

Pole Raising and Speech Making: Modalities of Swedish American Summer Celebration (Ritual, Festival, and Celebration Series)

By Jennifer Eastman Attebery. 2015. Logan: Utah State University Press. 208 pages. ISBN: 978-0-87421-998-2 (hard cover).

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The third volume of the Ritual, Festival & Celebration series is short and efficiently written without sacrificing depth. Jennifer Eastman Attebery's research is meticulous, covering archives, news articles, diaries, and scholarly literature in both Swedish and English. In eight chapters, Attebery presents an overview of festival celebration by Swedish Americans from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. With a folklorist's eye for emic meaning, she focuses on the expression of values in festival over time and how these changed from new immigrants seeking to assimilate quickly to their descendants, navigating the commodification of culture in the present day.

In chapter 1, Attebery focuses on the Scandinavian holiday of Midsummer in particular as “an index of Swedish Americanness” (6). Attebery's study of Swedish American culture is complicated by many factors, including the conversion of some communities to Pietist faiths and Mormonism. She notes that it can be difficult to identify which patterns are unique to Swedish LDS immigrants versus Swedish Americans at large. She writes that there is “a syncretic religious-ethnic identity that is neither easy nor necessarily appropriate to disaggregate” (7). Other complicating factors included conflict with American work schedules, which affected how and if Midsummer was celebrated.

Chapter 2 discusses the Rockies as a particular settlement location for Swedish and other Scandinavian immigrants. More often than not, Swedish traditions became syncretized with American ones—Midsummer dovetailed with Decoration Day or Independence Day, and St. Lucia Day and Jul blended into Christmas. Many families chose to be “American” on holidays like Easter, Independence Day, or Thanksgiving, and “Swedish” at Midsummer (17). Sometimes Swedish traditions were combined with those of other Scandinavian immigrants living close by. This was particularly true among Mormon immigrants who identified more strongly with faith than ethnicity. For Mormon Swedes, their faith impacted their observance of Midsummer through convergence with the LDS Pioneer Day, in such customs as whether or not to drink alcohol and whether to include prayers in addition to traditional speech-making. Finally, since many Mormons and members of Pietist groups left Sweden in the first place because their religious beliefs were repressed by the Lutheran Church, some altogether rejected the celebration of a Swedish national holiday like Midsummer.

In chapter 3, Attebery discusses how American fears of the “ethnic” outsider caused many Swedes to either confine their traditions to their families or to emphasize their patriotism for America when celebrating Midsummer publicly (57). She goes on to write that this tended to result in “crowded calendars” for celebration and the redundancy of certain practices and statements in festival, so as to accommodate the expression of both Swedish and American identities (62). Swedish Mormons had a particularly complicated relationship with American civic holidays, as many Mormon groups tended to have uneasy relationships with local governments (58-9).

Chapters 4 through 6 focus specifically on three themes which Attebery identifies in the celebration of holidays by Swedish Americans—verbal performance, negotiation between the sacred and the secular, and outdoor excursions. In chapter 4, Attebery writes that at the turn of the century, Swedish immigrants interpreted holiday celebrations through public speeches and songs (77). Poetic metaphors might connect Swedish and American ideologies or interpret the symbolism of objects in celebration (80-90). Chapter 5 discusses the fluidity between the sacred and secular in American civic rituals and how this affected Swedish Americans' celebration of Midsummer.

In chapter 5, Attebery discusses the convergence of the sacred and the secular among Swedish immigrants. She discusses how Swedes adopted the civil religion prevalent in America while at the same time engaging in sacralization, the process by which secular rituals take on sacred qualities (96). Hyphenated ethnicity and the numinous (e.g., nature, death, etc.), for example, became sacralized in rhetoric and celebration among Swedish immigrants (97). In this way, Midsummer took on the qualities of other American holidays while remaining a powerful symbol of identity.

Chapter 6 details more personal dimensions of festival, either within families themselves or in intimate settings of family and friends, as opposed to larger community gatherings for Midsummer. The personal aspects of Midsummer range from foodways and hospitality, such as the Swedish tradition of serving coffee and light refreshments, to taking family trips to the mountains for fishing and berry-picking (112; 115). Rapid industrialization in nineteenth-century America led to a preoccupation with nature, which Swedes embraced. Attebery calls attention to a particular custom of building “leaf-rooms” or leafy bowers for picnics and home parties (117). Attebery connects this to the Jewish custom of building leafy structures for the Feast of Tabernacles; Swedes connected their own outdoor bowers with biblical precedents (123). Outdoor activities for Midsummer in the U.S. provided a subtle way for Swedes to connect their traditions with prevalent American values, including Christianity and a love of nature.

By contrast, chapter 7 discusses uneasy relationships among different Scandinavian groups in settlement. In some Western settlements, as Attebery describes, there was a promotion of “panethnicity,” glossing over specific cultural differences among Norwegians, Danes, and Swedes (129). Some of these alliances were practical, while others were “programmatic” (138). In the LDS community in Utah, for example, immigrants were more likely to identify as Mormons than by ethnicity. This was partly to do with polygamous intermarriage among Scandinavian ethnic groups (132-3). Programmatic attempts at pan-Scandinavianism happened in Montana, where single ethnic groups were not large enough to gain resources for events or societies (138). The satisfaction different groups felt in joining with other ethnic groups to celebrate was largely dependent on how much autonomy they had.

Chapter eight discusses Scandinavian heritage preservation in Western states in the present day. Attebery points out that mode, medium, message, and audience have changed for calendar customs like Midsummer over time (148). As such, it would be erroneous to interpret traditions from the past hundred years with a contemporary lens. For example, where turn-of-the-century immigrants were concerned with becoming Americans and blending their traditions with those of their new home, the emphases of contemporary events described by Attebery tend toward preservation of heritage in a “rapidly modernizing environment” (153). The audience may include those of any Scandinavian descent, but also generally interested locals without family ties. Attebery concludes that “emergent culture” better describes patterns of ethnicity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries than that of “ethnic revival” (164). The former suggests transformation, whereas the latter suggests nostalgic recreation and repetition of the past.

The author spends the most time talking about the history of Midsummer in the United States, relying heavily on archival sources, but she also draws from personal interviews which she conducted with Midsummer participants in New Idaho. Attebery shows, overall, that the past does influence the present, and the legacies of Swedish immigrants live on in the way we define what it means to be “American” today. She sums up her

study in her introductory chapter, writing: “With the Swedish Americans, what comes to mind most immediately is the process of ethnic recontextualization—immigrants reshaping their existing customs within a new context, negotiating their transition from immigrant to ethnic identity” (7).

Attebery documents the transition of Swedish immigrants to American citizens at the turn of the century, navigating new cultural terrain. Attebery’s other theoretical contributions include her examination of festival. She specifically discusses contemporary examples of Midsummer festivals in relation to their older antecedents, which are often not continuous in meaning or practice (i.e., medium, message, mode, audience).

The greatest strength of Attebery’s book is how she illuminates personal aspects of history—the difficulties of learning English, the insecurity of being a foreigner wanting to fit in, the tension between the sacred and the secular, and most of all, local variations on the larger Swedish custom of Midsummer. The only criticism I have of the book is that it could address theory more directly. Nonetheless, the author demonstrates comprehensive knowledge of the subject and manages to be simultaneously thorough and succinct. This book will be of interest to students of festival, folklore, American history, Scandinavian cultures, and Mormon history.