

Book Reviews

Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography, by Dan L. Thrapp. 3 volumes. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988, 1991. xvi, 1698 pp. Bibliography, index. \$60.00 paper.

REVIEWED BY ROGER L. NICHOLS, UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

During the past decade public interest in American frontier and western issues has risen sharply. A recent focus on women's participation in the settling of the country brought some of the new attention the field has received, as has the growing awareness of environmental issues, American Indian affairs, the actions of minority peoples, and an increased appreciation of the important role many federal agencies played in national settlement. Because of this renewed attention to their field, historians of the frontier and West have written an ever-increasing flood of books and articles. This ambitious, three-volume book is one result.

In his *Encyclopedia*, author Dan Thrapp leans heavily on the work of a host of scholars for much of his data, and even to choose his cast of characters. His basis for deciding which people deserve inclusion in this impressive project is that he wanted to include "people no longer living, of either sex and any race: white, red, black, brown or yellow, who came to attention through the *significance* of their deeds or simply were of interest in some connection with the evolving drama" of settlement (vii). Having said why he chose some characters, he also explains why he omitted some. He decided that there were too many characters of local interest among the miners, so he excludes them. He also chose to ignore "persons who came to attention solely in the nation's formal and declared wars." That meant not discussing the actions of most officers and men in the army. Although seeming clear, these goals allow for some confusion. Thrapp fails to make clear what it takes for particular deeds to be deemed significant. Does he mean that they were recognized as such at the time, or by scholars since they occurred? He also gives no indication of whether the judgment of importance is his own or that of others.

In any case, this three-volume set provides brief biographies of some 4,500 people whose contacts with the frontier stretch from Bjarni Herjolfsson, a Norse sailor and explorer who sighted the East

Coast of North America in 985 A.D. to Phillip Johnston, who is reported to have suggested using Navajo Indians in military communications in the Pacific during World War II. Obviously the contact either of these men had with the frontier was slim at best. There are others whose presence one might question. John Kile, a soldier who was killed in a drunken row with Wild Bill Hickok would seem near the top of insignificant characters. Apparently he got too close to one of the more colorful nineteenth-century characters and so had to have his space in print. One might make a somewhat stronger case for Ray Allen Billington, one of the major historians of frontier America, although he, too, had no personal involvement in any frontier actions.

Despite these minor complaints there are good reasons to consult the pages of these volumes. They include hundreds of interesting and important people who took part in the settlement of the frontier. Most of those who are included were active on some part of the frontier between the seventeenth century and the opening of the twentieth. For example, readers interested in pioneer artists will find entries on John James Audubon, Karl Bodmer, Caleb Bingham, George Catlin, Peter Rindesbacher, and Charlie Russell. At the same time, however, such notable western painters as Charles Moran and Albert Bierstadt fall through the author's net. The range of topics covered in this collection is wide. It includes people who might be thought of as writers, newspapermen, artists, mountainmen, soldiers, explorers, vigilantes, lawmen, gunfighters, Indians, and others. Despite Thrapp's effort to include all regions evenly, there is a heavy emphasis on people from the southern plains and the Southwest.

Still, midwesterners and others interested in Iowa history will find information about many people and groups of local and regional interest. Individual Indians such as Black Hawk and Keokuk and such tribes as the Sauk, Mesquakie, Sioux, Pawnee, and Winnebago, all significant in early Iowa history, are included. Town founders such as George Davenport and Julien Dubuque, and explorers Lewis and Clark, Stephen Long, and Zebulon Pike also appear. Even a local character named Edward Bonney who helped track down George Davenport's murderers and described crime in early Iowa in his 1845 book, *The Banditti of the Prairies*, has a solid entry.

The range of people included in the three-volume set is impressive, but also occasionally puzzling and even frustrating depending on which people one is seeking. If a reader finds the character he or she is looking for, the information in the entry is likely to be accurate. Obviously in a compilation of some 4,500 entries some mistakes have crept in, but those I found were few and minor. The editor has

included one or two sources for each entry so that readers who want more information may get a start.

This three-volume set, even when published in a paperback edition, costs sixty dollars, so those without a healthy interest in the frontier and West might pause and hope that their local library gets a set for their use.

The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination, by Robert Thacker. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989. x, 301 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$32.50 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JOHN R. MILTON, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA

Taking a clue from Canadian novelist and critic Robert Kroetsch, Robert Thacker states his intention as seeking to define and analyze the collision between old-world esthetics and literary conventions, on the one hand, and prairie landscape on the other. The first observers, and later the first literary figures, brought to the prairie a set of assumptions, esthetic and cultural, that colored their perceptions. Often, even on those occasions when they saw the landscape accurately, they couched their descriptions in language more appealing than the landscape, feeling that their readers might not believe the truth. Thacker also seeks to understand the relationship between the prairie landscape and fiction and to show that elements of prairie fiction have been derived from the land itself.

Because the prairie encompasses the middle third of the United States and Canada, and because Thacker begins his investigation with the sixteenth-century Spanish explorations in the Southwest, the book is erratic in its organization. Superficially, the discussions are ordered into three parts: visitors, pioneers, and inhabitants. The early explorers and travelers were from Europe as well as the settled part of the United States. The problem with all of them, in varying degrees, was their inability to perceive landscape freshly, avoiding pre-established assertions, primarily romantic, brought with them to a new land. Even so, the early accounts differ according to the part of the country being observed. Castañeda and Edwin James were more fully exposed to desert than to prairie, while Henry Brackenridge and Lewis and Clark viewed the prairie from the Missouri River. One result is that James was not prepared to find anything of significance and labeled the plains the Great American Desert, while Lewis and Clark were able to respond in traditional literary language only when they reached the mountains in Montana.

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