Samuel M. Steward

Reviewed by: Monique Layton
School of Criminology
Simon Fraser University

This review will be as unscholarly as the book itself: first, I will speak of my expectations (but, then, what are titles for if not to create expectations?), and then I will say why the book did not meet them. Half seduced by the “Social History” part of the subtitle, I had made a number of assumptions about it. The first one was that it would adopt an academic approach (ethnomethodology, perhaps?); the second was that the promised “social history” would be based on work done during the period considered but would also certainly encompass a much broader perspective; the third was that an up-to-date bibliography would be provided on this rich subject, well covered, inter alia, in folklore studies. These half-formulated expectations took place before I received the book: the academic bias obviously showed.

The reality is different. The book is the third in a series in gay and lesbian studies, hence showing its own bias. The foreword is by one of the co-authors of the Kinsey Reports, encouraging the reader to follow the author into the tattoo shop, “with all its dangers, pathos, and bathos.” There is no “proper” bibliography, but “A Note on the Literature of Tattooing” constitutes Appendix B: references are to a few older stand-bys, mostly dismissed by the author as not contributing very much to the understanding of tattoo seekers, and to the odd esoteric text sometimes described as “extraordinarily bizarre” or an “interesting curiosity as a coffee-table book.”

The book, published so much later, was originally a diary written over a period of several years by Steward, a former English professor turned tattoo artist, at the invitation of Alfred Kinsey “to see what might be learned about the sexual motivations for getting tattooed.” Thus, unlike most, and more recent, studies on the topic1 where men and women’s self-expression, self-assertion, and body-

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1. The reader interested in the literature on tattoo and tattooing could profitably consult such books as C. Sanders, Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989) and particularly its thorough bibliography. For those intrigued with the visual and artistic experience of the tattoo, B. Attie, N. Monroe & M. Wellner’s videotape (the ideal medium) Skin and Ink: Artists and Collectors would be of interest; failing this, its review by J. Herman in 105:415 J. of American Folklore 83 would provide a fresh perspective.
image constitute the focus of serious analysis, Steward’s book considers almost exclusively the sexual motivation and representation of his “bad boys,” as sifted through the “tattooding” process. Part 4 (pp. 45–80) does address the stated objective. Titled “Sex and the Tattoo: Motivations,” it makes an attempt at tackling its subject. The best we can say about it is not too far from Kinsey’s own assessment of Steward’s contribution: “You may not be a trained scientific observer, but you have a writer’s keen eye.”

Forgetting the initial disappointment and accepting the author’s proud admission that the book is indeed and deliberately not couched in “academic gobbledegook,” the unfortunately narrow focus of sexual motivation, and the obvious wish to titillate of such chapter titles as “Lovely Ladies, Tramps, Dykes, And Farm Wives,” and so on, what can we make of it? And what about that tantalizing “social history”? Well, the book is in great part about Steward himself. But, more interestingly, it is also about the so-called bad boys who, in spite of the alliterative title, appear to be mainly young men somewhat anxious to confirm their manliness. Steward belongs to that presumably rare breed: the literate tattoo artist. On this account, his book should not be entirely dismissed. It dispels the shadows of the world of the tattoo parlour, and the reader, particularly the folklorist reader, might draw some interesting bits of insight (on tattoo artists and hangers-on, the characters involved and their language, the culture of the parlor) from reading it.

I do not agree with Steward’s contention that, had he attempted to produce a more scholarly work, he would have lost “hundreds of anecdotes and illustrative materials,” and that this preservation justifies the paucity of the analysis. Others (of roughly the same vintage as Steward) have very successfully preserved the richness of the field work in their scholarship. Ned Polsky’s material on poolroom hustling, for instance, or Spradley and Mann’s work on the cocktail waitress do not lose the feel of life in their analysis. However, as Steward firmly tells us, the book is entirely “subjective” and we should leave it at that. But, oh, why did it have to call itself a “social history” of anything?

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