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Many mark the 1970s as the decade of the birth of the field of public history. The term “public history” was coined by Robert Kelley in 1975. The next year Kelley and others at UC Santa Barbara launched the first public history program in the country. The program helped historians apply the skills they learned in graduate school to a variety of fields outside academia, which was suffering from a severe job crisis in the 1970s. This “new” field quickly became problematic as those already working within the areas that fell under the new label of public history (historic preservation, archival and museum administration, collections management, etc.) found themselves and their work questioned and marginalized as they lacked formal training in the new academic field. However, this simplified explanation of the birth of public history does not satisfy most public historians. Meringolo, in a well-executed work, argues that the field was in fact born much earlier than the 1970s, in part in the offices of historians employed by the federal government, with additional roots in the work of early Smithsonian scientists and archeologists at the early National Parks and Monuments. Meringolo’s belief that public history is not just a branch of traditional academic history, but a field in its own right shapes the rich and complicated history of the field beginning in the mid nineteenth century and leading up to WWII as “federal workers began to conceptualize the protection of landscapes and artifacts as valuable public work.” (xxix).

In Part I, Meringolo begins by looking at the slow process by which the federal government began to sponsor research in the pre-Civil War era. The Federal government, reluctant to over-extend its authority in states or to build up a scientific and educational bureaucracy, funded few projects. Those they did fund were scientific in nature and were seen as aiding economic growth and development, such as geological surveys to determine the safest locations for railroad lines in the West. During and after the Civil War, the government increased its involvement in funding research and education. As a result of the Morrill Act of 1862, American education began to undergo an important shift increasingly towards to a research-based curriculum. The number of scientific expeditions began to increase as well as government funds available to researchers. One such expedition led to the creation of the first national park, Yellowstone, in 1872. Recognized for its unique landscape and its value to science, Yellowstone became the model for other national parks.

In Part II, Meringolo examines how the federal government became increasingly interested in preserving archeological resources, which lead to the Antiquities Act of 1906 and the creation of the Park Service in 1916. While problematic in many ways, the Antiquities Act...
helped to usher in a new era where prehistoric and historic resources began to enjoy federal protection, at least in theory. In practice, controlling access to sites was difficult and it took trained archeologists/Park Service rangers like Jesse Nusbam at Mesa Verde to protect sites and artifacts from looters and to develop interpretive programs that helped to educate visitors. By the 1920s a new problem emerged for the Park Service. While the numbers of visitors to National Parks continued to grow yearly, leading to increased demand for staff and infrastructure, the Park Service’s goal of managing a “truly national landscape” was going unfulfilled (85). In 1925, Arcadia National Park in Maine was the only National Park east of the Mississippi, and justifying the creation of eastern parks was difficult. Meringolo argues that during the nineteenth century western parks were created based in their “scenic but otherwise useless landscapes” and their potential for scientific research (87). To create eastern parks, the Park Service turned away from science and looked to history as a justification, which became a “tool of development” and allowed the Park Service to transform “vernacular landscapes and local traditions into components of national heritage”(86). During the Depression, such a focus on history and interpretation in the parks increased, as historians took jobs working with the CCC on site development projects and the development of new museum programs. They also joined the ranks of national monument superintendents and rangers in greater numbers.

By Part III of Meringolo’s work, which examines audience, authority and offers her concluding thoughts, the debts the field of public history has to science, to the federal government’s role in protecting historic sites, to the Park Service and to the expanded role of the federal government during the Depression, are quite clear. As Meringolo argues, public history clearly has an evolution and a story of its own and is truly different from traditional academic history. It has its own issues, its own responsibilities to the public and to itself. A valuable book for practicing public historians and students alike, Museums, Monuments and National Parks, helps to ground public history’s methodologies and rich history in a much more realistic and complex narrative than is traditionally told.

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