

7-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Alexander, Thomas G.. "Review Essay: Revisiting the American West." *New Mexico Historical Review* 82, 3 (2007). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol82/iss3/6>

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Review Essay

REVISITING THE AMERICAN WEST

Thomas G. Alexander

For the second time in the last fifteen years, a new history of the Western United States is available to readers. Unlike Richard White's excellent *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), which represented the New Western History, this equally stellar book occupies, in a phrase that Richard Etulain borrows from Wallace Stegner, a "radical . . . position" in the "middle of the road" (p. 5). Etulain set for himself the task of telling the story of the complexity of the American West while avoiding "triumphalist or condemnatory history" (p. 4).

In defining the West, Etulain follows the lead of White and LeRoy R. Hafen, W. Eugene Hollon, and Carl Coke Rister by calling it a region.¹ This approach differs from that taken by Ray Allen Billington, Martin Ridge, Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, whose books consider the West a process.² As such they follow succeeding Wests or frontiers from the Atlantic coast to the area that Etulain, Hafen et al., and White define as the western region.

Although we might push the argument too far because the study by Hafen, Hollon, and Rister is more than thirty-five years old, Etulain's book

Beyond the Missouri: The Story of the American West. By Richard W. Etulain. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006. xiii + 466 pp. Halftones, maps, index. \$39.95 cloth, ISBN-13: 978-0-8263-4032-0, ISBN-10: 0-8263-4032-6, \$24.95 paper, ISBN-13: 978-0-8263-4033-7, ISBN-10: 0-8263-4033-4). Thomas G. Alexander is the Lemuel Hardison Redd Jr. Professor of Western American History Emeritus at Brigham Young University.

occupies a position midway between that work and White's. Hafen, Hollon, and Rister address the American Indian tribes of the Far West, but their scholarship tends to be much more triumphalist and uncritical than Etulain's. In his approach, Etulain acknowledges the model of recent sophisticated works, especially Walter Nugent's and Elliott West's, that decline to force westerners into stereotypes of heroism or villainy.³

While Etulain's treatment of his topics is sophisticated, his categories are rather conventional. His first seven chapters consider the landscape, first peoples, and the successive movement of various national, economic, social, and religious groups into the West. Nevertheless, the reader who expects to find a Turnerian succession of groups from lands of civilization to lands of savagery will be disappointed. Etulain finds in the westward movement as much continuity as discontinuity. The people who went west predominantly sought to reconstruct their familiar culture rather than escape to savagery. This idea borrows from that of one of Etulain's mentors, Earl Pomeroy, who provided a model for a West without frontier discontinuity.⁴

Etulain's recognition of the complexity of the region's history already appears in chapter two where he discusses the first of the European societies that moves into the West. The Spanish viewed the American Indians as a lower class, perhaps even as people lacking conventional reason. Like that of other Euroamericans, Hispanic interaction reduced the numbers of Native Americans by undermining their economic base, killing them in conflicts, and introducing diseases against which the First Nations had developed little genetic immunity. Significantly, the tendency of intermarriage or interracial sexual relations between Europeans and American Indians in Hispanic communities surpassed that of northern Europeans. The upshot of this interaction was that the Spanish and Mexican occupation produced a new people and left the American Southwest the most Hispanic region of the United States.

From the Spanish northward penetration, Etulain's narrative proceeds to "Imperial Rivalries and Colonial Empires" (p. 63). This chapter and the next consider not only the relations among Americans, British, Russians, and Spanish, which resulted in the eventual triumph of the Americans and British, but also the intermixing of European peoples with American Indians. Eventually, the United States defeated Mexico in war, and the Americans negotiated an agreement with the British to separate the Pacific Northwest at the 49th parallel. Like the remainder of the book, Etulain examines not only the international implications of these rivalries but also

the frequently negative impact of Euroamerican expansion on Native Americans and other minorities.

One feature that I found particularly engaging in Etulain's book was his emphasis on the religious aspects of expansion into the West including the Spanish use of missions as part of their imperial expansion. The story of expansion into the Pacific Northwest would certainly be incomplete without discussing Protestants like Jason Lee, Narcissa and Marcus Whitman, and Henry and Eliza Spalding, and Catholics, especially Father Pierre-Jean De Smet. Utah's occupation, of course, would certainly be incomplete without surveying its settlement by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or the Mormons.

By contrast, Etulain could have used a more competent cartographer or cartographic editor. The map "Great Basin Frontier" (p. 153) misplaces a number of cities including Ogden, Salt Lake City, Lehi, Fort Utah, and Manti. The map "Major Tribes in 1850" (p. 211) erroneously omits Indians in southwestern California, Apaches in Arizona, and Indians other than Gosiutes in Utah. Another one, "The Miners' Frontier" (p. 162), fails to show mining activities in Utah, which produced from about 12 percent to more than 30 percent of the nation's silver between 1880 and 1925. Park City reportedly produced more wealth than Nevada's Comstock. Still another, "Military Sites and Major Industries in the West, 1940s to 1950s" (p. 374), leaves out all of the installations in Utah including Hill Air Force Base, which was the state's largest employer, and the Geneva Steel Plant, both of which are mentioned in the written text.

Relying on research by Earl Pomeroy and others, Etulain revises the general interpretation of the Mormon settlement in Utah as an agrarian commonwealth. He points out that, after the Civil War, the Utah settlements were the largest concentration of urban populations in the Far West. A statistic Etulain did not cite is that Utah urbanized at approximately the same rate as the remainder of the United States until World War II, when it far exceeded the national rate of urbanization.

On the other hand, the treatment of the mining frontier essentially follows the conventional wisdom on the topic. Etulain sees the development of mining in the West as a series of strikes beginning in California and then moving eastward inland to Nevada, Idaho, Montana, Arizona, Wyoming, and Colorado. This eastward procession neglects the development of mining in Utah, which flourished after 1870, at about the same time as the mines in Leadville, Colorado, which are mapped and explained. Later in

the discussion, however, Etulain does mention the development and importance of the open-pit copper mine at Bingham Canyon, Utah.

Etulain's treatment of ranching, farming, and transportation development is also quite conventional. The ranchers' frontier begins with the movement of cattle from Texas into the cattletowns and railheads of Kansas. Etulain then digresses into California before continuing the story into sheepherding. He then discusses the movement of farmers into the West. His interpretation of the farmer's frontier, however, clearly displays a misunderstanding of John Wesley Powell.⁵ Powell did not warn "that farmers should not move west of a line that ran from the western boundary of Minnesota south through central Kansas and the middle of present-day Oklahoma into central Texas" as Etulain argues (pp. 193–94). Rather, Powell explained that through the irrigation of the low-lying areas, grazing in the middle uplands, and forestry in the higher altitudes, together with the organization of western political divisions around drainage basins, farming communities could occupy a great deal of the arable West beyond the hundredth meridian.

Following the analysis of farming, Etulain traces the development of transportation. Freight and stagecoaching comprised the earliest commercial transportation, followed by major changes in development after the completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869. Thereafter, transcontinental railroads proliferated north and south of the central route pioneered by the Central and Union Pacific.

In chapter eight, about halfway through the book, Etulain breaks with the traditional history of the westward movement, however updated by recent scholarship, and considers topics that break quite clearly from triumphalist history. The chapter begins with the 1876 battle at the Little Big Horn and follows the story of relations between Euroamericans and Native Americans to the massacre at Wounded Knee. From there Etulain discusses the dramatization of the Wild West through shows organized by William F. Cody, which included Annie Oakley and Sitting Bull. Etulain elaborates on the myth of western violence represented by Billy the Kid, Wyatt Earp, and others. He then covers the attempts of workers to gain a larger share of the fruits of their labor through union organization and the state- and employer-sponsored violence these efforts engendered. The chapter ends with the partially successful but ultimately futile attempts at political organizing made by the Populists and Democratic Party.

Next follows a chapter on western social patterns, which reports recent research on various ethnic groups, women, and children. We learn in general terms how these various groups lived and how they contributed to the development and character of the West.

Perhaps the principal strength of Etulain's work rests in his discussion of both popular and formal culture. Etulain is the only historian who has served both as president of the Western History Association and the Western Literature Association. In this book, much of the material on culture draws from his own research on the literary West. He spices the chapters on traditional western topics with passages on literature about the people under consideration. Chapter ten, however, becomes a tour de force on western literary figures. These range from authors like Stephen Crane and Richard Harding Davis to Owen Wister and Larry McMurtry. His discussion of pulp fiction includes the sensationalizing of the lives of real historical figures like Buffalo Bill, Calamity Jane, and Wild Bill Hickock as well as the creation of fictional characters like Deadwood Dick and the Black Avenger. The chapter also acknowledges the importance of nonfiction exploration literature by people like Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Zebulon Pike, and Stephen Long together with writers of serious literature and influential fiction like James Fenimore Cooper, Francis Parkman, and Washington Irving. This literary section also touches on the visual arts, education, and religion.

A significant feature of Etulain's book is the inclusion of five chapters devoted to the history of the twentieth-century West, although the categories are essentially conventional. They include Progressivism, society, culture, the Depression and New Deal, religion, labor organization and conflict, racial and ethnic relations, urban development, and conservation and environmentalism. Etulain also identifies westerners who impacted the national political scene. In the 1952 election, for the first time westerners won the election for president (Dwight D. Eisenhower) and vice president (Richard M. Nixon) of the United States. Other westerners who have shaped American history include Lyndon B. Johnson, Ronald Reagan, and Barry Goldwater. Moreover, the two most populous states, California and Texas, are located in the region. In summarizing the significance of the American West, Etulain argues that an insightful observer would recognize "that the American West continues to be defined by change and complexity" (p. 448).

As someone who has spent a lifetime studying the history of the West, I heartily recommend Etulain's synthesis to anyone who desires a sincere understanding of the region of the nation that I love most.

Notes

1. LeRoy R. Hafen, W. Eugene Hollon, and Carl Coke Rister, *Western America: The Exploration, Settlement, and Development of the Region beyond the Mississippi*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1970).
2. Ray Allen Billington and Martin Ridge, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*, 6th ed., abridged (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001); and Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000).
3. Walter T. K. Nugent, *Into the West: The Story of Its People* (New York: Knopf, 1999); and Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).
4. Earl Pomeroy, "Toward a Reorientation of Western History: Continuity and Environment," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 41 (March 1955): 579–600.
5. John Wesley Powell, *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States, with a More Detailed Account of the Lands of Utah* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1878).