



Winter 1967

Hollon, Eugene W., *The Great American Desert*

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Recommended Citation

Dean E. Mann, *Hollon, Eugene W., The Great American Desert*, 7 Nat. Resources J. 145 (1967).
Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol7/iss1/9>

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The Great American Desert

By

W. EUGENE HOLLON

New York: The Oxford University Press. 1966.

Pp. ix, 284, \$6.00

Most modern Americans are at least superficially acquainted with the "Great American Desert," often through personal experience, and at least second-handedly through periodic pictorial and verbal accounts of life in the Rocky Mountain West in popular journals and histories. Personal travel through the Great Plains and the Great Basin country cannot help but impress the visitor with its many peculiar characteristics: space, aridity, sharp contours, and apparent inhospitability to life.

To Americans a century ago it was truly inhospitable, except perhaps to the Mormons who found even the most barren "hole-in-the-rock" a cheerier prospect than riots in Illinois. Yet gold strikes, deprivations elsewhere, and sheer optimism brought hardy pioneers into the desert, where they and their descendants have established firm footholds which, unless calculated in thousands of years (and barring nuclear disaster), will endure despite all obstacles.

Professor Hollon tells in a graceful way the history of these ventures into the arid West, beginning with the aboriginal civilizations, the earliest Spanish explorations, through the American probes, the forays of the Mountain Men, the permanent settlements of the Mormons and others, and the cattlemen. The story is a familiar one, but not always told as well, nor with as good an eye for interesting detail. The reader will choose which chapter is most revealing; for the reviewer the chapter on the cattlemen provided the most new insights into this history.

As a professional historian Professor Hollon is at his best in the historical section, although it is obvious he could not encompass the complexity of this history in a book whose historical section is designed principally to buttress an interpretation of the meaning of this history of contemporary Western life. Professor Hollon clearly recognizes this past as prologue to a future which will be as exciting and as colorful as any of the previous centuries. In interpreting the present-day desert culture he plays the role not only of historian, but of sociologist, political scientist, and cultural critic. This reviewer

lauds the effort to make such an interpretation, whether by historians or scholars from any of the disciplines. My review, therefore, will concentrate on the degree to which he has been successful in this interpretative essay.

Basically, my reservations regarding his interpretation concern what appears to be an excessive effort to find uniqueness in the culture of the desert region. While admittedly there are singular characteristics about life on the desert—reliance on irrigation, the legal systems derived from it, and the like—the available evidence suggests, at least to me, that those who entered the desert regions of the United States did not and do not significantly adapt their cultural baggage to their new environment except under the most severe duress. The early settlers and those of today bring their prejudices and preferences with them, and at great cost to themselves *impose* their culture on their environment. The Mormons are a perfect example of this phenomenon, as are the settlers of the Northern Plains. Most policies, programs, and social and political forms of the desert regions are not really unique but are manifestations of national customs, practices, and traditions learned in the humid regions and transferred to the new environment. The peculiarities of the West may be explained less in terms of geography than in terms of *time*; that is, that certain habits or manners are exhibited to a more pronounced degree because these were *au courant* when the West was settled. The Populist impact on states such as Arizona can be explained fairly well in these terms. Moreover, the alleged conservatism which Professor Hollon sees as so pervasive (and so deplorable) in the desert region may be less a manifestation of desert influence than a reflection of the thinking of a majority of the people who have recently moved West and brought their conservatism to a strange situation where it seemed even more important to avoid rocking the boat.

In part, it is a question of evidence. To illustrate, he asserts that westerners have a tendency toward over-simplification,¹ but what evidence is there that this is more characteristic of westerners than people elsewhere in the United States or the world? The newer cities of the West have a temporary look and are generally unsightly,² but does this make them unique? And what are the signs of a temporary character? Does not any recently founded city have a certain "temporary" look which may lead either toward perman-

1. P. 196.

2. P. 236.

ence or toward impermanence? The desert has always meant wealth for the few, disappointment for the many,³ but what is the evidence for this assertion? Was it true for the Mormons; has it been true for recent settlers in the desert? Or was it true principally for the miners whose expectations far outstripped what anyone realistically could expect? Is this aphorism any more applicable to new migrants to the desert region than to other areas? The evidence is scanty to demonstrate the validity of a positive answer to any of these questions.

The difference in the approach one takes to understanding the region has significance for one's attitude toward public policy, with which Professor Hollon is very much concerned, particularly in the field of water development. He devotes considerable space to this policy question, generally favoring more developmental work on the major rivers of the desert region as a means of adaptation to the arid region. While the size of the dams and methods of financing were unique in the West, the developmental and booster spirit was not, and it seems clear that this spirit still has great vitality in spite of the real costs of continuing the big dam policy. Professor Hollon discusses Bridge and Marble Canyon dams as virtual certainties, even while they are being debated in Congress and as economists and physical scientists express their doubts. Geologists tell us, for example, that the net result of more dams on the main stem of the Colorado will be not *more* but *less* water for consumptive purposes. Professor Hollon suggests, in a very useful final chapter, some alternative sources of water or alterations in the usage of the lands of the desert which might be feasible, and it is here that the emphasis might properly be placed rather than on a devotion to the developmental approach of the Bureau of Reclamation and its local allies. Moreover a close acquaintance with the writings of Joseph Ward Krutch, which are not cited in his bibliography, would provide an additional perspective on the meaning of life on the desert.

One caveat about the presentation of material. Professor Hollon made a trip "around the rim" of the desert region, and consciously adopted the style of Steinbeck's *Travels with Charlie* in reporting his impressions. This reviewer found this reportorial style objectionable in Steinbeck (I found out more about Charlie than about the United States) and not very helpful with regard to the rim of the desert. The really perceptive sections of this account are where

3. P. 85.

the author stops to think about the same kind of phenomenon in *various* places in the desert region, such as in his delightful description of the different kinds of signs along the road, ranging from religious signs to Birch Society signs. Moreover, this approach leads to scattered treatment of the same matters, for example, where he subsequently discusses the cities of the desert.

My reservations concern principally my suspicions about the Frederick Jackson Turner-Walter Webb interpretations of history, and Professor Hollon is a conscious follower of the latter. He has written an interesting book, with useful information, and sometimes perceptive insights. I commend him for the effort in trying to draw meaning out of the highly varied experiences of the settlers of the West. I have reservations regarding his conclusions, but the evidence is hardly conclusive either way. And for those who want to know more, as I do, he appends an extremely useful bibliography.

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