elections. Our treatment of

the American Revolution is one example of our balanced and integrated approach to telling the story of the past. Women were not spectators during the war for independence. They understood the language of rights and equality, and while they could not vote for representatives in the colonial assemblies, they made known in other ways their protests against British taxation. They formed the backbone of the boycotts that helped mobilize popular opinion during the prelude to armed confrontation. And they made it clear that they expected liberation from the legal and economic constraints that consigned them to second-class citizenship in the new republic. Their aspirations were woven into every aspect of the American Revolution, and although they were surely disappointed with the male response to their appeals, they deserve—and here receive—attention not as marginal participants in shaping events but as central figures in an ongoing conversation about gender and power in a liberal society.

The story of how African Americans organized after World War II to demand that the nation live up to the promise of the Declaration of Independence offers yet another example of this book's integrated approach. Our account of the civil rights struggle ranges from the eloquent leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., to the key roles played by unheralded blacks in the ranks at Selma and Birmingham. These brave men, women, and children suffered the blows of local sheriffs and the indignity of being swept off the streets by fire hoses, yet their travails ultimately persuaded white America to enact the landmark civil rights laws of the 1960s. The United States has yet to accord African Americans full equality, but the strides taken after World War II constitute a major step toward racial justice. Similarly, the stories of other grand events integrate the hopes and fears of other groups—Native Americans, new immigrants from Third World nations—into what philosopher Horace Kallen once described as “a multiplicity in a unity, an orchestration of mankind.”

An overriding goal in our crafting of this narrative has been to produce a volume that would be enjoyable to read. Striving for this goal, we have sought to avoid the clumsy jargon that can be so irksome to the reader who—like us—believes that good history involves well-told stories. The structure and features of the book are intended to stimulate student interest and reinforce learning. Chapters begin with vignettes or incidents that introduce the specific chapter themes that drive the narrative and preview the topics to be discussed. Our interpretation of the central events of American history is based on the best scholarship of the past as well as the most recent historiography.

Although this book is a joint effort, each author took primary responsibility for a set of chapters. T. H. Breen contributed the first eight chapters, which deal with the long period from the first Indian migrations from Asia some 20,000 years ago to the War of 1812. George M. Fredrickson wrote Chapters 9 through

16, carrying the narrative through the Civil War and Reconstruction. R. Hal Williams was responsible for Chapters 17 through 24, focusing on the industrial transformation and urbanization of the late nineteenth century as well as on the events leading up to America's entry into World War I. Robert A. Divine wrote Chapters 25 through 33, bringing the story through the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War, and ending with the most recent national elections. Each author reviewed and revised the work of his colleagues and helped shape the story into its final form.

The Authors

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