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Book Review: The American West in 2000: Essays in Honor of Gerald D. Nash

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The American West in 2000: Essays in Honor of Gerald D. Nash. Edited by Richard W. Etulain and Ferenc M. Szasz. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003. viii + 208 pp. Tables, notes, bibliographical references, index. \$29.95.

The American West in 2000 is a literary labor of love edited by two former colleagues of the late Gerald D. Nash, a longtime professor of history at the University of New Mexico, and composed of essay contributions from former students, colleagues, and friends. Originally conceived as a retirement festschrift,

including a ten-page autobiography by Nash himself, the book became instead a memorial tribute to Nash upon his death in 2000.

Nash, the historian, is best known for his work on the history of the twentieth-century American West, and in particular his provocative and comprehensive treatments of western urbanization, the role of the federal government in the modern economic development of the West, and his assertion that the post-World War II West assumed a role as a regional agent of national cultural change. To read about the American West's recent history requires reading Nash, indeed a great deal of Nash, for his work explores the first of what will be many efforts at tracing the West's modern era.

During Nash's later years, he grew concerned, and some would say obsessed, with the direction of the "New Western History." In some unfortunate ways, his rantings detracted from his historical contributions. Ferenc Szasz underscores this observation when he notes in the brief introduction to this volume that Nash "considered the excesses of the New Western History as his particular *bête noire*." Why this occurred can only be conjectured. Some have attributed Nash's strong reaction to his origins in Nazi Germany, his and his family's escape from the Holocaust, and his own unique evolution as a historian of the American West. Another explanation might be that because he pegged his own intellectual contributions to the economic history of the twentieth-century West by concentrating on the region's external connections to the nation, he felt particularly challenged by theories that were place-based and emphasized social history.

Ten essays of a wide variety comprise the volume. After Nash's brief autobiographical remembrances, articles follow that concern modern mining history, by Christopher J. Huggard, four recent decades of women's history and western politics in thirteen western states (none of the Great Plains), by Marjorie Bell Chambers, a lengthy discussion of western cities as historically unexceptional, by Roger W. Lotchin, a stream-of-consciousness

essay on western futurism, by Gene M. Gressley, and Richard W. Etulain's tribute to Gerald Nash. But among the best are those by Margaret Connell-Szasz, Donald J. Pisani, Arthur R. Gómez, Ferenc M. Szasz, and Carol Lynn MacGregor.

Connell-Szasz is currently embarking upon a major history project about what she calls the Celtic Worlds. She brings to this subject a comparative perspective, and her thoughtful essay describing the recent cultural renaissances in Native America and in Wales, Scotland, and Ireland is a model for comparative history conceptualization. Any historian who wishes to take on the difficult task of writing comparative history should ponder this article.

Pisani provides a tight and concise history of the Bureau of Reclamation and how it "re-invented itself many times," concentrating on the Bureau's latest reincarnation after World War II. It was, after all, the era of James Watt and Jimmy Carter, and water policy was pre-eminent. Of particular interest is the Bureau's handling of the Cold War and the exportation of water technology and its involvement in the Central Arizona Project. Gómez, like Pisani, is interested in the terrain of environmental history in the American West, but his essay concentrates on national parks and the pressures and challenges they faced near the end of the twentieth century. Gómez documents how national park modernization occurred while the very real threats of reduced funding, political hostility in Congress and from states seeking parklands, recalcitrant leadership, and huge increases in park visitors threatened the national parks' very existence. One riveting incident Gómez includes is of a Taos Pueblo meeting with parks, land management, and air force officials regarding supersonic flights over the Pueblo and Blue Lake. The officials simply did not understand the cultural disruption this caused and had to be embarrassed into re-evaluating their past policies.

Szasz offers an overview of modern religious developments in the American West, chronicling the splintering and seemingly endless

variety of religions that have found solace in the West following World War II. After a brief period of identifying common ground in order to stand united during the wars, both hot and cold, the West's religions embraced pluralism and often concentrated in the growing urban areas. Szasz includes specific sections on Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and Santa Fe religious activities. Finally, MacGregor explains the evolution of cultural life in a western city—Boise, Idaho—that after World War II increased exponentially. Her theme, that of explaining how geographical isolation when combined with prosperity led to local investments in the arts, humanities, and the overall “quality of life” and emboldened Boise, enhancing its growth and importance in the West, is well-written, thoroughly documented, and forcefully argued.

Those readers interested in a Great Plains perspective will not find it often in this book, nor, for that matter, in most of the writings of Gerald Nash. Margaret Connell-Szasz does consider several Plains Indian writers, and Ferenc Szasz includes a number of examples from Plains parishes, including a census count on the number of churches in Lincoln, Roswell, and Amarillo, and a brief description of Denver.

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