

## Book Reviews

*Buffalo Nation: History and Legend of the North American Bison*, by Valerius Geist. Stillwater, MN: Voyageur Press, 1996. 144 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY DAN FLORES, UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

The impending twenty-first century may not necessarily be seen in conservation affairs as the Century of the Buffalo, but it seems fairly certain to become the Century of Environmental Restoration. And the North American bison already is a centerpiece of a surprising number of environmental restoration efforts. With the buffalo population on preserves and private ranches now approaching a quarter-million, with 40-odd Indian tribes actively restoring them, and even with talk of bison once again resuming their role as wild animals on federal lands (they are the only native animals denied that freedom), buffalo definitely are back. Indeed, in long-term history, the twentieth century is likely to be seen as the anomaly in the buffalo story, the one time in at least the past 11,000 years when buffalo have not loomed large in the lives of Americans.

Befitting their new significance, buffalo have become the subject of a good deal of historical rethinking of late. Over the past few years several books have been launched that likely will change a good deal of what has passed for set-piece history of buffalo. The first of them to appear is this new volume by the celebrated biologist, Valerius Geist of the University of Calgary.

*Buffalo Nation* proffers over its 140 triple-column pages an updated story of the history of buffalo in North America. Geist commences with the Pleistocene migration of early bison species from Asia to North America, devotes a chapter to the immensely long interaction between buffalo and native peoples, and then moves to sections that discuss the near eradication of buffalo in the nineteenth century, and finally the preservation and slow rebuilding of bison populations in the twentieth century. But that is by no means all the book does. It is richly, even lavishly, illustrated with color photographs and historic paintings by that great pantheon of western artists who captured the pathos of buffalo history in the last century. Too, the book is graced by dozens of extremely valuable sidebars,

written by Michael Dregni, that largely focus on Indian creation and folk stories about buffalo, but address other topics as well. In fact, Dregni's contributions are so frequent (and sometimes disharmonic with the book's interpretation) that I wonder why he does not appear as coauthor of *Buffalo Nation*.

Geist's text does remain the heart of the book, and it is both strongly written and—given much recent historical revision in the bison story—strongly eccentric. As expected, Geist is at his best dealing with buffalo biology; here he is up to date and usually effective, although rather better at discussing affairs in Canada than in the United States. A fundamental aspect of his interpretation, which I certainly endorse, is that bison biology, demography, and range have been shaped for more than one hundred centuries by the active influence of Indian peoples. It is here, indeed, that the materialist text and the softly New Agey sidebars sometimes tend to trip over one another.

As a historian, what I find surprising and eccentric in a book on buffalo published in 1996, however, is that both of these authors uncritically accept the traditional explanations for bison decline in the nineteenth century. Geist is particularly emphatic, for example, that bison were nearly wiped out in the United States by "a covert war on Native Americans and the bison" waged by the American government and military (84). Dregni calls it the "U.S. government's campaign to exterminate the buffalo" (85). Although Geist mentions (but only in passing) the host of other factors that demonstrably reduced the herds to a shadow of their former numbers, he pointedly ignores the role of the market, implying that buffalo hunters in the 1870s and 1880s were merely the paid lackeys of this supposed secret policy.

There are three very serious problems with this interpretation. One is that it marginalizes a panoply of other causes: the cycle of droughts that ended the Little Ice Age, bovine diseases, competition with an exploding horse population for grass and water, and the removal of so many eastern Indians to the West by 1840. Second, Geist is in the uncomfortable and untenable position of having to concede that Indian market hunting wiped out bison in Canada (and even *earlier* than they disappeared in the United States), while farther south the same end required a government conspiracy. Finally, and most egregiously, Geist and Dregni ignore the recent literature pointing out the extremely shaky documentary basis for the oft-repeated saw that the army and the government secretly did in the bison. Some of the sources are in fact reprinted here with no warning to readers that their versions are entirely unconfirmed apologies written by hide

hunters years later, likely to rescue their reputations in a conservation age.

*Buffalo Nation* does not advance the history of the North American bison by so vigorously promulgating this common but questionable and unconfirmed interpretation. Otherwise, I congratulate the authors and their publisher on a handsome addition to the field.

*Days of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the American Nation*, by Malcolm J. Rohrbough. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. xv, 353 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$29.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY DAVID A. WALKER, UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

James Marshall's discovery of gold in the California Sierras opened the door to one of the most spectacular episodes in this country's history. Perhaps eighty thousand Americans left for California in 1849, leading to changes the author equates with those brought about by plague or war. Malcolm Rohrbough, professor of history at the University of Iowa, has written a marvelous history of the gold rush that emphasizes the human dimension—both the Forty-niners and the families left behind.

The gold rush was a national event, part of the American dream. It exemplified basic mid-century values: hard work led to success; and wealth, available to all, would alter lives forever. "No other series of events produced so much movement among peoples; called into question so many basic values . . . ; led to so many varied consequences; and left such vivid memories among its participants" (2).

Although it touches on economic and political themes, *Days of Gold* is primarily a social history. The author focuses on specific individuals representing every social class and region of the country. As news of Marshall's discovery spread, tens of thousands of inexperienced argonauts caught gold fever and made plans to head west by sea, across Panama, or overland. The largest number of Forty-Niners left home only after considering the opinion of wives and parents; some simply announced that they were leaving and either expected others to accept that decision or defied family opposition. Many, recognizing their family responsibilities, expressed reluctance to leave home. As travelers raised funds for the trip, they also made provision for those left behind. Unity, cooperation, and competition intermixed with a sense of adventure and independence. The idea of failure and unfulfilled dreams was never out of the picture. By 1851—

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.