

## Book Reviews

*The West: An Illustrated History*, by Geoffrey C. Ward, with a preface by Stephen Ives and Ken Burns. Boston: Little, Brown, 1996. xvii, 445 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. \$60.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY DOUGLAS FIRTH ANDERSON, NORTHWESTERN COLLEGE

Popular histories pose distinctive challenges for critical evaluation. Both the historical profession and the public need such histories, for without them, there will be even fewer bridges between the academy and the public than there are already. Yet authors of popular histories are all too often prone to allowing entertainment to skew accuracy, simplification to overwhelm complexity, or stereotypes and myth to bleach moral ambiguity.

As a history written for a general audience, *The West* successfully avoids the pitfalls of the genre. It is a generally reliable work, given its purpose, which is to tell "the story of the American West" through "the experiences of individual men and women" (xvii). For the creators of this book, "history really is biography" (xvii), and the text reflects this biographical, or perhaps more accurately, "human face" approach. Both familiar and little-known individuals provide narrative substance throughout the book within a chronological framework. For example, in chapter five, Red Cloud, George Armstrong Custer, Charles Goodnight, and James Butler "Wild Bill" Hickok frame the discussion of the years 1865-1874. These and more briefly noted characters also introduce such topics as the building of the Transcontinental Railroad, conflict and accommodation between Anglo-Americans and Native Americans, the beginnings of the Anglo-American cattle-raising industry in the West, and the Anglo-American slaughter of the buffalo.

Most readers, however, are likely to be drawn to the book by its illustrations rather than its text. The illustrations, of course, reflect the PBS television series aired in the fall of 1996, to which the volume is intended as a companion. Where the illustrations in the broadcast did not match the people or situations the script was discussing, the book provides an important corrective; captions indicate the relevance of each illustration, and credits allow each one to be tracked. Some of the pictures have become icons; most, however, will be unfamiliar to

the general public and, probably, to many scholars. Unlike other readily available publications that feature visual arts of the American West, photographs rather than prints, paintings, or sketches dominate this book. Especially compelling are the numerous portraits, each displaying a unique personality, yet together constituting a multicultural collage for a region so often represented in more monocultural ways.

The multicultural effect of the portraits represents the impact of the new western history's scholarship on the book. Chapter one highlights first Native America and then Spanish exploration and colonization. The threads of a Native American and Hispanic West are generally sustained throughout the book. Richard White concludes the first chapter with a provocative essay on the contingencies of cultural encounters, exchange, and conflict in the West. Each of the remaining seven chapters also concludes with an essay: Julie Roy Jeffrey reflects on the West as "a meeting place" for women of different cultures; David G. Gutierrez illuminates the "mutual avoidance" of Latinos and Anglos through much of the West's history; Patricia Nelson Limerick ruminates—a bit less wittily than her fans may be used to—on the paradoxes of people of belief living in a largely unchurched West; John Mack Faragher provides an unsentimental overview of themes in Anglo-American migration to and in the West; T. H. Watkins draws on environmental history to outline the growth of movements to preserve wilderness areas in the West; N. Scott Momaday offers an intellectual contredanse between Native American and Anglo-American beliefs about the West; and Dayton Duncan lyrically yet astutely examines the western landscape's evocativeness for Anglo-American culture. While some are more engaging than others, the essays on the whole help to constructively deconstruct conceptions of the American West in which the central parts and moral high ground are almost always occupied by white, anglophone males. Together with the illustrations, the essays make the book worth perusing by general readers and scholars alike.

Nonetheless, some of the assumptions and choices made in the book are problematic. For one thing, the West is never clearly delineated, either in space or time. The where and when of the West has been frequently mooted among historians, so the failure to clue the public into the discussion seems odd. Even odder are the essentially conventional answers implied in the book. The lion's share of attention is given to the West of the Great Plains, Rocky Mountains, and Great Basin. California and the Pacific Northwest receive only fitful notice. Iowa, Hawaii, Alaska, and Canada, for example, are not seen as significant places or border regions of the West. As to the when, the primary focus of the volume is on the nineteenth century, the classic

period of the trans-Mississippi frontier of an expanding United States. To take just one western subregion, twentieth-century California—which has furnished much of the produce for U.S. grocery stores, makes most of the movies that are called “westerns,” and has supplied two Republican presidents since the end of World War II—apparently is not a part of the American West, at least according to this work. So then, is the West a place or only a frontier process?

Series producers Steven Ives and Ken Burns try to plant themselves in between an older mythic West which is “an unbroken series of triumphs” and a newer mythic West which is a story of self-serving “conquest and dispossession,” and in between the West as “a unique part of the country” and the West as “a metaphor for the country as a whole” (xvii). The result is a more inclusive, less triumphalist West, yet it still bears more than a passing resemblance to the old mythic West. Aside from sustaining conventional delimitations to the where and the when of the West, the book’s “human face” focus prevents Ward and his associates from considering themes which, though impersonal, may be more consequential to western history than biography, such as the role of the federal government, the predominantly urban character of western society, and the connection of the West to a larger world order of markets, technology, and communications.

*The West*, then, does not fundamentally alter the old story of the West. Insofar as it broadens the cast of characters included, it is an encouraging and engaging story. Insofar as it does not broaden the setting and the time frame of the story nor provide any compelling framework for assessing social and cultural forces larger than individual heroes and heroines, it is a misleading story. The book is not a glass half empty, but it is not more than a glass half full.

*Big Bluestem: Journey Into the Tall Grass*, by Annick Smith, with photography by Harvey Payne. Tulsa, OK: Council Oak Books for The Nature Conservancy, 1996. 287 pp. Color and black-and-white photographs, diagrams, maps, other illustrations, annotated bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY REBECCA CONARD, WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY AND TALL-GRASS HISTORIANS L.C.

*Big Bluestem: Journey Into the Tall Grass* is a visual feast served up with high-calorie text. Nature writer Annick Smith, also known for producing the film *Heartland* and coproducing *A River Runs Through It*, has written an exquisite natural and cultural history of the land from which came the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in Osage County,

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