
Rarely does encountering the word “encyclopedia” in the title of a book excite enthusiasm in a prospective reader. The term denotes comprehensiveness, synthesis, and unwavering fealty to a detached, scientific objectivity—all admirable qualities, but not necessarily the ingredients of a page-turner. For this reader, however, *Pennsylvania Germans: An Interpretive Encyclopedia* held the excitement and appeal that a popular bestseller might, not so much because of its encyclopedic nature (a mantle the volume has every right to claim) but rather the other key word in the post-colon title: “interpretive.” This detailed and engaging book offers a richly thoughtful and informative introduction to the state of contemporary Pennsylvania German Studies and should be—perhaps, by now, three years following publication, already is—an essential go-to source for any student or scholar looking to conduct work in the field and seeking direction from a gallery of enthusiastic experts. The publication of this volume renders an important service to Pennsylvania German Studies because of the book’s ability to sum up the current state of the field and, we must hope, catalyze follow-up work in new and exciting areas of scholarly inquiry.

In the preface to the volume, the editors outline four goals for the encyclopedia: first, “to broaden geographic and social coverage from the state of Pennsylvania to the Pennsylvania German diaspora, including settlements in Canada and the West”; second, “to broaden historical coverage to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries”; third, “to broaden cultural coverage usually restricted to language and literature”; and fourth, “to include separate interpretive discussions of popular culture, particularly the tourism, creative, and heritage industries revolving around Pennsylvania Germans” (xi). Key terms and concepts like “diaspora” and “identity” are important to the commentaries offered in this book, suggesting its focus on pushing Pennsylvania German Studies toward more pointed conversation with contemporary issues in the humanities and social sciences.

The volume is divided into two parts, each of which provides an invaluable collection of essays that can serve as useful jumping-off points for explorations of any of a number of aspects of Pennsylvania German life and culture. Part One, titled “History and Geography,” presents three chapters that offer a contextual overview of the history of the people called Pennsylvania Germans. A much lengthier Part Two presents sixteen chapters covering all aspects of Pennsylvania German “Culture and Society,” ranging from topics such as Pennsylvania German language, religion, literature, and education to textiles, furniture, and foodways. The list of contributors to the volume comprises a veritable pantheon of scholars of Pennsylvania German Studies working today. The editors, Simon J. Bronner of the Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg, and Joshua R. Brown of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, provide a useful historiographical orientation in their introduction, and Bronner offers two essays on folk life and popular culture in the second part of the volume (Brown, with Karen M. Johnson-Weiner, also offers an essay on the history of the Amish). Venerable scholars and academics including Mark Häberlein, John B. Frantz, Mark Louden, Sheila Rohrer, Donald Kraybill, Steven Nolt, Edsel Burdge, Jr., and Diane Wenger provide insights into complex historical issues that should be considered in every study of Pennsylvania German people, namely migration patterns, linguistic history, religion, and cultural identity. Highly regarded
museum professionals, material culturists, and social historians including Candace Kintzer Perry, Lisa Minardi, David W. Kriebel, R. Troy Boyer, Yvonne J. Milspaw, and Gabrielle Lanier offer surveys of a range of landscape studies and material culture genres and media, including furniture, textiles, architecture, works on paper, foodways, and agricultural patterns. William W. Donner, a respected anthropologist who focuses on Pennsylvania Germans, along with Simon J. Bronner, share important insights at the end of the volume regarding the resonance of Pennsylvania German culture in collective memory and popular media. Together, the essays comprise a robust, kaleidoscopic view on this important cultural subset.

What portrait emerges of the Pennsylvania Germans, and the scholarship that has grown up around them, from a systematic reading of the essays in this volume? And what, interpreted collectively, do the essays suggest about next steps forward for the field? Pennsylvania Germans: An Interpretive Encyclopedia highlights the immense possibilities and persistent challenges that the scholarly enterprise of Pennsylvania German Studies faces. First, the most obvious issue to emerge in the book is the continued gulf between material culture-oriented approaches to the Pennsylvania Germans, which emphasize consideration of the physical artifacts produced by Pennsylvania German communities, and social-scientific, historical, and literary approaches, which have more to do with thoughtways, languages, traditions, and beliefs rather than analysis of physical artifacts. Areas of overlap in these different fields of inquiry are quite evident—linkages between language study, book history, manuscript illumination practices, and religious beliefs, for example, or a similarly clear connection between architectural history and the study of agricultural practice. Yet thus far, these areas of inquiry have remained mostly discrete enterprises, and their presentation in separate essays in this encyclopedia shows that the immense work of methodological and interpretive synthesis awaits the next generation of scholarship in this field.

Second, the contents of the volume point to what might be another goal to add to the editors’ laudable objectives as outlined at the beginning of the book: a focus on situating Pennsylvania Germans within the context of other ethnic, religious, and geographic communities. The editors envisage a more robust exploration of the Pennsylvania German diaspora as a horizon for the field, but if Pennsylvania German Studies wish to attract attention from the wider scholarly world and maintain a sense of vitality among the general public, then they must also work relentlessly to place Pennsylvania Germans in the analytical context of other, non-German communities in the Mid-Atlantic, in North America, and beyond. Atlantic world theory would prove highly useful in bringing about this evolution of scholarly practice and making such efforts a centerpiece of Pennsylvania German Studies. This wonderful collection of essays can serve as a touchstone in these enterprises. The volume ties together the extant states of several related subfields in such a way that scholars interested in exploring new avenues can move forward with the confidence that comes from possessing a solid grasp of a rich and varied historiographical tradition.

I have only a few substantive critiques about the work itself. First, the entries in the encyclopedia sometimes stop short of offering clear and incisive direction for next steps in the various sub-fields under consideration, doubtless an effort to preserve objectivity and leave it to the reader to develop those new directions herself. However, given the interpretive nature of this particular encyclopedia, more explicit direction from these expert commentators might at times have been warranted. Some essays, like Mark L. Louden’s discussion of the Pennsyl-
vania Dutch language, conclude with detailed thoughts about next steps forward for future research (106-07). Yvonne J. Milspaw also offers explicit direction for the field of Food Studies in her essay, asserting that “a significant trajectory for the new Pennsylvania German studies advocates for more than the compilation of food histories and treasured recipes. It seeks to find meanings in the ways people eat and use the representations of foods that are perceived as Pennsylvania German for identity, ritual, and community” (340). This sort of clarion call is of great use to readers interested in conceptualizing future research projects. Second, the dissection of Pennsylvania German culture into the media and genres that comprise the second section of the encyclopedia, as described above, highlights the persistent challenge the field faces in fusing different approaches to cultural analysis into one transformational intellectual effort. Subdividing topics, genres, and media of study into different essays is a necessary component of constructing an encyclopedia, yet doing so with the various material culture topics discussed in this work may inadvertently harden rather than soften analytical boundaries. A key question moving forward must be integration of these various approaches, and the theories and methods that would be required to do so. The book naturally raises the question of at what point approaching the topics under consideration here through the lens of a regional ethnic “Pennsylvania German” framework becomes problematic and limiting rather than enlightening and informative. Is “Pennsylvania German Studies” a helpful interpretive device or a limiting narrative trope when exploring topics as diverse as ethnicity and identity in pluralistic regions of North America? Perhaps future scholars will find that the brightest future to be found for Pennsylvania German Studies is to throw off traditional categorical conventions altogether.

“All told, we present this encyclopedia to trigger larger conversations on the cultural impact of the Pennsylvania German diaspora and its integration in ethnic studies, regional studies, German studies, transnational American studies, and cultural studies,” the editors write (xiii). They clearly accomplished their goal. This admirable touchstone of Pennsylvania German scholarship will serve students of the topic well for generations to come.

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