

# Free book review on the reshaping of everyday life 1790- 1840 everyday life in ame...

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**Introduction:**

America in the early post independence years was a country with huge potential yet there was not much to get a look in at the time either. Larkin's narrative is exciting in the extreme as it paints an intriguing and satisfying picture of what was really going on at the time with inch perfect details of the clothes and customs worn by the population as well as other aspects of everyday life both rural and in the city. One has to acknowledge the fact that a lot of information about the United States' past history is muddled in the extreme and there is nothing so clear as what is actually portrayed in Larkin's book which is a model of efficiency and down to earth descriptive interest. The United States was a rapidly developing country in those years with the population expanding at a phenomenal rate and land acquisition also an important issue. The book also discusses a number of aspects which create a sense of authenticity on all fronts, especially on the cuisine front where we have a number of descriptive episodes on everyday life which are extremely interesting

**Merits: several and rather original with different aspects**

The book is extremely important for the historian of American history on a number of fronts. These include the astoundingly detailed narratives not just on what went on in the bigger picture but also what the small town man was experiencing. Life was definitely not an easy one for the small town American farmer in the early years of the 19th century and hard scrabble poverty was actually the order of the day in those times. Notwithstanding all this, Larkin espouses how the indomitable American spirit rose to the

occasion several times and especially in the second chapter he describes several innovative ways in which farmers and small traders managed to forge a successful living out of practically nothing.

### **Themes – always woven skillfully**

The book is principally focused on two main themes which are life in New England post independence and the expansion of the American land settlement westward. Obviously the intensely detailed descriptions of homestead life in the New England states such as Massachusetts, New Hampshire and New Jersey are rather fascinating to say the least. Larkin is extremely skilful in weaving themes together but he also manages to portray the character of several Presidents such as the indomitable Andrew Jackson who was one of the stalwarts of American political history. On certain occasions Larkin develops a descriptive theme where he manages to create situations which are not only extremely intriguing but also include several fine points which are not always appreciated or occasionally overlooked. Episodes of importance such as the Homestead Act and the westward expansion are also given their due importance. One also has to note that Larkin is very adept at describing the ever declining quality of life in New England states which continued to decrease as years went by due to the fact that land expansion westward proved much more attractive for those who were attempting to expand the economy.

However Larkin is best when he begins describing certain aspects of American homestead life such as: " By the late 1830s cook stoves were coming into use among middling city families and in Northern commercial

villages. In 1838, " the year we had a new cooking stove, the first one in town,' recalled Susan Blunt, who grew up in a bustling rural commercial center, `the neighbors said we would all be sick-taken off in rimmers as they called them."

This shows us the kind of life that Americans lived, a life which was rather hard and difficult at the best of times so one can imagine what it felt like when it was hard and difficult. The fact that the Blunt family had a cook stove was something which was a pure novelty in those days and this created much joy and happiness in the house, an obvious thing as it was something novel. Larkin also imbues ordinary characters with a certain tinge of hallowed greatness in their simplicity and that is also one of the novel aspects in the book.

Another interesting part of the book is when he describes certain persons who leap to life in Larkin's detailed and methodical descriptions, always imbued with fantasy and larger than life anecdotes. One particular example is: " Phineas T. Barnum of Bethel, Connecticut, whose father was a middling farmer and tavern keeper, remembered that in the 1820s he and his brother customarily slept three in a bed with the Irishman who labored on his family farm."

Here one is almost shocked or taken aback that farmers would sleep with their own labourers but when one is attempting to create a life out of such a hardscrabble existence then anything goes, really.

**Momentous parts of the book:**

One of the best parts of the book is when Larkin describes the opening of the Erie Canal which brought about so much change and diversity to life in New York state. This masterpiece of civil engineering is given its full due with astoundingly descriptive parts of it brought to life in Larkin's narrative. He also waxes lyrical about how the Erie Canal transformed the whole American notion of trade and created what can only be described as a huge explosion of trade on the new continent. Another important part of the book is the Great Western Migration of 1837 where Larkin literally brings the journeys to life in more ways than one. He comes up with accurate and hugely descriptive portrayals of the immigrants clothing, the wagons which were used for the journeys and the intrinsic perils which these poor yet brave personas had to face all the time. Naturally enough the situation was such that constant Indian attacks made the life of the immigrants even more perilous and Larkin is certainly not oblivious to these facts which are given due importance throughout the book.

**Personal opinion:**

I was greatly enthused by Larkin's book for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is one of those volumes which you can never really put down as it contains such intriguing and honest to goodness stories that the narrative fairly leaps out of the pages. Secondly it offers what to my mind is a unique description of life in New England in those decades which is largely overlooked by other historians.

This is important as it also sheds light on the influx of Irish migrants who were fleeing the Great Potatoe Famine, stories of which have disappeared over the years and who were instrumental in building the American economy from first stone to last. Thirdly, Larkin offers important social commentary on the great changes and upheavals which were taking place in American society in those years especially as this began changing from a rural society to a more industrialized one with the North beginning to assert its dominance over the South and the issue of slavery becoming ever more contentious on all fronts

### **Conclusion: A true look at American history**

History is shaped by people and individuals and Philip larkin certainly brings all these to life in his mostly outstanding narrative. His book is definitely a must read for any self respecting history student who wishes to learn more about US history in a period which is often overlooked. His descriptions of Presidents such as Andrew Jackson and James Polk are particularly intriguing for all their swagger and incredible real life authenticity. However it's chief benefit is the fact that provides incredible and original social commentary on situations which truly shaped American history in more ways than one.

Larkin who currently heads a research programme in a reconstructed village in Massachussetts is definitely an author to which I will return to time and time again. He provides a full scale description of everything he goes in to and is also extremely adept at demonstrating certain aspects of American rural life which is so often discarded. His book is also important for students

of US history who should take to it like meat to drink and should appreciate that the country was built by the sweat and blood of their forefathers.

### **Works Cited:**

Larkin P: The Reshaping of Everyday Life: 1790-1840 (Everyday Life in America); New York; Harper Perennial 1988, Print