

David W Fletcher, Summer 1999

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### BOOK REVIEW - *THE WEST: AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY*

Geoffrey C. Ward's 446-page oversize volume *The West: An Illustrated History*, published in Boston in 1996 by Little, Brown and Company, unfolds "the dreaming place" of the West thematically and chronologically through anecdotes and stories, high drama and the mundane. Always interesting, often surprising, and frequently astounding, the narratives are as diverse as the eyewitness cast chosen by Ward and his team of researchers, historians, and writers. This is a cast involving

Explorers and soldiers and Indian warriors, settlers and railroad builders and gaudy showmen, but also a Chinese ditch digger and a rich Mexican American landowner, a forty-niner from Chile and a Texas cowboy born in Britain, a woman missionary and a Wellesley graduate (preface, xvii).

The book is a melodrama of biography, and its publication accompanied the PBS television series *The West* produced by Ken Burns and Stephen Ives. The producers make no bones about their view of history, "We believe that history really is biography" (preface, xvii). As a result, they focus on personal diaries, private letters, and autobiographical accounts of events, with critical interpretations of history temporarily brushed aside for the sake of drama and story. The reader is captivated, and perhaps the justification for this approach to the history of the West comes from the apt words of the producers.

America without the West is unthinkable now. Yet there was nothing inevitable about our taking of it. We could quite easily have remained forever huddled east of the Mississippi. The story, with all its heroism and inequity, exploitation and adventure, sober realities and bright myths, is the story of all of us. We became a different people, but in this often stirring story of the West, a human price was paid for every gain (preface, xvii).

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The drama of this human sacrifice in the transformation of the American West is worth the telling and worth the reading.

The drama opens with the Spaniard's contact with native inhabitants,<sup>1</sup> specifically, Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca and the Cocos on Galveston Island. The land to the North, so the Spanish heard and believed, held vast resources and wealth in "The Seven Cities of Gold." Their quest to solve this "Northern Mystery" became one of many adventures into the West to explore and exploit, to struggle and survive. The promise of gold for Coronado never materialized and forestalled Spanish exploration of the "Northern Mystery" for decades. "Conquest without profit was too costly even for the viceroys of Mexico" (page 21). Further episodes of white-red interaction include the revolt of Pope, the introduction of the horse, guns, and disease, the "sacred expedition" of Father Junipero Serra in California, the myth of the Northwest Passage, and the accomplishments of Lewis and Clark. Without the natives, the whites could not have survived, but the reds aided the newcomers to their own demise.

Europeans from different nations had been entering the West from different directions, pursuing different myths. Without help from the native peoples who had lived on these lands for thousands of years, none would have survived for long. Yet each intruder [from Spain, from France, or from England] had laid claim to the region as if he were the first to discover it, as if the people already living on it whose worlds had been changed forever did not exist. Now it was the Americans' turn (page 47).

Ward appropriately marks American advancement into the West with the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Trappers, traders, and adventurers eagerly

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<sup>1</sup>Unfortunate is the old rehash of the Bering Strait theory of Indian origins (page 10).

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followed. The hard and often lonely life in a world of free spirits but frequent dangers is illustrated well in the work of Jedediah Smith, and in pioneers such as the Mormons, individuals like John Bidwell, and Indian missionary couples like Marcus and Narcissa Whitman. Excellent details accompany the familiar story of Tejas (Texas) and also the Trail of Tears.

By 1848, annexation of Texas, expansion into Oregon Country, and gains from the Mexican War “stretched the nation’s boundaries all the way to the Pacific. But the West was still American in name only. Then gold . . .” (page 120). While not the beginning of national greed, as the author suggests, the California Gold Rush certainly intensified lust for material things and perhaps legitimized material gain as an honorable virtue. For many, formidable obstacles of the West could not possibly defeat their human desire for fortune and glory. Tens of thousands left home and hearth in the East and trekked westward.

Unfortunately, the problems of the young nation could not be left behind. “A Hell of A Storm” was brewing between North and South over slavery, and the “Storm” swept westward as territories sought statehood, a situation which raised all sorts of political questions that had no good answers. The answer most commonly resorted to was violence. Kansas is a particularly bloody example. Texas, with its mix of Spanish and Mexican inhabitants, is another case. Also, the role of the Indians and the Union’s appeasement of various tribes cannot be neglected. Ward well notes the effects on the nation and the West by the dynamics of this disunion.

With a measure of relief after the Civil War, Americans turned West like never before. One Union Pacific engineer noted in his diary, “The time is coming, and fast too, when, in the

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sense it is now understood, there will be no west” (page 222). The rails provided the pace and the means. Red Cloud and other tribal leaders gave opposition. Custer, Sheridan, and Sherman responded. Buffaloes, Indians, and white men died, but many survived. Stories of Wild Bill Hickok, Isom Dart, and Texas trail drives abounded. According to the assessment of some, settlement of the American West became “the Grandest Enterprise Under God” (page 215).

By the third quarter of the nineteenth century, only a few stubborn groups, i.e., the Indians and the Mormons, resisted national transformation and consolidation of the American West. The story of Nez Perce leader Chief Joseph is an amazing example of such resistance. Nonetheless, although the native will was bent to the “Great Father” of Americanism, the spirit of the West, in spite of the white man’s cultural influence, could never be tamed. The land was too vast. The variables of brutal nature were too great. So the West will remain a land of story, tale, and myth—exactng “a human price paid for every gain.” Just as surely, biography as history will continue to be written that will thrill, captivate, and amaze about our American West.

Geoffrey C. Ward’s *The West: An Illustrated History* is worth the reading, quite imaginative in its design, very well researched, and lavish in illustrations. It is a storyteller’s goldmine!