

the Turnerian vision of our frontier past, but his respect for Turner as "an insightful, innovative historian" (13) is refreshing.

Obviously, to condense four hundred years of history into a book of fewer than three hundred pages, the author had to make hard choices about subject matter. Nobles devises a broad conceptual scheme for each chapter, which allows him to range quite widely. In his chapter titled "Forging a Frontier Policy in the New Nation," for example, he describes the negative image most elites held of frontier residents at the time of the Revolution and for several decades thereafter, the type of society frontier people developed, the importance of Thomas Jefferson to the frontier, the role of Tecumseh in Indian resistance, and Andrew Jackson as frontier soldier and president responsible for Indian removal. The chapter titled "Westward Expansion: Political Controversy and Popular Culture" manages to range clearly and intelligently over the fight at the Alamo, westward expansion and the extension of slavery, the artists of the frontier, James Fenimore Cooper, Davy Crockett, the California gold rush, the Mexican War, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The unifying theme in these chapters and throughout the book is the role of government and policymakers in the expansion of the United States and the legitimate resistance of Indian peoples to that expansion.

Scholars may quibble about Nobles's choice of topics or emphases, but his presentation and argumentation are exceptionally well done. Readers interested in American Indian history will be especially interested in his concise and sympathetic treatment of native cultures and experiences. While *American Frontiers* does not blaze new trails in frontier historiography, it does provide a valuable overview of the entire frontier experience in all of its complexity. This book will be especially useful for general readers who wish to acquaint themselves with current themes in the field, and for undergraduate classroom use in the American survey or courses on the frontier or the West.

Frontiers of Historical Imagination: Narrating the European Conquest of Native America, 1890-1990, by Kerwin Lee Klein. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997. xi, 377 pp. Notes, bibliographical note, index. \$45.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY KENT BLASER, WAYNE STATE COLLEGE

Kerwin Klein's *Frontiers of Historical Imagination* is a big, sprawling, intelligent, intimidating, and impressive work. For a first book, it is especially remarkable. (*Frontiers* began as a dissertation, but shows few

vestiges of that sometimes dismal genre.) Klein ostensibly has a single story to tell—the historiography of the frontier West—but develops that story by juxtaposing for parallel analysis two large and complex themes that coexist somewhat uneasily within the covers of a single volume. The first and primary theme is a history of the writing of all of American history over the past century. In order to get some kind of purchase on such a large and slippery theme, Klein examines American historiography through a lens with a single focal point, the conquest of the American West. Further complicating the analysis is Klein's interdisciplinary approach. *Frontiers* is, in his own words, "a critical genealogy of the narrative traditions through which historians, philosophers, anthropologists, and literary critics have understood the European occupation of Native America" (6).

The book is presented in four parts. The first, "The Language of History," provides a basic introduction to American historiography, including a tour of most of the methodological and philosophical debates of recent decades—questions about objectivity and relativism, the nature of historical explanation and narrative, history as science and literature. In part two, Klein examines Frederick Jackson Turner's creation of an archetypal mythology concerning the meaning and significance of the conquest of the West, and the massive frontier historiography that ensued among Turner's followers and critics. While Turner and his followers developed the basic story of American history as comedy—it had a happy ending—critics, from the philosopher John Dewey to the new western historians, often emplotted the same story as a tragedy. In part three, Klein looks at the way anthropologists portrayed the collision of European and Native American societies from an Indian perspective, with a focus on the rise and fall of the "culture concept" and the "ethnohistory" movement in the last half of the twentieth century. Finally, in part four, he considers the significance of the frontier theme among literary critics, especially within the newly emerging American Studies movement after World War II.

The result of all of this is a heady brew, one that is difficult to characterize. Klein's intelligence and erudition are apparent and enviable. At times the twin themes of narrative historiography and western conquest seem unwieldy, or even compete with each other to control the direction of the book, but overall their juxtaposition is fruitful and heuristically justified. Similarly, the interdisciplinary perspective is innovative, but puts a good deal of pressure on readers to follow and understand the sometimes arcane discourses not just of academic history but of anthropology, philosophy, and literary criticism as well.

These unusual combinations will not be to everyone's liking. Klein generally writes well, sometimes wittily, and he has a knack for explaining complex disciplinary arcana to nonspecialists. Nonetheless, there is a rather thick patina of philosophical and "postmodern chic" vocabulary to deal with. If "subaltern studies," "algorithms," "warranted assertibility," or the concept of "colligation" are not your cup of tea, parts of this book may be heavy going. There is also no particular thesis or conclusion. Klein is not much interested in taking sides in the comedy/tragedy argument, or choosing between scientific objectivity and postmodern relativism. On one level, he writes oddly old-fashioned descriptive history. In any case, *Frontiers* is not light bedtime reading. Still, serious students of both the western frontier and American historiography will surely want to work their way through it. Klein's breadth of knowledge, interdisciplinary comparisons, and wealth of suggestive ideas and connections are all compensating strengths that well reward serious reading. While not likely destined to become a classic, *Frontiers of Historical Imagination* is an ambitious, original, and important book.

Plain Pictures: Images of the American Prairie, by Joni L. Kinsey. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press for the University of Iowa Museum of Art, 1996. xx, 236 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY LEA ROSSON DELONG, DES MOINES ART CENTER AND IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

Plain Pictures is an exhaustive study of a single landscape: the American prairie or, interchangeably, the plains. Tracing this subject from its first appearance in American art to the present is also the study of human culture in the region, and Joni L. Kinsey accomplishes both tasks. Especially interesting is her gauging of attitudes towards this landscape. Although the landscape itself is considerably altered, attitudes towards it have changed even more; in contrast to early perceptions of the region as the Great American Desert, it later came to be seen as the breadbasket of the world.

When European and American artists first began to depict the prairies (the earliest paintings are from the 1830s), the landscape could not be fitted into the current compositional formulas that derived from French classicists Nicholas Poussin and Claude-Lorrain. Europe itself had only in the seventeenth century accepted landscape as a serious subject matter, and the American prairies were unlike

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