Philosophers ignorant of their history often err in their judgments as well as falter in moving forth the discipline. After all, respect for one’s history is part of the self-reflection of a discipline concerned about its assumptions and foundations. In the words of Josiah Royce, “faithfulness of history is the beginning of creative wisdom.” Royce argued that philosophy must respect its past because “no fresh beginning is worth making unless the ages have fertilized the forest soil where the new saplings are to grow.” In a time when philosophers in countries in Europe and Central Europe are becoming engaged in a discovery of the works of American philosophers including James, Dewey, Mead, and Royce, and are, in fact, writing articles about the ideas of these classical American thinkers, it is appropriate that we become aware of the history of such interest and the implications it might have for the dialogue today. Thus, this book is timely and provides an overview of the reception of Pragmatist thought in France, but especially of the thought and work of William James.

The book will be of special interest to scholars of James’ work and certainly also to those interested in American Pragmatism in general. However, the book particularly provides insights for those involved in dialogue with scholars in Europe and Central Europe where Catholic thought and life has been and still is prevalent. As this volume makes clear, aspects of James’ thought paralleled those of French philosophers and theologians identified with Catholic Modernism and, it is this that set the stage for interest in France in this period about American Pragmatism and particularly the work of William James. Shook and Shultenover, in their Introduction, write: “The intense agitation over French Catholic Modernism provided the setting for the reception of James in France. Absent this movement, James would likely have had far less impact in France during his lifetime.” Given this setting, the book will also be valuable to those interested in Catholic thought and in theological issues in general. Of concern to those in the Catholic Modernism movement was a “method” that could overcome what they viewed as the “intellectualist extrinsicism” of the dominant Neo-Thomist view. They were seeking ways to make dogmas more
humanly meaningful and divine revelation more connected with ordinary human experience. The reception of James’ work in France was also facilitated by the fact that he had an easy facility with the French culture and language and he did engage in correspondence with some of the central figures in the Modernism movement including Maurice Blondel, and Édouard La Roy.

The first essay in this volume by Stephen Schlosser, S.J., labeled interestingly as a *propaedeutic* to the collection, seeks to set the issues surrounding Pragmatism and Catholic Modernism in a broader setting, in a larger intellectual and cultural drama: “a drama catalyzed by widespread anxieties about experience, realism, and determinism.” (25) An excellent illustration of Schlosser’s project is his discussion of Henri Bergson and the paradox that a Jew, in a time when French Catholic intellectual life was “strongly imbued with anti-Semitism,” became an important figure in Catholic Revivalism. Schlosser writes: “This paradox is explained largely, however, by seeing that Bergson's central project offered great promise to the central anxiety of many others, especially Catholics – namely, the problem of freedom within a cultural hegemony of determinism.” (52) Such an anxiety also provides insight into the appeal of James’ philosophy since on of his major concerns in “Will to Believe” and other essays was with the question of freedom of belief. Other anxieties of the time were equally addressed by James, for example, the anxiety over the new priority given to experience leading to the question of knowing reality without experience’s distorting lens. Finally, Schlosser argues, convincingly, I believe, that anxieties of this epoch in intellectual thought continue to be relevant today. He writes “A common task links both epochs: religiosity and modernity are locked in ongoing negotiations as they represent humanity’s place in the world.” (58)

The second essay in the volume by John Shook addresses early responses to American Pragmatism in France. Shook argues that there was selective attention to the ideas of pragmatism with particular focus on the importance of lived experience, connecting ideas with voluntary action, and regarding faith as playing a necessary role in achieving truth. There was also concern about pragmatism’s notions about scientific knowledge and questions about the compatibility of pluralism with notions of an independent reality or absolute truth. There was also much debate over pragmatism and religion and strong arguments against applying this viewpoint to the religious arena. It was argued that the individual’s own emotional needs should not decide theological matters, that reason and truth should not be abandoned and that “pragmatism leads to relativism, subjectivism, and skepticism.” (69) Shook argues that James’ more explicit and careful views on philosophy of science arrived in France late in the discussion and, unfortunately, just as James’ final conclusions about truth and reality were becoming appreciated, war broke out. France’s interest in pragmatism fell into steep decline not only due to the war but also to rival philosophies. Interest in pragmatism did not arise in France again until the 1950s.