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Book Review: Western Lives: A Biographical History of the American West

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Western Lives: A Biographical History of the American West. Edited by Richard Etulain. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004. 454 pp. Maps, photographs, illustrations, index. \$23.95 paper.

This is an eclectic collection of short biographical essays from the American West grouped from contact to 1850, from 1850 to 1900, and from 1900 through the end of the twentieth century. The editor defines the American West as beginning at the Mississippi River and ending on the Pacific coast. His guidelines for each contributor were simple: “to deal with the lives of notable westerners” and “to demonstrate how each of these lives broke from the main currents of the region’s history.”

Unlike southern history where scholars have created strong regional themes such as slavery in the antebellum era and civil rights since World War II, historians of the American West continue to struggle to find identities for western history. They have written general tomes, narrated regional studies, crafted gender and ethnicity studies, and offered collections like this unfortunately flawed volume of biographical essays of western individuals.

In the absence of a defined American Western theme, few contributors follow the editor's guidelines. Gary Anderson forces the two tribal leaders Wakantapi and Juan Sabeata into a "structural Marxism" model that leaves no room to reveal how they broke from other tribal leaders' decisions, grouping them instead with other tribesmen since they all "had a very firm idea of how their economies should work and how Europeans should work with them."

In the absence of regional focuses within the American West, some regions are slighted. The Great Plains is limited to R. Douglas Hurt's short piece on gender and nineteenth-century homesteaders, while pages are devoted to individuals from California, New Mexico, and the Pacific Northwest, including Microsoft's Paul Allen, César Chávez and the United Farm Workers, and Sister Aimee Semple McPerson and her church. Absent are essays on mining laborers and the entrepreneurs who appropriated the Mountain West's possibilities, migrants who left the Great Plains during the Dust Bowl, those who stayed, and twentieth-century tribal leaders.

Even in these short biographies, Frederick Jackson Turner's ghost still walks. Try as hard as the editor and contributors may, western scholars still cannot escape making him their straw man. As long as Turner remains the whipping boy, his presence will influence the region's scholarship as it does in *Western Lives*. Glenda Riley writes that Turner and Bill Cody "agreed that the conquering of the West was fortuitous for Americans." Despite the editor's plea for studies of "emblematic men and women," that goal was not achieved, and blame for all errors of fact, failure to achieve

objectives, and typographical mistakes lie on the editor's desk.

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