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Review of *The Ambidextrous Historian: Historical Writers and Writing in the American West* By C. L. Sonnichsen

Ralph Mann
University of Colorado

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The Ambidextrous Historian: Historical Writers and Writing in the American West. By C. L. Sonnichsen. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981. Bibliography, index. 120 pp. \$9.95.

This is a short book of essays, some published before and some not, mostly on the pleasures and problems of the amateur historian. Taken together, the essays also reflect C. L. Sonnichsen's attempt to develop a definition of good historical writing. Unfortunately, while most of the book's pages are filled with good, common-sense advice for beginning researchers and writers, the whole is burdened by the author's jaundiced view of the academic historical profession. The essays introduce the neophyte to the editors, librarians, and reviewers who populate his new world, and gently point out that librarians do not have the leisure to do his research for him, that journal editors may rewrite his prose, and that Knopf is not likely to publish his account of granddaddy's ranch. All in all, the sections of the book on the amateur portray the history buff as a conscientious, cooperative soul, interested mainly in entertaining by preserving the past. But even here, jarring notes intrude. There is a pervasive defensiveness, an expectation of rejection, expressed toward academics and publishers.

This undertone becomes dominant whenever the author focuses on professional history. Sonnichsen begins with the proposition that professionals agree that "their discipline is sick—perhaps unto death." This astounding statement is based on sometimes contradictory self-criticisms by various historians, ranging from Oscar Handlin's Mandarin traditionalism to James Henretta's call for interdisciplinary

conceptualizations, but the main point the author extracts from his sources is that academic historians talk too much to the initiated and far too little to anyone else. He adds to the indictment by scoring the profession for a stifling commitment to objectivity and for refusing to cross disciplinary bounds. The latter is at the expense of depth of understanding, the former, at the expense of the "poetry"—the excitement, the emotion, the deep feeling for the past—the author sees as central to historical writing. So he comes up with a stereotype of the scholar: dull, pedantic, and narrow. Like many stereotypes, this one contains some truth, but Sonnichsen shows no understanding of the teaching component of published scholarship, no recognition that there may be little "poetry" in important discoveries about the past, no real grasp of the range of approaches used by academic historians, and no acknowledgement of the professional's role in clearing away the mythology that has contorted our view of the frontier West.

It follows that the author's view of good history is the obverse of that he sees practiced by professionals. The ambidextrous historian of the title—identified by the jacket blurb with the author—is his ideal. Unfettered by disciplinary limitations, free of the shibboleths of scholarship, he is, presumably, able to pursue the poetry of history. If this ideal is construed to include respect for good writing, a willingness to use a variety of tools to uncover the past, and the belief that the whole process is important, then it is a good one and one that is pursued by professionals as well as amateurs. Unfortunately, people reading this book might lose sight of that fact.

RALPH MANN
Department of History
University of Colorado