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## REVIEWS

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Greg Dening, *Performances*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1996. Pp. xvi, 296, bib., index. US\$45 cloth; \$19.95 paperback.

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THE WORK OF NO OTHER HISTORIAN has been so intimately involved in contemporary ethnography in Oceania than Greg Dening's. In respect of Dening's own impatience with disciplinary boundaries, he should be seen as an ethnographer who uses the distance of time to define the otherness he sees as essential to the ethnographic enterprise. Perhaps no other practitioner of the craft has so completely fused a historical perspective with an anthropological one, setting out one of the goals of this work: "Let me show also that an ethnography of History as a mode of consciousness is History's anthropology even as it is anthropology's History. Historians cannot escape a theory of how the past is in the present any more than can anthropologists" (p. 41).

This volume is a collection of twelve essays, many of which had been published before in edited collections and various journals. The essays are grouped into five sections, starting with a prelude and ending with a postlude. The three sections in between reflect the key theoretical themes that inform much of his work: the degree to which the recounting of the past is the substance of present realities, history as performance and representation, and the power of history's poetics to liberate. In the prelude, Dening positions himself as a man who devoted many years of his life to scholarly and religious discipline as a member of the Society of Jesus, founded by Ignatius Loyola. In writing this prelude, he finds commonality between his academic

experience and that of William Wordsworth and his contemporary, William Gooch. While Wordsworth reflected on a dismal academic performance at St. John's College, Cambridge, Gooch's scholarly career was a triumph and he became the subject of one of Dening's major works. As the balance of the essays show, the author has sympathy both for the poetical imagination of the former as well as the obvious joy found in order and discipline of the latter.

The postlude returns to personal experience and concerns having to do with ritual, the value of symbols, and their ability to harness emotional energy. Whereas the prelude gives a glimpse of religious fervor in everyday life, the postlude focuses on the current experience of the Mass by the now-former Jesuit. With detachment the author observes the many liberalizations of religious practice, such as young girls acting as altar attendants, and ponders the power of strictures instilled in him early as to proper reception of communion. He asks, "Whatever happened, for that matter, to all the allegories that filled the air like angel choirs" (p. 270). This is a question of a historian and an anthropologist. And in attempting to understand the value of all the communions taken in his life as a starting point in finding answers to this question, he concludes the collection: "Perhaps I should write a poem and by that be honest to my particularities. But then again, I do not think my narratives of what it is to believe and hope, to be guilty and sad, to be sure and doubting—in different space and different time—is something less than a poem. Or should be."

These thoughts capture a paradox that permeates all the essays. Whether it is the well-known "Sharks That Walk on the Land" concerning the death of Captain James Cook or the heavy-hearted war history of Dening's own school, Xavier College, in "School at War," the reader is constantly confronted with the tension between relativity and absolutism, whether of faith or fact. Confronting the issue directly, the author writes:

So the ultimate taunt of the absolutist to the relativist: "Are you certain that you are a relativist?" is nothing but a sad joke. On the other hand, the inventions of the semiotician of more and more words to isolate less and less are just as sad. A curse on both their houses. The theatricality of history-making is to narrate the paradoxes of the past out of the paradoxes of the present in such a way that our readers will see the paradoxes in themselves. (P. 122)

The reader is presented with a number of clear and provocative definitions in the course of the essays, which together come to build a method for the doing of ethnography. Poetics, Dening writes, "are the facility with which we relate the systems of meaning in these texts to the occasions of their

reading” (p. 36). Histories are “metaphors of the past: they translate sets of events into sets of symbols. But histories are also metonymies of the present; the present has existence in and through their expression” (p. 37). The ethnographic moment is “the space between cultures filled by interpretation, occasions of metaphorical understanding and translation” (p. 195). All of these ideas are embroiled intimately with recent questions pursued in the anthropological literature, questions of history and culture, memory, symbol, and action. This collection of essays, spanning a twenty-year period, brings Dening’s ethnographic method into focus. At risk of poaching on Dening’s own powerful rhetoric, it is a method for the discerning eye and the passionate heart.

*Performances* has appeal to a broad audience, not just anthropologists and historians, but all ethnographers struggling with the paradoxes of the moment.