

review essay

urban biographies

TWIN CITIES: A Pictorial History of Saint Paul and Minneapolis. By Lucile M. Kane and Alan Ominsky. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1983. \$27.50. WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA: An Architectural and Historical Portrait. By Tony P. Wrenn with Photographs by William Edmund Barrett. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, for the Junior League of Wilmington, 1984. \$27.50.

The growth of the historic preservation movement has led to a need for holistic studies of cities, and there has in fact been an increase in publications which might be described as "urban biographies," which, in contrast to traditional urban histories, focus on the city itself, and treat it as a living organism, with a personality of its own. Pictures, in such books, carry a great deal of the information; examples of architecture, streetscapes and city views illustrate physical changes over the years. An ideal urban biography would synthesize work by architectural historians, sociologists, economic and social historians and other specialists. Two recent examples permit us to examine the genre of the scholarly urban biography.

Twin Cities by Kane and Ominsky is a happy synthesis of Kane's experience and research and Ominsky's photography. There are seven chronological sections, each beginning with a substantive prose statement, and followed by a large and varied group of illustrations well reproduced on coated paper, with paragraph-length captions that add to the overall narrative. The illustrations for the earlier years stress city and building views, while people and activities predominate in the later years. All told, a great deal of verbal and visual information is included, with reference notes, picture credits and index bringing up the rear. The layout of this large-format volume has both the annoying characteristics and the charm of a family photo album, but given the sweep of subjects and time covered, anything

more formal would have made an already substantial book even bigger and, of course, more expensive.

All in all, students of American culture and history can learn much about the Twin Cities from this book, and I found it a wonderful prelude to a recent visit to the area, as well as a reference tool afterwards. The principal fault is one which can be found in any "biography": one discovers that some topic has received less attention than one expected or believes it deserves, especially when this is clearly the result of an editorial decision and not a matter of available sources.

Wilmington is slightly smaller, but thicker, than *Twin Cities*, and it carries a number of color plates. While the illustrations in *Wilmington* concentrate almost exclusively on architecture, it is the format which provides the greatest contrast. Clearly, this book is intended for those who already know Wilmington, North Carolina, and know it well. And that limits its effectiveness.

Mr. Wrenn is the archivist at the American Institute of Architects. He worked with a variety of knowledgeable people in piecing together an extraordinary amount of information which is presented, appropriately, in conjunction with catalog-like entries on individual buildings, sites and objects. A large index provides some access to this data, but since the entries are arranged strictly by their location in the city, there is no way one can readily extract the historical development of the city (though one must acknowledge that the all too brief introduction does provide some historical orientation). This is not to say that *Wilmington* is not useful. One can learn a great deal about the physical appearance of Wilmington from the illustrations, and individual entries are often quite extensive and richly detailed. In this respect it is much like a guidebook, except it is too bulky and much too heavy to carry and use on a walking tour. And that raises the fundamental question concerning all such books: who is the anticipated reader-user?

Both books are obviously intended to be attractive to current or former residents who appreciate having a picture book (with text) of their city. But is there a readership beyond that group which might want to use such a book? As already noted, this reviewer was able to use *Twin Cities* as both an urban biography and as a reference tool. *Wilmington* can certainly be used by the architectural historian, but with some attendant frustration. For example, one finds vented friezes on many of the buildings, and there is constant reference to them, but there is no extended discussion of this feature or its significance. Or, the importance of the railroads to this seaport city is discussed in fragments, but we don't learn enough to be able to derive any insights concerning its effect on Wilmington's history beyond a few standard observations.

Wrenn's accomplishment and Barrett's photographs deserve praise, but this is not a "portrait" of the city as the title suggests. It is rather a source book for the student of Wilmington's architectural history. As such it fills a sizeable gap. When someone integrates this material with other and much older sources on the history of the city, a true and up-to-date biography of Wilmington, North Carolina, is feasible.

A compilation of many photographs, some maps and a wealth of historical data relating to a city does not in itself constitute an "urban biography." A chronological structure of some sort is necessary, and its organization and character must be truly interdisciplinary. The city as a unique entity must be the focus. When these occur we have the potential of a publication which can be useful to scholars.

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