

Book Reviews

The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West, by Patricia Nelson Limerick. New York: W. W. Norton, 1987. ix, 396 pp. Illustrations, notes, reading list, index. \$17.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY PAULA M. NELSON, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-PLATTEVILLE

At the end of the recent television miniseries, *Lonesome Dove*, Woodrow Call, the taciturn visionary, returns to his point of departure, the town of Lonesome Dove, Texas. Call had driven a herd of Texas cattle to Montana, creating an entire new industry for the West. In the epic journey, however, his only real friend and several other loyal followers had perished. Even the town of Lonesome Dove had suffered as a result of Call's vision: the saloon keeper, in despair over the defection of the resident prostitute to Call's party, had locked himself in the saloon and burned it down around him. As Call ponders the ruins, an eager reporter pleads with Call to tell the story of the cattle drive. "They say you're a man of vision," he beseeches the unresponsive Call. "Yes," Call finally replies regretfully, "a hell of a vision."

Call's few short words express the American experience with its West. While the story was grand and ultimately successful for many, the cost was high. In the past, the popular image of the West, created by people like the news reporter in Lonesome Dove, emphasized the triumphs. The academic view was more balanced but acknowledged the overall virtues and successes of the past. Today, several academics are working to create a revised vision of the western past. Embarrassed by the popular West and disdainful of previous academic interpretations that saw the good in the struggle, the revisionists are creating their own bleak story of our past. To them it matters little that the Woodrow Calls in our history accomplished their goal and made it to their figurative Montanas. All they see are the bodies of the dead along the way. It is a hell of a vision.

Patricia Nelson Limerick's book, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, has provided a central interpretive focus for the otherwise disparate work of other new revisionists in the field. In Limerick's western worldview, ethnocentrism, a universal attribute of human cultures, has become Eurocentric racism; frontier has been replaced with invasion, conquest, colonization, or exploita-

tion. Limerick and the revisionists have trumpeted the death of the mythical West, killed it seems, by this brave band of younger scholars, eager to unmask the falsehoods of the past as they unmasked the "myth" of American goodness, justice, and invincibility in the sixties. They have become the new prosecutors of the past, but it is a very peculiar type of justice that they are bent on meting out.

Limerick's goal in *The Legacy of Conquest* is to create a new interpretation of the West to supplant that of Frederick Jackson Turner, whose essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," began the serious academic study of the frontier in 1893. According to Limerick, Turner's emphasis on the frontier as a process set "arbitrary limits that excluded more than they contained" (21). His interpretation was "ethnocentric and nationalistic," did not include women, and really had relevance only to the agrarians of his native Midwest. Indeed Limerick rejects the whole notion of the frontier as a useful interpretive device. She claims that the concept of frontier implies a discontinuity between the western past and present, making the study of the West appear to be irrelevant and obscuring the ongoing issues that stem from our frontier past. Hence her subtitle, "The Unbroken Past of the American West." Limerick hopes to substitute for Turner's vision of the frontier and its synergistic relationship to national development a concept of the West as a "place undergoing conquest and never fully escaping its consequences" (26). Casting the history of the American West "as one chapter in the global story of Europe's expansion" promises no less than "to help knit the fragmented history of the planet back together" (26).

The *Legacy of Conquest* takes as its central themes the impact of the European oppressors' past and the continuing conquest of the environment and minorities in the West, which reveals the venal, soulless nature of the conquerors. Thus Limerick tells the story of settlement twice, once from the vantage point of the conquerors and then from that of the conquered. The first part of the book deals with the conquerors, the white Americans; the second part, "The Conquerors Meet Their Match," tells the tale of the intersection of white and minority cultures as well as that of humanity and nature. The chapters on the white West use examples from the nineteenth century to the present to demonstrate the prevalence of the "innocent victim" motif among white settlers, who always seemed to rationalize disasters inflicted on themselves and others by their claims of good intentions; the presence of sheer greed and rampant unrestrained capitalism, rather than the more benign concept of opportunity, as a motive for western settlement; and the ongoing inclination of westerners to proclaim their rugged individualism and independence while holding out

their hands for federal allowances. The second section includes chapters on Indians, Latinos, Asians, and nature. Limerick continually reminds us of important points: that minority cultures were not any one thing but were diverse and ever-changing, and that the relationship among all cultures, both "conqueror" and "conquered," was complex. Humanity's relationship with nature has been equally confused and contradictory, according to her view; the end result is that every case of conquest, and therefore the entire history of the American West, has been folly.

One of the most frustrating things about this book is the contradictory messages it sends. Limerick uses anecdotal evidence to personalize her arguments and provide narrative interest. The people whose stories she tells, however, are caricatured and then pilloried. In her chapter on the power of the profit motive, for example, Limerick concludes with the tale of W. W. Brookings, who was crippled for life when he had to have portions of his feet amputated after a Dakota blizzard caught him unawares. He had been hurrying to stake a townsite claim at that time. "Disillusioning?" Limerick asks. "One's first response is that, to court such danger, Brookings should have been up to something better than townsite speculation" (77). Risk-taking in pursuit of profit becomes an unsavory predation. Her story of the missionary, Narcissa Whitman, killed by Cayuse Indians in Oregon, is meant to be a cautionary tale about the need for historians to look at both sides of an issue or event. However, Limerick uses words such as *villain* and *intolerant invader* for poor dead Narcissa, while the Cayuses are "acting in and responding to currents of history of which Narcissa Whitman was not the primary determinant" (41). The Cayuses' acting out of their cultural imperatives is seen as natural and proper, while Narcissa Whitman acting out hers merits the death penalty. Limerick often uses the proper cautionary historical language, but unfortunately her tone overcomes its impact. After four full chapters of western folly and mischance, she carefully intones a reminder: although there is much talk today about despoliation of the West, "it is important . . . to recall that many of these 'despoilers' wanted, primarily, to find a job and make a living" (133). It is a belated and half-hearted insight that cannot correct the distorted overall vision of her work.

The effort to focus on the West as a place stems from an admirable desire to avoid ethnocentrism but creates new dilemmas. To change the focus of study to a place rather than the peoples who settled it is to turn away from history rather than to correct it. History at a minimum must begin by understanding people from their own perspectives, in light of their own beliefs, experiences, and intentions.

Without at least starting from this level of understanding, one achieves only polemics. Limerick's understanding of the "conquerors" is one-dimensional and inaccurate. If the goal is only to provide equally unbalanced stereotypes of Euro-Americans as a kind of academic retribution for stereotyping of minorities and women, Limerick's approach is justified. If the goal is historical understanding, it is not. There is nothing wrong with pointing out the failures, but failure and foolishness were not all that there was. The legacy that Limerick scorns is part of the larger inheritance which includes most of those things we value—democracy, equality, and opportunity—values that Turner embraced. Woodrow Call did make it to Montana, and that was not all bad.

Towns and Temples along the Mississippi, edited by David H. Dye and Cheryl Anne Cox. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1990. ix, 292 pp. Maps, tables, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$22.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY WILLIAM GREEN, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

The essays in *Towns and Temples along the Mississippi* present archeological and ethnohistoric perspectives on central and lower Mississippi valley Indian cultures of the past one thousand years. The thirteen chapters—originally prepared for a symposium in 1985 at Memphis State University—focus on the part of the Mississippi valley between the Cairo Lowland of southeast Missouri and western Kentucky and the Natchez Bluffs of western Mississippi. The temporal framework consists of the Late Prehistoric (1350–1541), Protohistoric (1541–1700), and Early Historic periods. The term "Mississippian," used throughout the volume, refers to the prehistoric cultures of the Southeast and portions of the Midwest, about 900–1541, which exhibit numerous indications of greater cultural complexity than the preceding Woodland societies.

James B. Griffin, the doyen of eastern U. S. archeology, contributes an opening chapter that emphasizes the role of corn in the rise of Mississippian culture around 700–900 and reviews Mississippian settlement and political systems, trade and exchange, games, warfare, art, and religion. Griffin also considers the effects of early European imperialism and the correlation of particular Late Mississippian archeological complexes with specific tribes and language groups. As a brief introduction to the Mississippian stage, the chapter is certainly adequate, but a more comprehensive definition and analysis of Mississippian culture can be found in Griffin's excellent chapter in

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