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REVIEWS

The Great Plains. By Walter Prescott Webb, associate professor of history in the University of Texas. (Ginn and Company, 1931. Pp. xi., 535. \$3.80.)

When geographers and historians join in a round table discussion of the influence of physical factors upon the life of mankind, disagreement usually follows, as the former are apt to claim more than the latter will concede. Speaking as a historian, however, Professor Webb concedes much. In fact, his book is a very suggestive, and, on the whole, rather convincing "case study" of the influence of nature upon man. Devoting himself to a single environmental unit, the author notes how it affected three races who came successively into contact with it: the Indians, the Spaniards, and the Americans. The Indians of the Plains were nomadic, non-agricultural, and were dependent for their existence upon the buffalo. Their culture came to center around the horses which the Spaniards had brought to America and which found a natural home on the plains. Mounted, the Plains Indians ranged further, became less inclined to agriculture, more warlike, and far better buffalo hunters than they had ever been before. They also became formidable fighters, "the most formidable Indians to face or to fight," says Professor Webb, "that were found anywhere on the American frontier."

In spite of the fact that the Great Plains had a climate much like that of Spain, Professor Webb shows that the success of the Spanish explorers in the New World was much less pronounced in that region. The problem of subsistence proved difficult, though not insuperable, as the explorers learned to drive cattle, sheep, and pigs with them on the hoof. Comparing the two great expeditions to the Plains environment, that of Coronado from the west and that of De Soto from the east, the author finds that in each case the Indians themselves furnished the Spaniards a guide

to lead them into the Plains where they could find no food. In both cases the main army was left behind and a picked army was sent forward. In both cases it was believed that an extensive expedition into the Plains would be attended with disaster. Professor Webb gives two reasons for the failure of the Spaniards in their approach to the Great Plains: first, the Spanish colonial system, based on the exploitation of the natives, was not applicable to the nomadic and propertyless people who roamed the plains; second, the mounted Apaches and Comanches proved too formidable for the Spaniards. The task of conquest and occupation eventually grew impossible, "owing to the fact that the Indians learned to use horses."

Writers sometimes refer to the ax, the rifle and the boat as being the instruments with which the American pioneers conquered the frontier. Professor Webb shows, however, that the ax was relatively unimportant where there were no trees, and the boat where there was no water. The rifle and the pistol proved inadequate weapons on the Plains. A Comanche might ride three hundred yards and discharge twenty arrows while a Texas Ranger was reloading his weapon. The Indians had the advantage until Samuel Colt invented the six-shooter, which multiplied every soldier by six, thus revolutionizing plains warfare in the United States. The cost of building fences in a treeless country presented a serious problem, which was finally solved by the invention of barbed wire. Similarly, the search for water led to a wide use of windmills, and western farming to the extensive use of McCormick reapers and other big farm machinery.

The Great Plains is a distinct contribution to the history of the American frontier. Historical students who heard Professor Webb discuss "The Great Plains and the Industrial Revolution" at the Boulder Conference on Western History, in June, 1929, as well as those who merely read the paper as published in *The Trans-Mississippi West* (Boulder, 1930), will read the book with great pleasure and

profit. The book will also make a strong appeal to the popular reader. It is decidedly readable, and it is not surprising that the Book-of-the-Month Club has recommended it as an alternate choice for September.

MARION DARGAN.

The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth.
Edited by T. D. Bonner. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931. xl+405 pp. Frontispiece. \$4.00.)

The title-page of this book is misleading, for it is really a current editing by Bernard De Voto of a book which first appeared in 1856, written by T. D. Bonner (as shown by the original title-page) from the dictation of the famous, or notorious, mulatto, Jim Beckwith.

To the serious student of the development of the American frontier, the book is much more apt to prove exasperating than helpful, or even interesting. De Voto argues that Beckwourth (as he chose to call himself) is credible in his reminiscences "when he is talking about any subject but himself," but admits that this is "a drastic limitation, since Jim discusses other subjects only through inadvertence. . . Beckwourth takes the stage, and the whole West appropriately revolves round him." (p. xxii) In other words, the only value of the book, historically, is the indirect evidence which it may yield, and as to such evidence the reader will probably agree with Chittenden, who called Beckwourth a "redoubtable prevaricator" and said that "the whole work is replete with fable, and there probably is not a single statement in it that is correct as given." (p. xx) De Voto himself says that "he is wholly unreliable in three matters: numbers, romance, and personal grandeur." (p. xxiii)

Drawing on his memory in 1855, Beckwourth glosses over a period as recent as that from 1850 to 1852. Within this period falls a letter which is in the archives in Santa Fé, which shows the opinion held of him by some of those

with whom he had business dealings. Jacob Hall, of McCoy, Waldo & Company, wrote to Manuel Álvarez, under date of Independence, Mo., Feb. 1, 1852:

"... You say in a letter written August last that Beckwith acknowledged to you that he owed us \$35.00 and was ready to pay it. Would not that be evidence enough to prove his suit a piece of villany? I have written to Garey & Pellins and asked them to send a commission here to take the deposition of Young, Martin, Van Epps, and a man by the name of Joseph Kitham, who lived with Beckwith last winter. I have the depositions of these men here in our cases against Beckwith in this court. They prove that the contract between me and Beckwith was that he only was to get pay for the cattle that were alive and in good traveling order in the spring. Beckwith's own witnesses prove that they all died but one. I expect to be in Santa Fé next season and if I can get Van and Young and Martin's evidence before the grand jury, Mr. Beckwith will have to stand a trial for perjury or I am much mistaken."

For the last years of Beckwourth's life, De Voto has relied chiefly on an article by LeRoy R. Hafen in the *Colorado Magazine*, V. 134-139. The latter has an interesting photograph of Beckwourth in 1864, together with one of the squaw Sue, the last of an indefinite succession of wives.

De Voto has made a masterly but futile attempt to rehabilitate this shabby old frontiersman and his pack of yarns. Doubtless the book will go on the shelves of many libraries, but under what classification? It may be found necessary to create a new section of "mendacious literature" and enter this book as "number 1."

L. B. B.

Caballeros: The Romance of Santa Fé and the Southwest. By Ruth Laughlin Barker. Illustrated by Norma Van Sweringen. (D. Appleton and Co., New York, 1931. \$3.00.)

A book that is, indeed, romance. What though the author does interpolate a chapter on "The City of Contrasts," which gives all the modern color and "progress" of

Old Santa Fé? What though she admits that there are streets with disturbing modern names, and bus lines, and couriers; and what though there are, in sooth, Hamburg-erizers, and garish filling stations?

Ruth Laughlin Barker set out to tell the story of "The Romance of Santa Fé and the Southwest" and she stuck to her text. She has remained in the purlieus of the little Spanish town. The visitor to this capital who fails to see what she has described has only himself to blame. If there is more modernity than he was led to believe, if he expected to view stately *Doñas* and *Hacendados*, gilded grandees and "Men on Horseback" parading by the bus station, we find on careful perusal of *Caballeros* that the author promised nothing of the kind, and that, moreover, the substance of her picture is here—behind adobe walls, in little-frequented streets, beyond alfalfa fields and over the hills—and at Fiesta time, all over the place.

The old-timer in Santa Fé, whose familiar friends of years' standing are "Joe" and "Frank" and "Mike," may awake with a start to the fact that these are "Don Coronel José" and "Señor Francisco" and "Don Miguel," but—beyond the adobe wall, in the patio, in the procession of Corpus Christi—inside the life that is inside the town, is it not so?

Qué triste, that *Caballeros* is not all of Santa Fé; but *qué alegre*, that it is still so much of Santa Fé! And most gratifying, that the writer has so steadfastly painted the picture of her choosing without cluttering up the composition with distracting incongruity, if we except the chapter on "The City of Contrasts" and the one on "Where Americans are Anglos"—concessions perhaps of the epic and the folk-tale to guide-book accuracy, and partaking distinctly of the flavor of Sunday magazine articles. But grateful critics in the East have already appreciated *Caballeros* as a guide-book to the Spanish Southwest, and after all, the chapters referred to, free the author's skirts of

culpability for misleading the visitor into expecting an all-Hispanic Santa Fé and environs.

Ruth Laughlin Barker has achieved a very unusual thing. She has lived among Spanish-speaking neighbors in Santa Fé since her first birthday. She writes with entire certainty and minute detail, with authoritativeness unre-served, about New Mexico Spanish people, life, customs, religion, arts, traditions, thought, and conversation. She has the completely sympathetic viewpoint of one who has always loved these people. But on the other hand she senses the folk-value, the quaintness, the foreignness of this scene as would a newcomer discovering New Spain for the first time. The fact that the book is entering its second edition may prove that it thus has a telling appeal to the general public.

Change has come to old Santa Fé in the past few years. Ruth Laughlin Barker's picture is composite of present and past, the past she has known; the prelude a glamorous narrative placing the historical background, than which none on the continent is more brilliant or stirring.

The writer leaves nothing of color out of her historical tale. She may have exaggerated the number and the splendor of the "ricos" of other days. Whether there were in reality fewer or more *caballeros*; whether all adobe *salas* were resplendent with Andalusian glory or merely reasonably small and rather dark rooms in comfortable Spanish-colonial houses; whether the coaches of the wealthy had four horses or six, and passing the question of the number of mounted outriders, the historical records of the luxurious wardrobe of Juan de Oñate alone makes the sky the limit. It is a gorgeous tale of a gorgeous time. She tells the story as one who knows it, not as material gathered from moldy archives; she has made it a living narrative. Starting with Cortés, the first "Man on Horseback" in the new world, she follows swiftly down the picaresque horse-trail of romance, danger, beauty, and cloth-of-gold to the Córdoba, and the

Agua Fria, and the Santa Fé-of-Now, where the daily salutation on the plaza is, as of old: "Caballero!"

The resurgence of the colonial arts, the renaissance of fiestas, the return of old songs and dances, fit into her picture of a vital survival. Certainly she has helped to make this culture live. Whether or not the old ways are vanishing, retreating further into the "Rio Arriba," the mountain hinterland where, "in self-contained isolation," the antique Spanish life remained static for centuries, she tells the reader where to find these old ways. If one wants to know of their architecture, of their homes and families and work and play, of their trails and sanctuaries, "When the Saints Play," "Old Plays of Passion, Love, and War," of "The Gifts of God," of "Wooden Saints," or "Lost Treasures," it is all here.

The book is a beautiful piece of work, and not the least of its attractions are the sketches by the illustrating artist, Norma Van Sweringen. Incidentally, the three-color *caballero* of the jacket, on his rearing steed, ought to be irresistible on any book-stand.

E. DANA JOHNSON.