ForeWord Reviews

America's Song: The Story of Yankee Doodle
Stuart Murray
Images from the Past
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History can be enchanting. Too often it is relegated to forensic inquiry, where vast armies and larger-than-life characters engulf simple lives, at which point all present-day relevance can be lost. The genuine stuff of history, though, is the small comings and goings of single, ordinary souls. In these lives live the real lesson of history.

Murray has created one such work of enchantment. America's Song chronicles the roots and unexpected branches of "Yankee Doodle": its music, its colloquial folkways and its etymology. Yankee Doodle, the song, is as much a part of the United States as the very earth on which it was founded and Murray takes readers on a joyride to show them why.

America's Song is perhaps the best small history since John Hershey packed the bombing of Hiroshima into one hundred pages and won a Pulitzer. The two works are similar in that they concentrate on the extremely human side of history. From the start, Murray corrects the historical data about Yankee Doodle and explains that it started as a Dutch-American broadside against the Puritan New Englanders. He provides vignette after vignette to show how the song evolved, right up to its most present day form and its obtuse relationship to macaroni.

The evolution of the song is not the meat and potatoes of the story. How this evolution metastasized within the context of the times is where the pleasure of the story resides. New verses were coming and going, new tempos, new stanzas. Different ethnicities adapted to meet their needs. Frequently, these needs had to do with a young nation finding its way on a new continent, and these are the stories to be relished.

America's Song is an outstanding work in that it is extremely accessible to all that can read with a modicum of interest about our country's past. It is a joy to digest; Stuart writes with a lyrical quality at some points, and at others like a fast-paced adventure novelist. Finally, readers are left with the overarching knowledge that history, important history, is not always to be found in laborious volumes by Gibbon. Sometimes, great history is about a simple, little song.

John Arens