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*AN INDISPENSABLE GUIDE:  
A REVIEW ESSAY*

MARTIN RIDGE

HISTORIANS AND THE AMERICAN WEST. Edited by Michael P. Malone, with a foreword by Rodman W. Paul. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983. Pp. xi, 449. Notes, bibliog., index, list of contributors. \$24.95.

THIS IS AN AMBITIOUS and significant book. Eighteen western historians, each an expert in a field, have contributed critical essays that assess the literature, the state of the art, and the areas where productive work is needed. Michael Malone of Montana State University, who organized the project and edited the book, has earned the respect of the profession because this book is now indispensable for scholars who want to gain control of the literature and look for new directions. Since this is not an annotated bibliography, or even a collection of bibliographical essays, but a series of discussions of topics, it may be used for an intelligent analysis of substantive observations as well as for information about who wrote what and from what point of view.

Rodman W. Paul, who was invited to contribute a foreword, provides an overview of the book. He is a thoughtful historian, and his brief comments should not be by-passed, especially by a scholar who does not want to read the whole book but only a few essays. Among his many probing observations Paul points out that many of the contributors are senior in the field, their methodology is conservative, and they are still battling or standing in awe of the ghosts of Turner, Webb, and Bolton. Paul wonders what the on-coming generation of western historians would say about the subjects if they were given the opportunity.

Paul's preface does not overlap or detract from Malone's introduction. Malone explains the purpose of the book and gives it a context. He defines the West as a region that embraces the area beyond the Prairie Plains but recognizes that the West is both an attitude as well as an environment. Not all of the book's contributors share his views: Fred Luebke, for example, is more concerned with process than location. Maloné also provides a review of western literature from early travel accounts through Turner, Webb, and Bolton, and he assesses the gifted trio and their impact on the profession. Malone points out that much new work is of high quality, and he can illustrate this by indicating that many of the contributors to

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this book are pace-setters in the field. He concludes that much needs to be done, especially in comparative history and the twentieth century, and with new methods from psychohistory to social science.

Herbert T. Hoover's "American Indians from Prehistoric Times to the Civil War," an excellent but depressing analysis of the state of the art opens the volume. Hoover points out that so few scholars have the necessary interdisciplinary skills to do Indian history that the consumer has yet to receive even elementary guidelines about the complexity of the field. Although he has favorable comment about some of the scholarship of the last fifty years, he sees so many areas of need—ranging from books on laws and treaties to biographies of Indians—that he thinks no meaningful synthesis is likely in the next decade. Hoover is tough on authors who like easy explanations and simplistic moral answers to the Indian question. One may disagree with his judgment of some work, but neither his typology nor his logic can be faulted.

Donald C. Cutter's "The Western Spanish Borderlands," is a good deal more charitable. Cutter tends to list books rather than evaluate them. Much of his essay is devoted to a discussion of the evolution of the field, which includes praise for Bancroft and Bolton. Cutter's main emphasis is on what will be useful to the reader, directing the scholar to proper sources and collections. He makes a valid but often overlooked point when he notes that Borderlands scholarship requires demanding language and paleographic skills as well as special archival training. Cutter is also helpful in explaining the state of Borderlands scholarship in Spain, material with which most Americans are unfamiliar.

Gordon B. Dodds's "The Fur Trade and Exploration," a personal tour through the major traditional literature of the field, deftly summarizes the contents of books and characterizes authors as popularizers and professionals. Since the literature is vast, he cannot be expected to discuss even all of the major works, but it would have been useful to see Henry Savage's *Discovering America* mentioned because it gives exploration a context often missed by western historians. Dodds does not offer suggestions for future work. Dodds's strength is his weakness: his personal view is an informed and balanced assessment of a complex field that he sees as devoid of schools and interpretations.

Dennis E. Berge's "Manifest Destiny and the Historians" is quite different. In presenting the literature in almost chronological order, he deals with interpretations as distinct from content; and his discussion centers on major authors: Smith, Bancroft, Binkley, Garrison, DeVoto, Weinberg, Merk, Graebner, Brack, Brauer, and, of course, Pletcher, for his magisterial work. Berge presents the clearest analysis of changing and persisting views from glory, land hunger, and Malthus, to commerce and ethnocentricity. Berge's essay is rewarding because he asks his authors the big question—why expansion—and frustrating because answers to questions regarding human and national territoriality are still too vague for most historians to grasp, never mind explicate.

Clark C. Spence's "Western Mining," which examines both the content of books and the interpretations of authors, demonstrates his superb command of the literature. He is critical of Turner for overemphasizing the glamor metals and

praises scholars since World War II who have utilized economic and technical knowledge to write a new kind of mining history. Although he traces the literature in the field since the 1880s and makes shrewd assessment, Spence is at his best in literally "ticking off" work that needs to be done. He provides seminar topics for a generation, and he hints that there are more where those came from by merely praising the products of comparative research.

Much that is true of Spence's work is valid for W. Turrentine Jackson's "Transportation in the American West," except that Jackson is more charitable in his treatment of the literature. He does not discount the work of popularizers. Jackson outlines both the substance and interpretation in arguments over the profitability of railroad land grants, who ran stages in California, and railroad regulation. He carries his discussion into the twentieth century, but he does not define transportation clearly, and, consequently, he can overlook the obvious, for example, oil pipelines. Nevertheless, this is a sound and thoughtful essay.

In "Government and Politics in the Nineteenth Century West," Kenneth N. Owens undertakes an almost impossible task. The existing literature is so extensive and the need for modern work so great that he has little space to do more than touch the high spots. Dividing his analysis of the material into three subheadings—pre-territorial, territorial, and statehood period (he does not look at the national picture after statehood)—Owens indicates work that sheds new light on the subject. His discussion ranges from studies of the law by John Reid and John Guice to works on minorities by Albert Camarillo and Leonard Pitt. He also provides a convenient summary of Populist literature. Owens can point to models of sound scholarship like Spence and Lamar, but he also indicates that the field of western government and politics is still undeveloped so far as modern scholarship is concerned.

Robert C. Carriker's "The American Indian from the Civil War to the Present," obviously intended to follow chronologically Hoover's chapter in this book, is not the same kind of essay. Carriker manages to present a surprisingly insightful brief history of Indian affairs after the Civil War (which could almost be used as the basis for a classroom lecture), while inserting discussions of authors, trends, and interpretations. He has high praise for Prucha, Utley, the new *Handbook of North American Indians*, and the series of pamphlets published by Indiana University, but he thinks that much early scholarship was marred by writers who did not know how to use sources. Carriker is kindly and judicious, but he does not hesitate to point out that books like Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* deserve to be discredited.

Gilbert C. Fite's "The American West of Farmers and Stockmen" laments that there is no general history of western agriculture and farming. There are few sound state studies, almost no secondary work on water, especially irrigation, and aside from excellent essays in *Agricultural History* and some monographic work on selected topics, much remains to be done. In fact, Fite insists, despite the works of Gates, Malin, Hargreaves, and many others, including himself, we are a long way from a distinguished synthesis. Fite provides a catalogue of needed

work. He also provides a concise discussion of land policy, water, foreign investment, livestock, and the cowboy. Unfortunately, he does not discuss farm labor; it too can be added to the many subjects that await the western historian who looks beyond the 98th meridian.

Richard Maxell Brown's "Historiography of Violence in the American West" discusses how physical force has been used in cases ranging from crime to social control. Brown has a myriad of books to assess, especially since he discusses fact, folklore, film, myth, and image, as well as the Symbionese Liberation Army. The primary problem with this field, Brown contends, is the lack of an adequate paradigm. As a result, the sum of all the work adds up to less than the parts. The field requires thoughtful research within a context of larger studies that look at societies in general. Brown not only points out the sound scholarship and the puzzles, he also indicates how studies of the West fit into the large whole.

William L. Lang's "Using and Abusing Abundance: The Western Resource Economy and the Environment" is thoughtfully conceived within the context of David Potter's *People of Plenty*. The result is a discussion of lumber, petroleum, coal, fishing, recreation, water, and environmentalism. Lang not only deals with areas of controversy but also demonstrates the unusually rewarding opportunities that await scholars who venture into the field. Like Spence he is highly suggestive in terms of what he says needs to be done and by including in his discussion topics that others might overlook.

F. Alan Coombs's "Twentieth Century Western Politics" is a noble effort to discuss meaningfully a field that is almost too wide open. He wisely notes that, despite the amount of work that has been done, a plethora of topics virtually cry out for analysis. Furthermore, most state histories are modest. When Coombs points to good and bad work done by political scientists, his observations are helpful. Like other authors in this volume, he has high praise for Pomeroy's pioneering *The Pacific Slope*, which offers the best working model for regional political history.

Bradford Luckingham's "The Urban Dimension of Western History" traces the historiography of urban history from Schlesinger forward. Like so many others in the volume he laments the absence of a paradigm to explain the field. He can, however, point to excellent works that deal with aspects of urbanization—Reps, Dykstra, Smith, Doyle, Barth, Pomeroy—almost all of which challenges Turner. Ironically, Luckingham says little about social mobility studies, which may, in the end, offer answers to questions that interest western historians. One senses from Luckingham that the field of urban history in the West is a long way from a viable paradigm but is likely to produce in the future some outstanding books and essays.

Thomas G. Alexander's "Toward the New Mormon History: An Examination of the Literature on the Latter-day Saints in the Far West" is an excellent but depressing essay. After setting out the trends in the field and calling attention to the unique problem of reconciling religion and other causal factors in Mormon history, he notes the increasing difficulty of scholars in gaining access to Mormon archives. The results of such restriction can only set back the field. Alexander praises the new generation of Mormon historians, who seek to tell a whole truth,

and, of course, he sees Arrington as both a pioneer and preeminent scholar. Alexander asks for balanced studies of the Mormons, whose history, he believes, has much to tell about the West. To do this will require fresh attitudes as well as fresh topics; Alexander suggests both.

Sandra L. Myres's "Women in the West" explains what has not been said by many leading scholars of the West because of insensitivity or gender blindness. She also disposes of authors who dealt in stereotypes and myths. She explains the sharp differences that plague scholars dealing with women's history in the West, and demonstrates how new scholarship may force a major reassessment of some aspects of western history. Although she is an active participant in the controversy regarding the role and status of women in West, she gives a fair explanation of both sides in the debate. Although much work in women's history remains to be done, and Myres points out many of the needs, she clearly thinks that we are currently working toward a model that will place the history of women in the West in a transnational context.

Frederick C. Luebke's "Ethnic Minority Groups in the American West" is in many ways the most evocative essay in the book because it centers on process more than place. Luebke is hard on most authors in the field because they were interested in filiopietism, heroics, and myth. He condemns Turner's followers for either ignoring ethnicity or being wrong-headed in the way they went about studying it. If they had looked harder at what Turner did as a social scientist and less at what he wrote as a historian the field would have been better off. Basically Luebke is asking historians to ask new questions rather than focus on assimilation as a surrogate for democracy. He praises recent work that is out of the Turnerian tradition, calls for more work on non-European groups, as well as a host of other aspects of ethnic history, and concludes historians are only at the beginning of a new understanding of ethnicity in the West. Luebke is one of the few authors in the book that does not mention Pomeroy. For Luebke the name of the game is measuring change over time, and the operative word is *measuring*. The next generation of western scholars will need to do more than conceptualize; they will need to know when, what, and how to count.

Richard W. Etulain's "Shifting Interpretations of Western American Cultural History" discusses the evolution of the field, with an emphasis on literature and suggests additional areas for study. Etulain, who has an excellent command of the historical literature as well as cultural resources, has pungent things to say about the latent anti-cultural bias in Turner, Bolton, and Webb. He notes that the break with this tradition came with Parrington and that Henry Nash Smith simply revolutionized the way scholars thought about the field. Yet much remains to be done, according to Etulain, especially regarding art, religion, and education. Unfortunately, Etulain did not have space to discuss catalogues and means of studying western art. Etulain repays careful reading because he assesses sources that most western historians have not used with skill and understanding. Avoid Etulain's essay at your peril, if you want to discuss western history in its larger setting.

This is an important and valuable book, but it is not without flaws. For example,

Malone never explains why he selected these subjects for analysis: others are equally deserving of discussion. In a technical way the book is hard to use. The notes are at the end of the chapters, but they are vital to the text, and really belong at the bottom of the page. This is especially important because many of the arguments are made in the notes. Even more unhandy, for a volume that is in part a bibliography, is an index that does not include citations to the notes. Woe unto readers who assume that they have surveyed the works discussed by checking the index. It would also have been helpful if the essays had been dated. As they stand it is hard to tell if an author missed an item or chose to ignore it.

But these faults aside, this book is indispensable. It supersedes the existing tools in the field and is the best general discussion of the literature available.