

The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado, by Elliott West. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998. xxiv, 422 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.

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The Contested Plains is a splendid book about a very important subject. The Great Plains region, with its varieties of plant, animal, and human life, is quintessentially American. Throughout the world, wherever modern communication reaches, the great grassland, the buffalo, and the Indian tribes of the plains are American. So it is not surprising that the Great Plains forms the centerpiece of much of the myth and image about America and the American West. It is the story of this landscape and these life forms that Elliott West tells with such grace and insight.

West studies the long history of human occupation or human interaction on the central plains. He emphasizes a few themes: the ancient past of the plains and mountains, the dense connections between Indian and white histories, and the continuous connection between human actions and the wonderfully varied environment.

The detailed story, with all its human consequences, begins with the arrival of Coronado on the central plains in 1541. It was symbolic that this Spanish adventurer had come in search of gold. He found no gold, but within a century Indian groups had acquired the horse and several tribes had made nomadic life on the plains the economic, social, and cultural center of their world. West is especially insightful on the significance of the horse for Plains Indian life. He concludes that "rarely in North American history had native peoples found such an open, inviting road to wealth and power" (68).

As the previously isolated Indian groups came into continuous contact, they began centuries of warfare, trade, and interconnection. They also reconfigured the plains in their worldview—one in a continuing series of reconfigurations of the plains and its environment over the next 400 years. Changes had only begun. Between 1700 and 1850, the plains was unsettled by the arrival of three separate groups pressing toward outer frontiers: the Spanish from the Southwest, the French and English from the East and South, and finally, and most decisively in terms of permanence and numbers, the Euro-Americans, spilling from the Appalachian Mountains toward the interior of the continent.

With this long sweep of history and these recent arrivals, West sets the stage for the discovery of gold in what is today Colorado. The date was July 1858. Within twelve months, the influx of 100,000 goldseekers had changed the landscape and human interaction in ways that were

impossible to imagine. In West's own words, "After several generations of quickening transformation, this new onslaught, muscling its way westward, set loose changes of a new order. Few creatures, human or otherwise, escaped the consequences"(146). Stories of mining rushes are among the most compelling in the history of the West, but West's account is the fullest we have ever had of the influence of gold on peoples and places.

After the gold rush, the interaction between the Indian and white societies becomes a central theme, as the influx of white settlement changes the delicate balance of natural resources for the tribes of the plains. The Indians watched as their access to vital sanctuaries of grass, water, and shelter vanished under a tidal wave of immigration. It is a remarkable story, in which the brilliant and imaginative culture of the nomadic plains Indians takes a cataclysmic turn. So in less than a decade, the region was reshaped and reenvisioned by Indians and Euro-Americans alike.

West offers innumerable insightful observations as this story unfolds: the swift and deep changes in the continental center of the nation contrasted to the upheavals of the Civil War; the significance of capital in the new allocation of natural resources in the West; the ways in which the reconfiguration of the Great Plains in the minds of national leaders transforms the great, empty grassland into a central part of the nation's historic and geographic destiny, or as West writes, "the focus of gathering greatness, resting at the crosshairs of historical and geographical destiny, was the South Platte and the gold fields"(238). Human reimagining of the plains had reached another vital stage. This is a book about reimagining the Great Plains over five hundred years. What had been a place to get across was now an essential part of one national vision (326).

For whites, the country from the Missouri River to the Rockies had been rethought as the vital core of a rising empire. Unfortunately, the Euro-American boosters, officials, and settler families would come to understand, over the next century, that power had limits. No people ever pressed the land so hard because the vision of the new Eden was so expansive. Even as the whites celebrated, they began to break what West calls "the unbending rules of the minimum" on the plains. The result was "stunning human and environmental calamities" (337). Droughts in the 1870s, blizzards in the 1880s, and finally the Dust Bowl of the 1930s were reminders of these unbending rules. West concludes by reminding us, "People never master their environment; they bargain with it" (233).

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