Lawrence Samuel’s brief introduction to the “history of American history” offers readers an overview of some of the discourse about the teaching and dissemination of the subject from World War I to the War on Terror. The book is organized chronologically, with the first three chapters covering about two decades each, and the last three focused on a decade apiece. The earlier chapters tend to review the debates over textbooks, and the central question whether “truthful history could build character [the presumed goal of nearly everyone interested in history education] just as well if not better than any fabricated version” (16). Samuel’s exploration of more recent decades takes a somewhat broader view of popular published discourse regarding the role of history and history education in the US.

This is a good and useful book in some ways, and for those with little knowledge of the long-standing debates regarding the teaching of American history it offers a concise and informative introduction to key moments and influential figures. However, readers should temper the expectations raised by the author in the introduction. Samuel informs us at the outset that his is the first cultural history of US history, a surprising claim that is speciously supported by the absence from his bibliography of any historical work from the past two decades. Moreover, despite the assertion that the book relies on “hundreds of different sources,” drawn from all variety of popular culture (7), primarily the book is a digest of opinion pieces published in popular newspapers and magazines. That material has value, and Samuel insightfully analyzes the musings of leading historians, such as C. Vann Woodward and Stephen F. Ambrose, as well as more obscure reporters for major American newspapers, but the method cannot deliver what is promised in the introduction. Only on two or three occasions does Samuel list a few contemporary movies with historical themes, but he offers no further explanation. Museums, historic sites, television and radio are almost completely left out. Disneyland and the Freedom Train get attention, but it is again revealing that no historical works are cited, which means that insights previously provided by scholars are not to be found here. The Smithsonian Institution, the only museum mentioned in the book, appears only in the chapter on the 1990s. Aside from these few examples, this “cultural history” rests on articles published in the popular press (and available online).

Much of the analysis of historians’ ideas about the teaching of American history will be familiar to scholars, though anyone looking for references to that scholarship will be disappointed. Samuel’s discussion of key figures such as Arthur M. Schlesinger and Daniel Boorstin rely exclusively on particular articles that they published in the popular press, with no mention made of their historical scholarship (and how that fit with their ideas about teaching the subject) or their treatment by more recent historians. This is unfortunate, because nearly all of these historians engaged with the public in other ways, including popular book clubs, television and radio programs, and museum work, and by ignoring the existing scholarship Samuel missed an opportunity to tell a much more comprehensive story. An op ed written in 1956 by Dumas...
Malone may reveal something about contemporary ideas, but his expressed approval of popularized versions of the past is much more meaningful when we understand that he was at that time the editor of the History Book Club. Similarly, C. Vann Woodward is quoted through three chapters, but never introduced. At least many readers will have heard of him, but of the various newspaper and magazine reporters who wrote stories about the teaching and learning of American history we are told nothing. Yet they are meant to be representative of widely shared opinion. A single US News reporter’s claim that Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* held particular relevance for the early twenty-first century is apparently all the evidence we need to say that “Tocqueville fever” gripped the nation (and one might challenge, in grammar and fact, the author’s statement that Tocqueville’s central theme was that America was the “most unique country”) (148).

Throughout the book, Samuel shows how prominent historians and other interested individuals engaged with the question of why young Americans have exhibited such a poor understanding of American history. He is dismissive of critics who blame textbooks and teachers, but offers no other explanation other than an offhand remark that perhaps “American students were just not very smart” (49). The initiative that he most clearly favors, Teaching American History (TAH), is held up as an example of what works, but the book ends without clear recommendations for policymakers or teachers other than a suggestion that American history should be added “to the list of subjects that are prioritized in standardized testing,” and a scolding of museums and other institutions for not using social media and new technologies to attract more young people (172).

I remain unsure of the book’s intended readership. If undergraduate students, then the breadth without depth will leave them wondering what to make of these scattered comments by politicians, historians, and journalists. If scholars of American history and memory, then the absence of any historiography would seem to be a severe limitation. If policymakers, what conclusions should they be expected to reach, other than the fact that people have been complaining and arguing about the teaching of American history for a long time? For any reader, the decision not to provide an index makes the book difficult to use. However, even as it stands, the book serves as a useful compendium of major shifts in thinking regarding the role of American history education in American political and social life.

*Department of History, Rhode Island College*

ERIK CHRISTIANSEN