

Dighe, Ranjit S. *The Historian's Huck Finn: Reading Mark Twain's Masterpiece as Social and Economic History*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2016. 352 Pp.

Traditionally, scholarship in the fields of history, economics, and business has focused on content research. This has been especially evident in published monographs and journal articles, few of which have addressed pedagogical matters. Yet pedagogy has been garnering more attention in content-oriented venues in recent years, as evidenced in many conference programs. This trend is starting to manifest itself in print, as exemplified in Ranjit Dighe's *The Historian's Huck Finn: Reading Mark Twain's Masterpiece as Social and Economic History*. A professor of economics at the State University of New York at Oswego, Dighe composed this volume to serve as an instructional resource. He argues that Twain's classic story is ideal for teaching 19<sup>th</sup> century US economic and social history because it is accessible to students, yet also rich with insight into a vast array of topics that span the period.

Dighe begins with a preface that merits an essay of its own. He details his long-held interest in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Twain, and his reasons for composing this volume. He previews its structure and outlines some "lesson plans" for its use in a course. He posits that in addition to economics and history, *The Historian's Huck Finn* could benefit students in other fields, such as philosophy. On a practical note, he points out that the volume fits with the emerging trend toward "customized" course texts. He follows his preface with an extensive chronology of events that occurred during Twain's life, providing the reader with a useful context for understanding how *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* reflects the history of the period.

Dighe gives the reader some background into the story, its author, and the period in two introductory chapters. The first, "Samuel Clemens and His Times," is a short biography of Twain intertwined with the greater events of the period. He posits that Twain was "a man of his times," and in fact one who "lived an extraordinary yet quintessentially American life" (pp. 1, 18). Twain's fortunes, rife with successes and failures, reflected 19<sup>th</sup> century America. He also witnessed some of the period's milestone

developments. In sum, Twain's personal story, and thus that of Huckleberry Finn, are viable lenses through which to view the period. The second chapter, "The Raging, Booming, Tearing Nineteenth Century," situates *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in the larger historical context. Acknowledging that Twain vigorously denied that the story had any lessons for the reader, Dighe nonetheless sees "compelling themes" (p. 19). Admitting that "as an economic historian, I naturally gravitate toward economic themes," Dighe cites four: prosperity, expansion, inequality, and commercialism (p. 19). He then dedicates the rest of the chapter (over 20 pages) to expounding on each; in the process, he presents a survey of American economic development in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The following section recounts *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, with Dighe's annotations appearing in footnote form. While this constitutes the bulk of the volume, a synopsis of Twain's classic tale herein is neither possible nor necessary. For his part, along with maps and illustrations to help the reader follow the narrative, Dighe provides 170 annotations. As with the story, the sheer volume of these precludes an exhaustive summary. In total, they offer a wealth of explanations and insights into Twain's work and the history of the period. They address a wide array of topics. Many have an economic focus, ranging from banking to agricultural practices to relative costs. Yet they also highlight political matters (most notably slavery), social movements such as religious revivals and temperance, and technological advancements and challenges as embodied in such innovations as steamboats. The annotations vary in length and serve a variety of purposes. For example, annotation 83 is over 400 words and expounds on the economic importance and implications of rafts in Mississippi River commerce (pp. 150-1). Annotation 49, on the other hand, is 22 words long and converts the 19<sup>th</sup>-century value of a canoe to 21<sup>st</sup>-century dollars (p. 96). A number of the annotations include supporting statistical evidence and reference scholarly works in history and economics. In sum, Dighe's notes provide information and explanations, but also thought-provoking points and overarching frameworks.

There are many strengths to this work. Dighe offers a coherent rationale for the need for such a book, and carries his main argument through the text. His chronology, background chapters, and annotations

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are all well done. These offer insights into 19<sup>th</sup> century economic, social, political and technological history. He supports this effort with solid research, using a wide array of sources. Twain's story is engaging; Dighe matches this with well-conceptualized chapters and annotations that help translate the 19<sup>th</sup>-century account for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century reader. Without question, the volume is well suited to meet its stated aim of serving as a teaching resource.

The work has a few issues. With regard to organization, addressing "Samuel Clemens in His Times" in the first chapter, then outlining those times in the subsequent chapter seems rather disjointed. With regard to argument, in presenting his four overarching economic themes, Dighe suggests slavery might have been a fifth, but neglects to explain why he opted not to include it. Still, such issues are of limited consequence. In fact, the work is both remarkably insightful and useful. The greatest challenge it poses for the academic is determining how best to use it. For example, some of the introductory material reads as a "teacher's manual" that would not be of much use to students; yet it also contains elements from which they would decidedly benefit. In short, this resource will require some planning to integrate it effectively in a class. This is not indicative of a flaw, but rather a remarkable utility; this work could enrich courses ranging from a general education survey to an upper-level history or economics seminar. Beyond its utility, Dighe's work stands as a fine example of how academics can further the scholarship of teaching in their content fields, an example worthy of emulation.

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