

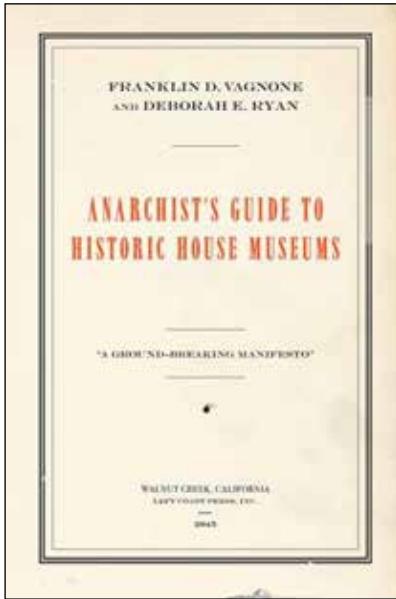
Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums

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Many public historians currently expend much effort to ensure that diversity and inclusivity are priorities in community engagement initiatives. With those goals in mind, the function of Historic House Museums, or HHMs, may be open for debate. Attendance to HHMs beyond marquee destinations, like Monticello, is down, and these once vaunted institutions often struggle to demonstrate relevance in our contemporary era. It is also hardly a surprise to anyone in the local history field that small museums, and especially historic houses, often struggle to stay afloat financially. *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums* by Franklin D. Vagnone and Deborah E. Ryan steps into this dilemma and fashions itself as a rousing call for revitalizing HHMs. What they propose is not actual anarchy so much as a deliberate distancing from the stagnant methods of interpretation and curation put in place decades ago that still overwhelmingly govern how HHMs are operated and presented to the public.

Vagnone and Ryan developed their conclusions from years of workshops, focus groups, and online feedback about how community members interact with HHMs. They repeatedly came up against perceptions from both professionals and visitors that HHMs have become disconnected from their increasingly diverse communities, as well as elitist, sterile, and pedantic in their presentation of history. They argue, consequently, that HHMs must radically alter their approach to their surrounding communities and re-think the way they treat the exhibits they present or else they risk becoming obsolete. The rollout of these accusations, for a lover of traditional HHMs and docent-led tours, can feel like a personal attack. Yet it seems that the harshness of their tone is also meant to jar readers from complacency into action.

The name *Anarchist's Guide* does suggest a call for transformative, large-scale change within history organizations, yet there is also much in this book for organizations seeking only to dip their toes into the kinds of interventions Vagnone and Ryan suggest. A reader can chose whether to take each directive to heart or to discard it, can understand how it's possible to do four or five of their charges fairly well while others remain beyond an institution's reach. The authors focus on finding ways



for HHMs to provide tangible connections to the past—whether that's inviting visitors to see formerly off-limits spaces, allowing visitors to touch collections objects or sit on the furniture, or embracing kinetic learning in museum education activities. Ultimately, these authors seek to provide ways for museums that embrace the past to also address the present and shape the future. For that reason, museums seeking ways to address issues of race, gender, class, or any aspect of difficult history may find the suggestions in the *Anarchist's Guide* empowering.

Because the recommendations it contains may be seen as radical, the book's structure is an important selling point. Vagnone and Ryan encourage action by packaging their recommendations as a kind of workbook, complete with appendices full of evaluation questions and research tools. They divide their conclusions into five subject "Guide-

lines"—Community, Communication, Experience, Collections/Environment, and Shelter—that are each then divided into "Markings" that address aspects of the Guideline. Each Marking is then subdivided into Rant, Evidence, and Therefore. The Rant is the complaint made, almost in the spirit of commiseration, by a professional in the field or an astute observer. The Evidence is the proof compiled by the authors, either through practical experiments in the field or from published research, that the Rant has some grounding in truth. The Therefore is, therefore, the conclusion for what each HHM must do to more effectively solve the problem that the initial Rant unveiled.

The strength of the *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums* is that it forces its readers to confront their own assumptions, as history-lovers, about how their museums engage people who may not be as passionate. It promotes a more inclusive, contemporary view of the relevance of the HHM that the authors sincerely hope will reward institutions that adapt to their model and use their techniques. As experts in the field and practiced researchers, Vagnone and Ryan try to provide ways to ensure the survival of the HHM in the decades to come, and indeed *Anarchist's Guide* only begins this complicated conversation. Readers may find it difficult to hear the criticisms these authors dish out, but they will undoubtedly find hope for the HHM in the ideas provoked by this useful iconoclasm.

Vagnone, Franklin D. and Deborah E. Ryan. *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2016. ■