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"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own"—A New History of the American West: A Review Essay

MICHAEL P. MALONE

Richard White, McClelland Professor of History at the University of Washington, is quite correctly acknowledged to be one of the brightest and most thoughtful and innovative historians of the American West today. This eagerly awaited volume amply lives up to anticipation that it would be a thoroughgoing re-thinking of the subject.

Whenever a writer purports to write a "new history," our antennae shoot upward, and quite appropriately so. This volume exhibits the same sort of self-conscious revisionism as did the "New History" of the 1920s, as proclaimed by James Harvey Robinson and Charles Beard. More to the point, its affinity with the "New Social History" that arose during the past quarter-century in general United States historiography is quite obvious. And even more to the point, White is a card-carrying member of that little band of devotees to what practitioners term the "New Western History." He draws, in fact, heavily upon the work of the other leading historians of this school, such as the environmental historian Donald Worster, and expresses his indebtedness to others such as Peggy Pascoe, William Cronon (who disavows the label, in-

Michael P. Malone is president of Montana State University. He is the author of numerous books and articles concerning the history and historiography of the American West.

cientally), and particularly its most emphatic spokesperson, Patricia Nelson Limerick.

The volume does, indeed, set forth an interpretation that embodies the vaunted "New Western History." First of all, it pays no homage to the dean of the old frontier historians, Frederick Jackson Turner, nor does it preoccupy itself with frontiers, as did the traditionalists in this field. Such main themes of the frontier historians as exploration, the fur trade, Indian wars, the mining and cattle rushes, and particularly the farmers' frontier, are treated—usually rather cursorily—less as pioneer epochs than from a socio-economic-institutional perspective. In some cases, especially the great farmers' invasions of 1880–1920, this neglect of pioneering is troubling.

In predictable contrast, this aptly entitled book features a starkly pessimistic interpretation. Here, the focus is not upon triumphant white, male frontiersmen, but rather upon the broad diversity of peoples and environments that paid the price of their acquisitions. To a large extent, as in Limerick's writings, the West is depicted as a region of conquest and of failure. "The American West is a product of conquest and of the mixing of diverse groups of peoples" (p. 4).

Even in dealing with such prosaic topics as the fur trade or the westward migrations or frontier mining, White consistently exhibits his sociological bent and his strong ties to the New Social History. He also, not surprisingly, adheres closely to the preoccupations of his earlier publications on environmental history, Indians, and social banditry. Thus, his consistent focus is upon ethnic minorities—primarily Indians, Hispanics, and Blacks—and not upon the white majority, which sometimes seems as amorphous as it does in the platform of the national Democratic Party. The western environment, as depicted by White, is less cornucopic than it is despoiled; the regional social structure herein described is far more stratified and exploitive than it is permeable; and the economic and political systems that he reveals have produced more frustration than they have successes.

The book has much to recommend it. Its analyses of social structures, from the frontier of New Spain to the Black migration to Los Angeles, are highly sophisticated and insightful. So are the discussions of the evolution of the western economy. Western ranching, mining, and lumbering, for example, are refreshingly assessed from a modernist and analytical perspective, rather than from the traditional vantage that seemed to assume that frontiers was inherently more important than all the history that followed it. Similarly, the political discussions, while episodic, are intelligent and well informed, making the best of recent comparative and analytical studies. The West that

emerges from these pages is not the West of most textbooks in United States history—that is, the West *qua* gunfights, cowboys, and Indians—it is, rather, the West as dynamic region.

Considering the broad sweep of his study, White is also reassuringly accurate in his depictions and free from errors. The few of these that do occur, such as confusing the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad with the modern Burlington Northern, are generally minor, and are in fact more telling in their paucity than in their frequency. The author does draw exceptionally heavily upon his western places of residence, namely Utah and Washington, for his examples, but that is hardly a matter for serious concern.

There are, however, larger problems here. The “Readings” bibliographies that end each chapter are remarkable both for their brevity and for their seemingly incongruous selectivity. Major works in the field, both established authorities and newer revisions, are missing. One can argue that these bibliographies are simply eclectic, but such an argument is not convincing for a book that claims to be a sweepingly new and encompassing history of a major region. This problem reaches, in turn, to the philosophic heart of the matter: is the “New Western History” really as new as it purports to be? Or, by looking past much of the newer scholarship of the past quarter-century, does it make out to be iconoclastic by knocking down, once again, the Turnerian and “Wild West” straw men that have, in fact, been on their backs for decades? In fairness to White, he does not make such claims here, as his compatriot Limerick does often. But such bibliographic brevity does raise the question of whether such sources have simply been ignored, or whether they have been consulted but not credited.

Another problem concerns what is covered, and what is not. Just as the Turnerians focused excessively upon pioneering, this “new history” excessively ignores it. And even beyond that, such a significant topic as, say, industrial mining, seems slighted, and to be considered more in light of the environmental problems it has posed than as a subject in its own right. Politics and government, for another example, is treated insightfully but episodically, with major facets of the subject left untreated. In the context of such a heavy socio-economic focus, the cultural history of the region is largely ignored. A final chapter on “The Imagined West” ponders the western mystique, but it only scratches at the surface of the region’s rich literary, artistic, and architectural history, or even of the subject at hand—the West in popular culture.

And sometimes, the author’s fondness for the victims and the downtrodden leads him to questionable conclusions, conclusions that seem to project current political concerns backward in time. “Current

studies," for instance, are cited to reveal, seemingly, "that most nineteenth-century westerners advanced only slightly or not at all during their working lives" (p. 286). Sioux and other plains Indians "repeatedly proved themselves more than a match for the blue-coated federal soldiers in battle" (p. 104). And, we are told, prostitutes were tolerated in western towns in part "as a warning of the penalties paid by women who did not conform to the social roles demanded of them in American society" (p. 307).

In the final analysis, White's book represents a mixed achievement. On the one hand, it brings a high level of analysis to a broad range of western topics, primarily social and economic topics, and it is felicitously written. Given the sorts of subjects dwelt upon, this is no mean achievement. It underscores, as White's previous books have done, the author's exceptional abilities and erudition. It is the fullest and highest achievement yet of the so-called "New Western History," and any serious student of the region can learn much from it.

On the other hand, this book, like earlier renderings of the "New Western History," can no more claim to be the "correct" or even most solidly based interpretation than could the best products of the frontier school, like the writings of Ray Allen Billington. Each has its own predilections; and, frankly speaking, Billington's writings had at least one clear distinction that this volume does not. They were demonstrably based upon a thorough grounding in the scholarship of the field. If this book is so based, that is not evident from the bibliographies herein included.

Was and is the West a land of conquest, failure, environmental despoliation, and frustrated minorities? Of course, it most assuredly was and is. Was it a land of triumphant frontiersmen, opportunity, success, and bliss? Ditto! Richard White's far-ranging and challenging history has much to offer us. But, like the New Western History itself, it is neither as new as it might seem nor as broad in its coverage as it needs to be to qualify as a truly general regional history that will stand the test of time.