

Book Review

Loewen, James W. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. New York: The New Press, 1995. Xii + 372 pp. Index. Hardcover, ISBN, 1-56584-100-X, \$24.95; Softcover, ISBN, 0-684-81886-8, \$15.00

In this book's introduction, James W. Loewen describes his survey of twelve high school American history textbooks published between 1974 and 1991, inclusively. Through his sometimes light-in-tone but unusually hard-hitting narrative, the author provides information and insights that all Americans would do well to consider, especially those without college-level training or the equivalent in American history. Along the way, he indicts the authors and publishers of these textbooks for what he sees as the sorry state of American history education in the nation's high schools. He asserts that "history is the only field in which the more courses [high school] students take, the stupider they become" (p. 2).

Loewen cites studies whose results reveal that "African American, Native American, and Latino students view history with a special dislike." They make only slightly lower grades than white students in high school mathematics, but much lower grades in history. However, white students also "hate history," and consider it "the most irrelevant' of twenty-one subjects commonly taught in high school" (p. 1).

The author believes that college history courses and textbooks are generally sound, but, unfortunately, only one American adult in six takes even one American history course beyond high school. Consequently, some observers charge that the United States suffers from a larger gap between what the general population knows and what professional historians know than any other country.

Loewen argues that high school American history textbooks "seldom use the past to illuminate the present," but instead "portray the past as a simple-minded morality play" in which "every problem has already been solved or is about to be solved." He accuses the authors of nationalism and charges that they attempt to "indoctrinate blind patriotism." He asserts that they provide far too much and too favorable coverage of the American federal government, especially the executive branch. Indeed, even the "titles themselves tell the story," with their "covers, graced as they are with American flags, bald eagles, the Statue of Liberty" (pp. 2-3).

The author states that "history is a furious debate informed by evidence and reason," but "textbooks," with their "godlike tone," "encourage students to believe that history is facts to be learned" (p. 5). With an average length of 888 pages

and weight of four and a half pounds, the books provide far too many details. The litany of facts and details "stifle[s] meaning by suppressing causation" (p. 4), which results in melodrama instead of the actual drama of history. The books are marred by "the omniscient narrator's voice" that "insulates students from the raw material of history," such as quotations from "speeches, songs, diaries, or letters" (p. 5).

After the introduction come twelve chapters and an afterword. The first ten chapters tell "stories" about different subjects that elaborate on and support the points the author makes in the introduction.

In the first chapter, Loewen discusses what he sees as the textbook authors' tendency to produce heroes, a process he calls "heroification." To illustrate this point, he focuses on the twelve textbooks' coverage of the lives and careers of Helen Keller and Woodrow Wilson. He asserts that Keller was a radical socialist who moved to the left of the Socialist Party. Without judging her politics, he observes that Keller's notoriety is not covered in the books.

Loewen is especially critical of the textbooks' coverage of the Woodrow Wilson Administration (1912-1920). He says that some of the books excuse or blame others for Wilson's frequent invasions of Latin America, and that none of the twelve books even mentions American support of the "White Russians" through Wilson's naval blockade of Russia during the Bolshevik Revolution. Moreover, he asserts that only four of the twelve books "accurately describe" "Wilson's racial policies," which "disgraced the office he held" (p. 17). He states that Wilson was so "widely despised in the 1920s" (p. 25) that his apparent Democratic successor lost by the largest percentage of popular vote in American presidential election history. That defeat came at the hands of Warren G. Harding, the Republican candidate who did not even campaign.

The second chapter in this book is about Christopher Columbus. The author presents a long list of explorers who allegedly reached the Western Hemisphere before 1492, together with an interesting discussion of the evidence and the likelihood that each of these events actually happened. Among others, he mentions a possible Irish expedition to Iceland in 500 B.C. and the presence of Africans in Brazil in the mid-1400s. He reports that only two of the twelve textbooks raise questions about possible pre-Columbian explorations by Afro-Phoenicians, for example.

Chronology aside, Loewen says that the textbooks differ on aspects of Columbus's first voyage, including the weather conditions (it was perfect and the ships were not "storm battered"), length of the voyage (it took one month), mutinous actions of the crew (they came nowhere near mutiny, although they did "gripe"), and condition of the ships (they were not small or inefficient). Furthermore, he says that "few people" on either side of the Atlantic "believed in 1492 that the world was flat" (p. 45), and Columbus did not die poor and

unappreciated—facts that are misrepresented in most of the textbooks. The textbooks also resolutely present (different) authoritarian statements about the true purpose of the explorer's first trip to the New World, despite historians' belief that the real intentions will probably never be known.

Loewen reserves his main criticism of the textbooks' treatment of Columbus to their coverage of what the explorer actually did. For example, he claims that the textbooks leave out accounts of Columbus taking the Native people's land, wealth, and labor, which led to their near extinction. On his second voyage, in 1493, Columbus commanded seventeen (not three) ships, which carried "1,200 to 1,500 men, cannons, crossbows, guns, cavalry, and attack dogs" to the New World. Loewen cites primary sources about the explorer's treatment of the Indians on his second voyage to Haiti, such as how he "demanded food, gold, spun cotton . . . [, and] sex with their women" (p. 51). He goes on to describe Indian enslavement by the Spanish, Portuguese, French, and British, and then claims that some textbooks fail to mention any of this, and the ones that do fail to hold Columbus responsible. The author makes a case for a different historical perspective: "We understand Columbus and all European explorers and settlers more clearly if we treat 1492 as a meeting of three cultures (Africa was soon involved), rather than a discovery by one" (p. 61).

In the chapter entitled "The Truth about the First Thanksgiving," Loewen reminds readers that the land we now know as the United States was first settled in 30,000 B.C., not 1620. He maintains that the first non-white settlers were "African slaves left in South Carolina in 1526 by Spaniards who abandoned a settlement attempt" (p. 67), and that there were French Protestants in St. Augustine before 1565 (Spaniards massacred them that year), Spanish Jews in New Mexico in the late sixteenth century, and a Dutch settlement in New York as early as 1614.

One of the main points in this chapter is the importance of the plague in the European conquest of the Western Hemisphere. The author believes that British and French fishermen working off the coast of Massachusetts almost certainly transmitted diseases to the mainland. He cites evidence that ninety to ninety-six percent of the Indians "of coastal New England" had died of the plague by the time the Pilgrims arrived in 1620. He argues that Europeans may not have been able to settle the Americas if it had not been for diseases, to which the indigenous people had little or no resistance. He also argues here that the textbook authors' treatment of the Pilgrims, who constituted only about thirty-five of the 102 people on the Mayflower, introduces "the archetype of American exceptionalism," portraying "the Pilgrims as Christian, sober, democratic, generous to the Indians . . ." (p. 80), whereas in reality they "appropriated Indian cornfields" (p. 82) and robbed Indian houses and graves, among other transgressions.

The fourth chapter is a continuation of the historical coverage on American Indians. Loewen describes Native influences on food crops, customs, and place names, and he speculates about Native influences on the formation and eventual shape of the American democracy. He believes that despite "some improvement in textbooks' treatment of Native peoples in recent years," in portraying the Europeans as "settlers" and the Native Americans as savage aggressors the "textbook authors still write history to comfort descendents" (p. 91) of the former. He argues that "even an appreciative treatment of Native cultures reinforces ethnocentrism so long as it does not challenge the [posited] primitive-to-civilized continuum" (p. 94).

The author maintains that Indians and white European settlers and their descendents coexisted in the United States for approximately 325 years, until the "end of Sioux and Apache autonomy around 1890" (p. 100). He states that the war with the highest proportion of deaths to population in American history occurred in 1676, when Indians attacked fifty-two and destroyed twelve of the ninety Puritan towns in New England. Five of the twelve textbooks fail to even mention this war, and all of them fail to tell students that five of the seven largest land battles of the War of 1812 were against Native Americans, not the British. Textbook authors also fail to mention major obstacles to favorable race relations, such as the failure of the East Coast colonies—and later, President Thomas Jefferson—to grant citizenship and other legal rights to the Indians, and that the Delaware Indians made an unsuccessful proposal to Congress to create a separate state in 1778.

Loewen tackles racism against African Americans in the next chapter, where he states that textbooks provide a more accurate portrayal of slavery since the civil rights movement, but that modern authors still "shoehorn their improved and more accurate portrait of slavery into the old 'progress as usual' story line" (pp. 134-35). He cites established sources for the following facts: (1) "almost half of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were slaveholders" (pp. 139-40); (2) Thomas Jefferson owned 175 slaves at the time he wrote the Declaration of Independence, a number that increased to 267 by 1822; (3) slavery was the cause of both Seminole wars, in part because Indians were harboring runaway slaves; and (4) there were black professional major league baseball players in the nineteenth century (in other words, Jackie Robinson's major league debut in 1947 was not the first by a black player).

Chapter six deals with what Loewen calls "The Invisibility of Antiracism in American History Textbooks." He argues that textbook authors not only "underplay white racism, they also neglect racial idealism" (p. 165). To illustrate this point, he discusses the case of the executed (white) abolitionist John Brown, whom Loewen believes was sincere in his beliefs. Textbooks published from about 1890 to 1970 portrayed Brown as insane, but during Reconstruction

and again after the civil rights movement most textbooks portrayed him as sane. Loewen says that American history textbooks' treatment of Brown "provides an inadvertent index of white racism in our country" (p. 166). Even now, three of the twelve books examined say or imply that Brown was insane, while two others say that he was fanatical. The authors also fail to quote from Brown's own words and they omit his religious ideas.

Similarly, Loewen describes antiracism and Union sympathies in the Confederate South, and he condemns textbook authors for not portraying Abraham Lincoln's struggle and "personal growth" over the issue of slavery. He argues that the Fourteenth Amendment was highly idealistic, and notes by comparison the nation's failure to pass a similar amendment for women in the late twentieth century. He acknowledges that Lincoln was a "master politician," but laments what he sees as the textbook authors' suppression of "the possibility that Lincoln acted at least in part because he thought it was right" (p. 175).

Chapter seven, entitled "The Land of Opportunity," deals with the idea that high school American history books downplay or even deny the existence of social class, and hence inequality in the United States. The author states that not one of the indexes of the twelve books he examined includes such terms as "upper class," "working class," or "lower class," and that only six of the twelve indexes include such terms as "social class," "social stratification," "class structure," "income distribution," and "inequality." Loewen acknowledges that the United States truly is a land of opportunity, but he makes a strong case for social class being probably the most important social variable. He believes that the textbook authors' portrayal of the nation as a meritocracy leads some Americans to conclude that they deserve all the good things they have accumulated and achieved, while encouraging "a subculture of shame" (p. 201) among the poor.

In his chapter on history textbooks' treatment of the United States government, Loewen criticizes the authors severely for making American history "a morality play in which the United States [especially the executive branch] typically acts on behalf of human rights, democracy, and 'the American way'" (p. 211). This, he says, leads readers "to conclude that criticism is incompatible with citizenship" and to "minimize the potential power of the people" (p. 213) to manage the government. He chastises the authors for overemphasizing American presidential administrations; for downplaying the role of "nongovernmental institutions and private citizens" (p. 210) in important historical changes (e.g., the environment, race relations); and for omitting any treatment at all of the powerful influence of multinational corporations on national policy (influences that date back at least as far as pressure on the Wilson Administration by the First National Bank of New York in relation to Haiti and Standard Oil in relation to Russia, followed by influences of the Rockefeller family enterprises on American foreign policy from 1953 to 1977, when Dean Rusk,

Henry Kissinger, and others reigned in Washington). He also criticizes them for lauding the United States for its generous foreign aid contributions, saying that “today at least a dozen European and Arab nations devote much larger proportions of their gross domestic product . . . to foreign aid” than does the United States (p. 211), and for not pointing out the negative and ambivalent roles played in the civil rights movement by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Kennedy Administration, respectively. He analyzes the textbooks’ coverage of six of the United States government’s “more recent attempts to subvert foreign governments” (p. 215), beginning with its role in returning the shah to the throne of Iran in 1953, and including its eight known attempts to assassinate Cuban premier Fidel Castro.

Loewen claims that half of the textbooks omit all six incidents, and that the others treat only one or two—always with the implication that American “actions were based on humanitarian motives” (p. 221), whereas most college textbooks on American history and professors of political science tend to take the “American colossus view” (p. 210). He again laments “the embarrassing gap” (p. 223) between college/professional knowledge and the information presented in high school American history classes.

In chapter nine, Loewen disparages lack of textbook coverage of the recent past, stating that “many recent high school graduates know more about the War of 1812 than about the Vietnam War” (p. 234). He then discusses how current perceived needs can change the way historical phenomena are interpreted, which he believes explains relatively recent positive opinion shifts toward Woodrow Wilson (beginning in the 1940s) and Reconstruction (1960s), and differences in the 1892 and 1992 celebrations of Columbus’s first voyage. He complains that such shifts did not occur due to the uncovering of new information, but rather to shifting ideological needs in the present. He also believes that the textbook coverage encourages students to conclude that there is a single version of history that becomes more accurate over time, and that they should memorize the facts about this history.

In chapter ten, Loewen again writes about the textbook authors’ penchant for telling the story of American progress, and also for failing to discuss such ongoing problems and potential problems as the promotion of antirevolutionary attitudes in the United States, the income gap between rich and poor nations, and concerns related to excessive consumption and environmental pollution. He asserts, for example, that “textbook authors seem much happier telling of the governmental responses—mainly the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency—than discussing any continuing environmental problems” (p. 262).

In chapter eleven, the author discusses reasons for history being taught like it is in American high schools. Most of the textbooks he surveyed contain no