



Beyond Truman: Robert H. Ferrell and Crafting the Past

Douglas A. Dixon

London: Lexington Books, 2020

ISBN-10: 1793627819

ISBN-13: 978-1793627810

Hardback/Paperback/Kindle £30 / €36 / \$40 (Amazon)

[Beyond Truman: Robert H. Ferrell and Crafting the Past : Douglas A. Dixon: Amazon.co.uk: Books](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Beyond-Truman-Robert-H-Ferrell-and-Crafting-the-Past-Douglas-A-Dixon/dp/1793627819)

Review by Gloria Montebruno Saller, first published online 21 April 2022.

In his book *Beyond Truman: Robert H. Ferrell and Crafting the Past*, Douglas A. Dixon provides a personal and professional portrait of his mentor. Dixon wrote this book for several reasons. First, he wanted to understand how Ferrell approached the past and “evaluate his work against that of emerging conceptions of the fields” (127). Dixon was also interested in exploring “how Ferrell’s experience, scholarship, and professional approach fit in with the evolution of professional practice among more celebrated past masters during his lifetime” (127). On a personal level, Dixon was interested in learning more about Ferrell the man, the teacher, the husband, the historian, the activist, thus getting to a better understanding of how Ferrell’s life experiences “might inform his craft and topical orientation” (127).

The book is organized in three parts and each part comprises two chapters. Part One, “Three Vignettes,” details Ferrell’s undergraduate and graduate education, with emphasis on his unexpected

admittance to graduate school at Yale in the department of history. Dixon then describes Ferrell’s WWII experience as a lowly enlistee who was dispatched to Cairo, Egypt and besides enjoying traveling the Middle East, North Africa, England, and France, he did not see much action during the three years he was enlisted. In letters to his parents, Ferrell launches into descriptive and lengthy accounts of the historical sites he visited. The third vignette of Part One is a description of Ferrell’s encounter with his future wife, Lila Sprout, who was one of his undergraduate students at Michigan State College in fall 1952.

In Part Two, “Beginnings and Scholar-Activist,” Dixon first looks at Ferrell’s early years: birthplace, religious formation, boyhood activities, which “provided the geological formations mixed with personality that crystalized into Indiana University’s distinguished historian” (49). In other words, to understand Ferrell, one must understand the man and his times. Rooted in northern Ohio culture, Ferrell made his own many of



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his parents' lessons, values, and biases. And although "the history of his early years could not predict later thoughts and actions," it did provide "a framework to understand who he would become and how he would engage the historian's craft" (66). Ferrell was an activist "as scholar, teacher, and private citizen" (71). In Chapter 4, "Dear Senator Taft, 'Heads Ought to Roll,'" Dixon provides a rounded description of Ferrell as an activist on multiple fronts. For example, as a teacher, he was an advocate of reforming the education system from within (85). When describing Ferrell as an activist scholar/historian, Dixon invites his readers to go beyond the decades old "history and objectivity" debate and consider how Ferrell's historical interest in Truman's presidency happened by chance (75) and colored his profession as a historian. Yet, was Ferrell always objective in his multi-faceted portrayal of the thirty-third US President? According to Dixon, not always.

Part Three, "Distinctions," comprises a chapter on "Ferrell-related historiography, his world of historians, his times and contributions" (Chapter 5), and the last concluding chapter, "Then and Now," which Dixon uses to explain the reasons behind writing this book.

From Dixon's book, we also learn Ferrell was a very prolific author: he wrote or edited 60 books and most of them after he retired. Dixon uses a postmodern approach in his description of Ferrell as a historian. As much as Ferrell himself despised and denigrated the postmodern canon and tenets, Dixon in a crafty way intertwines empiricist historiography with postmodern historiographical strategies to provide us with an intriguing personal and professional portrait of his mentor. Dixon accessed Ferrell's personal letters and

Papers; he interviewed Ferrell's daughter, family members and friends. As he writes in his "Introduction," his book does bring to the fore "in a personal way the ongoing struggles that producing history can present to the storyteller" (xviii).

Dixon's book is the first on Robert H. Ferrell, distinguished professor of history at Indiana University, and it is a tribute to his mentor who was, in his words and in the words of many of his former students, not only a skilled historian but also a great and effective educator.

In his attempt to mix and blend personal anecdotes with records of professional pursuits and achievements; and in his attempt to engage with current and past historiographical methodologies of inquiries, Dixon weaves a somehow intricate web of information on Ferrell, thus leaving this reader wondering whether the book could benefit from a more cohesive and effective organization. For example, why conveying in the last chapter of the book the reasons behind writing this monograph? Moreover, why isn't Chapter 3, the chapter describing Ferrell's childhood, at the beginning of the book? And then there is Chapter 5, "Traditionalists, Debunkers, and Revisionism." This chapter is a book proposal and constricting so much information in about thirty pages does not do justice either to the field of history itself or to Ferrell's contributions to history and historiography. Although this is not a text for a general audience, US historians, graduate students of US history, and Ferrell's friends and foes will enjoy reading this book.

Dr. Gloria Montebruno Saller (Ph.D. *East Asian Languages and Cultures*) is a Research Scholar in Japan Studies. Her current research focuses on the history of Japanese and Japanese American Atomic Bomb survivors residing in the United States and their social activism through CABSUS (Committee of Atomic Bomb Survivors, United States) and ASA (American Society of Hiroshima-Nagasaki A-Bomb Survivors). Currently, she serves as the Honorary Director and Historian of the American Society of Hiroshima-Nagasaki A-Bomb Survivors in Los Angeles, California.