

7-1-1986

The West Comes of Age: A Review Essay

F. Ross Peterson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr>

Recommended Citation

Peterson, F. Ross. "The West Comes of Age: A Review Essay." *New Mexico Historical Review* 61, 3 (1986).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol61/iss3/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Historical Review* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

The West Comes of Age: A Review Essay

F. ROSS PETERSON

Gerald D. Nash is one of the few contemporary historians who has built a career as a student of the twentieth-century West. His newest volume, *The American West Transformed*, is an analysis of the Second World War's social and cultural impact on the American West. It is important to understand the author's emphasis because the reader keeps wondering about the need for a greater discussion of economics. There is only one chapter that specifically discusses economics. Nash has promised a subsequent volume focusing on the economic revolution that transformed the West. For Nash, the West is the three Pacific slope states and the eight Rocky Mountain states of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho.

The author is anxious for his book to be viewed as a pioneering work. He does not want these eleven chapters to be the final word. In his view, he imagines each of his ideas spawning criticism, new scholarly endeavors, and published results. In his words, the "work is designed to be suggestive rather than exhaustive" (ix). Readers must read the preface closely because Nash carefully outlines his intent and then adheres to that outline. He foreshadows potential disagreements over

F. Ross Peterson is professor of history in Utah State University and the author of *Prophet Without Honor: Glen H. Taylor and the Fight for American Liberalism* (1974) and *Idaho: A Bicentennial History* (1976).

geographical description, economics, and the absence of women. These assumed omissions, however, do not distract from an excellent study.¹

Nash understands clearly that many of the social and cultural transformations occurred because of economic expansion and growth. Indeed, the war's dramatic effect on the West can be traced to the outpouring of federal dollars into the area. In some respects, World War II was merely an overwhelming expansion of the New Deal. Reclamation projects and agricultural programs are replaced by military bases, shipyards, and the new suppliers for the defense industry. Federal dollars continue to provide the impetus for expansion and growth.²

Selecting topics thoughtfully, Nash chose to emphasize wartime migration into the West, urbanization during the war, the effect of the war on minorities, and science and cultural developments. The eleven chapters focus on specific examples relating to these topics. Ironically, each chapter in this rather general history is strengthened by research in primary materials. Indeed, the notes are almost overwhelming because they exhibit a tremendous depth of research. An astute student of the contemporary West already knows the conclusions of each chapter, but the specific detail that led to the conclusion is a major contribution. In fact, that is true of the entire volume. Intuitively, the reader knows why the West was transformed, but Nash provides detail as to how, when, and where.³

1. Gerald Nash's exhaustive bibliography is nearly all-inclusive. Much of the material used in the book is taken from primary archival materials. The government document research is overwhelming, but it is the only source for much of the statistical data. Nash has consulted numerous political collections such as those of Carl Hayden, James Murray, and Pat McCarran. Gerald D. Nash, *American West in the Twentieth Century* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), is the best single volume study. He uses the various state histories in existence and pays close attention to those written for the nation's bicentennial. Many of these volumes make a significant contribution to the historiography of the West in the twentieth century. To explain a contemporary approach, John Gunther, *Inside U.S.A.* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1946), has an interesting state-by-state analysis.

2. Nash relies mostly on secondary works to document economic changes, including Leonard J. Arrington's numerous studies on specific topics. See Leonard J. Arrington, *The Changing Economic Structure of the Mountain West* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1965). Jesse H. Jones with Edward Angly, *Fifty Billion Dollars: My Thirteen Years with the RFC, 1932-1945* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1951), chronicles Jones' years as head of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, which continued throughout the war. Gerald T. White's *Billions for Defense: Government Financing by the Defense Plant Corporation During World War II* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1980) is a detailed account of how the Defense Plant Corporation functioned. Once again, the general histories of the states are used extensively by Nash. Still it is the government records and hearings that provide considerable documentation.

3. One of Nash's strengths in the book is his utilization of the sources he cites. In the chapter on migration, he uses statistics from a variety of government reports, but he also uses the appendix to document growth and migration. Some of the most noteworthy articles include Howard Myers, "Defense Migration and Labor Supply," *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 37 (March 1942); Henry S. Shyrock, Jr., "Internal Migration

This is especially poignant in two sections of the book. When Nash discusses the wartime development of cities in the West, he is selective in his use of potential mountains of data. What emerges is a brilliantly concise analysis of how the war totally changed the urban West. In California, Long Beach, San Jose, and San Diego were literally yanked from an almost pristine provincial existence into the dynamic modern world at war. Nothing quite compared with the East Bay area of northern California. Oakland grew by over 200,000 during the war years. It happened so rapidly that school expansion for housing projects, sanitation problems, and crime overwhelmed the local governments. Federal agencies with overlapping jurisdiction compounded this frustration. Vallejo and Richmond were worse in a comparative sense. They grew from nearly 20,000 to 100,000 and 150,000 respectively. People from all over the nation, seeking work after a decade of depression, poured into these communities. These boomtowns literally exploded with people and there was a crisis atmosphere throughout the war. Transportation, housing, police services, and sanitation never caught up until years after the war. It is no wonder that the major west coast urban areas never really developed a good transit system or, in some cases, a sense of identity.

Using personal reminiscences and city records, Nash chronicles the problems with schools, water, sewers, housing, and every other conceivable difficulty and details how agencies tried to solve them. Interior communities were affected similarly, but the effects were less dramatic than on the coast. The author discusses Seattle, Portland, and Denver in some detail and even credits the war for the popularization of Las Vegas, but his chapter on the cities outside California is not as dynamic and forceful. In fact, brief descriptions of the war's impact on smaller communities such as Ogden, Utah, and Tucson, Arizona, are needed and would have strengthened the author's coverage of the entire West.⁴

and the War," *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 38 (March 1943); and Henry S. Shyrock, Jr., "Wartime Shifts in Civilian Population," *Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly*, 25 (July 1947). Nash's book on the West in the twentieth century and Gunther also discuss migration. Gladys L. Palmer, *Labor Mobility in Six Cities: A Report on the Survey of Patterns and Factors in Labor Mobility, 1940-1950* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1954) is good and quite general. Carl Abbott's *The New Urban America: Growth and Politics in Sunbelt Cities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982) is an excellent book.

4. The urbanization of the West books are too numerous to mention. Abbott's *The New Urban America* is excellent as are the essays in Gerald D. Nash, ed., *The Urban West* (Manhattan, Kansas: Sunflower University Press, 1979). Nash relies heavily on a government document called *Congested Area Hearings*. It is a series of hearings on specific cities and how overwhelming their problems were. The discussions of Long Beach, Vallejo, and Richmond are all in these hearings. There is not much secondary material on the specific Californian cities. These *Congested Area Hearings* are valuable for the rest of the western cities as well. E. Kimbark MacColl, *The Growth of a City: Power and Politics*



Male and female workers at the Oregon Shipbuilding Company in 1945. Courtesy Oregon State University Archives.

Nash chose to discuss the impact of the war on four distinct minority groups: blacks, Hispanics, Indians, and Japanese-Americans. In a cultural history these chapters are extremely important and, for the most part, provide considerable enlightenment. Each minority is distinct with an entirely different history. The chapters focus on migration and urbanization for blacks, Hispanics, and to a degree Indians. For Japanese-Americans, it is a forced reverse migration from the coastal cities to incarceration camps in the interior. While the destruction of Adolf Hitler and his racial doctrines was a major goal of World War II, American minorities were constantly faced with prejudice and discrimination during the war. Using letters, diaries, and biographical sketches, Nash analyzes these ironies and inconsistencies.

Nash also demonstrates that during World War II the FEPC and other agencies provided an atmosphere that created Indian voting rights and set the stage for the entire civil rights movement. Why the author did not devote separate chapters to Indians and Japanese-Americans

in Portland, Oregon, 1915–1950 (Portland: Georgian Press, 1979); Roger Sale, *Seattle: Past to Present* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976); Nard Jones, *Seattle* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1972); and Gerald B. Nelson, *Seattle, the Life and Times of an American City* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977) are all general. Lyle W. Dorsett, *The Queen City: A History of Denver* (Boulder, Colorado: Pruett Publishing Company, 1977) is well done, but not strong on the war years. A volume could be written on every major western city and the impact of the war.

is a mystery. He wrote twenty pages on Indians which was comparable to the chapters on blacks and Hispanics. It seems that the Japanese-American experience is underplayed. This was an unfortunate phenomenon of the West and many of the relocation camps were situated in the less populous states. Consequently, more on Wyoming, Utah, and Idaho could have been included in the text. This criticism, however, should not detract from the major contribution of the chapters on minorities.⁵

Perhaps the most challenging and revealing chapter deals with science during the war years. It is an intriguing story of how the University of California became a center for nuclear physics research prior to the

5. The author had to do considerable primary research on blacks and Hispanic-Americans because general accounts are lacking. The government agency reports are helpful because the various officials are honest and also somewhat racist in their views. There is not a good history of blacks in the West during the war. There are some fine articles that contribute immensely to the material available. Among these are Charles Wollenberg, "James vs. Marinsip: Trouble on the New Black Frontier," *California History*, 16 (Fall 1981); Robert C. Weaver, "Negro Employment in the Aircraft Industry," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 59 (August 1945); Eugene S. Richards, "Migration and the Social Education of the Negro," *Journal of Negro Education*, 13 (Winter 1944); Robert C. Weaver, *The Negro War Worker* (San Francisco: n.p., 1944).

Unfortunately, the zoot suit riots in southern California are the main focus of much of the material on Hispanics during the war. Nash gives those events extensive coverage as well. There are some fine overall accounts of this experience such as Carey McWilliams, *North From Mexico* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1944); Ruth D. Tuck, *Not the First: Mexican Americans in a Southwest City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946); and Celia S. Heller, *Mexican-American Youth: Forgotten Youth at the Crossroads* (New York: Random House, 1966). Lloyd Fisher, *The Problem of Violence: Observations on Race Conflict in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: 1946), is good on the riots. The key sources that are used by Nash are the Coordination of Inter-American Affairs records. The CIAA records are excellent on the government's handling of situations involving Latin America. Nash also uses the FEPC (Fair Employment Practice Commission) records for all minorities.

Literature on Indians is fairly superficial, and Nash relied on numerous government reports from the Department of the Interior. For the most part, he discusses Navajos and Sioux. It is assumed that more information is available on these groups. John Collier's *Indians at Work*, monthly publication of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, is well done and valuable. This report is good for tracing and following Indians involved in the war effort. Collier was the Commissioner of Indian Affairs from the New Deal through the war. Doris A. Paul, *The Navajo Code Talkers* (New York: 1970), is a detailed account of the famed Navajo signal group during the Pacific campaign. An exceptional volume is Margretta Dietrich, *Hello and Many Lucks* (Santa Fe: Santa Fe Press, 1945), which is a compilation of letters written by Indian servicemen and women. Also see Margretta Dietrich, *Doing Fine and Thanks a Million* (Santa Fe: Santa Fe Press, 1943), which utilizes the same sources. Once again government documents are very valuable.

The Japanese-American relocation experience has been well covered by historians. Martin Gradzin, *Americans Betrayed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949); Dorothy Swaine Thomas and Richard S. Nishimoto, *The Spoilage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1946); Roger Daniels, *Concentration Camps, U.S.A.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974); and Audrie Girdner and Anne Loftis, *The Great Betrayal: The Evacuation of the Japanese-Americans During World War II* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1969), are just a few. Each of the specific camps has received scholarly attention, but no one has thoroughly studied those who remained in the interior after the war, nor the fair disposition of property compensation. Nash utilizes many newspaper accounts in this section but the story deserves a full chapter.

war and how its people were so essential to scientific research throughout the war. The reader expects to learn more of the Manhattan Project and the specific work that led to the atomic bomb since both Los Alamos, New Mexico and Hanford, Washington, were instrumental in the research and production that led to the development of a nuclear capacity. For some reason, Nash felt a need to discuss the growth of academic and professional psychoanalysis in the West. It is an interesting aside, but is the only segment of a well-conceived and beautifully organized volume that does not really fit the general theme. Every other topic the author chose literally changed the West in some way.⁶

There is no doubt that California emerges from the war as the center of mass culture in America. Although Hollywood was entrenched as a film capital prior to the war, it blossomed during the war under federal sponsorship. By utilizing military personnel and film footage, World War II movies were often produced by cooperation between film moguls and the government. Although severe censorship was imposed, filmmakers prospered and studios expanded during the war. Nash also highlights the role of European intellectual émigrés who settled in southern California and enjoyed the freedom of artistic expression. World War II dramatically altered the view of southern California as a cultural wasteland and, although some citizens may not like it, that region came to typify mass culture in America.⁷

6. There are some excellent accounts of the impact of science in the nation as well as the West. Some focus on the role of European immigrants, but most are about specific projects. The archives at the University of California, Berkeley, are used extensively, especially the papers of Ernest O. Lawrence. Richard Hewlett and Oscar Anderson, Jr., *The New World, 1939–1946* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1962), is an official history of the Office of Scientific Research and Development. Stéphane Groueff, *Manhattan Project: The Untold Story of the Making of the Atomic Bomb* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), and Leslie Groves, *Now It Can Be Told: The Story of the Manhattan Project* (New York: Harper, 1962), are good accounts. There are numerous studies of Los Alamos and almost none on Hanford. James W. Kunetka, *City of Fire* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1978), and Ferenc Morton Szasz, *The Day the Sun Rose Twice* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), are both fine works. There are two standard works of significance: James Phinney Baxter 3rd, *Scientists Against Time* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1946), and Irwin Stewart, *Organizing Scientific Research for War* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1948). Bernard Jaffe, *Men of Science in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), is a good contemporary account.

7. There has been extensive writing on Hollywood and quite a bit on its activities during the war. The Office of War Information papers in the National Archives demonstrate how Hollywood used and was used by the government. Ken D. Jones and Arthur F. McClure, *Hollywood at War: The American Motion Picture and World War II* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1973), and Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg, *Hollywood in the Forties* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1968), are two good general histories. Obviously, the numerous newspapers and magazines are important. Nash's major contribution is probably to bring together information on the intellectuals and émigrés who found themselves drifting toward southern California. Laurie Fermi, *Illustrious Immigrants: The Intellectual Migration from Europe, 1930–41* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

This volume provides a major service. The general feelings held about the region during the war are finally confirmed by scholarly research. Seven million newcomers moved into the region between 1941 and 1945. Over four million military personnel were stationed in the West and many remained after the war. This mass migration changed the racial character of the West, especially in urban areas. Since more than ninety percent of the migrants settled in urban areas, the city centers of each state grew. When World War II finally ended, so did the isolated colonial West. Those who feared a stagnant region with little prospect for growth and expansion were startled by the transformation. The society had altered and a new boundless energy characterized the area. Although still dependent on the federal government the West was close to fulfilling the dream of self-sufficiency and prosperity.⁸

Gerald Nash has done a marvelous job in pulling together the data that documents this amazing story. When his anticipated volume on the economic impact of World War II is published, the story of the transformation of the modern West will be completed.

1971), and Donald Fleming and Bernard Bailyn, eds., *The Intellectual Migration: Europe and America, 1930-1960* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969), are very important. These studies are scholarly and well researched and are not designed to appeal to the mass audience.

8. The author's conclusions are obvious in his title, and the material he utilized is rich and diverse. The book will be an intellectual launching pad for additional research as well as a fine summary of existing sources.

WESTERN HISTORY ASSOCIATION

Call for Papers for the Twenty-seventh Annual Meeting October 7-10, 1987 Los Angeles, California

The Program Committee is particularly interested in sessions that deal with new directions, themes, and methodologies in the study of the American West. Equal consideration, however, will be given to papers dealing with any aspect of the frontier experience or the West as a region.

Proposals for individual papers should not exceed one typewritten page and should be accompanied by a *brief* vita. Session proposals should not exceed two typewritten pages and should be accompanied by a *brief* vita for each participant.

By August 15, 1986, ten copies of the proposal should be mailed to committee chair Paul Andrew Hutton. By September 15, 1986, a copy of the proposal should be mailed directly to each member of the committee.

Paul Andrew Hutton, Chair
WHA Program Committee
Department of History
University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87131
(505-277-5839)

William Cronon
Department of History
Yale University
Box 1504A Yale Station
New Haven, Connecticut 06520

Brian W. Dippie
Department of History
Box 1700
University of Victoria
Victoria, British Columbia
CANADA V8W 2Y2

Paul L. Hedren
Fort Union Trading Post
Buford Route
Williston, North Dakota 58801

Abraham Hoffman
19608 Gifford Street
Reseda, California 91335

Patricia Nelson Limerick
Department of History
Campus Box 234
University of Colorado
Boulder, Colorado 80309

Peter D. Olch
9201 Chanute Drive
Bethesda, Maryland 20814

Donald J. Pisani
Department of History
Texas A&M University
College Station, Texas 77843

Melody Webb
National Park Service
Southwest Region
P.O. Box 728
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501

Paul W. Wilderson
University of Nebraska Press
901 North 17th Street
Lincoln, Nebraska 68588