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The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America.

By Robert G. Athearn. Foreword by Elliott West. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 186. Prologue, essays on sources, index, photos. xii + 319 pp. \$25.00.

Robert G. Athearn's *The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America* is the capstone to a distinguished career in Western history. It is also a considerable departure from his other work. Athearn began with frontier military history, wrote extensively on railroads and the history of the High Country Empire, and delved into the exodus of blacks into Kansas at the end of the 1870s. His West, the Plains, began one tier of states west of the Mississippi and stopped one short of the Pacific.

In *The Mythic West*, Athearn set out to explain the particular fascination Americans and, indeed, people around the world, have with the plains West, the "mythic West." Athearn's approach is highly personal, highly selective, and not always sympathetic to the topic at hand. The prologue suggests the book will expose the fallacies of the myth, drawing on Athearn's own childhood experiences on a horse ranch in Montana to show the gap between western romance and reality. Its tone is hardly nostalgic. The first chapter sets up the West as a place in the mind, but would be stronger if Athearn introduced the specific qualities of the myth that lured people westward on a quest where disappointment was the only possible result given the gap between expectation and reality. A chapter on the cowboy myth discusses the rapid passing of the free-roaming horseman with the arrival of the farmer, and shows how brief the agrarian bonanza was as well. By the third chapter Athearn is into the twentieth century and one of the central paradoxes of the Western myth: the West was eager to sell itself to the nation as a dynamic, progressive region, even as the nation was looking to it to freeze the past and remain a bastion of unchanging pioneer values. Subsequent chapters explore this paradox. In the 1930s the West, desperately dependent on government handouts, was the single

greatest beneficiary of New Deal aid—yet its politics remained bedrock conservative, premised on rugged individualism and frontier independence. Never was the West's traditional colonial status more starkly apparent.

Athearn crosscuts the chronological progression of his argument with overview chapters on the tourist West, the fictional West of novels and movies, and (contributed by Elliott West, who saw the manuscript through to publication after Athearn's death) the wilderness West, which in the late twentieth century exerts an immediate appeal to an urbanized world. A final chapter, "The Man, the Land, the Legend," and an epilogue on "The Genesis of the Mythic West" wrap up the book; they might better have gone at the front, since they deal most directly with the values associated with the West—spaciousness, independence, self-reliance, youthful optimism, democratic egalitarianism, a conservatism regarding change yet a progressive spirit. Too, the epilogue bends the book around to an appreciation of the myth. The note of disenchantment running through the preface and opening chapters yields to the conclusion that the myth itself is important as a national rather than a regional inheritance, and as a key to the American identity. "Born of the closest thing we have to a collective experience, fed by our need to discover or invent who we are, the myth endures" (p. 274).

The Mythic West, as this summary implies, is not a well-integrated book, nor is it consistently argued. Indeed, through the first half the reader may find that Athearn is at odds with his subject. His tone is arch, even cynical, his prose full of put-downs of those naive enough to swallow the myth. The chapter on Western tourism, "The Dudes' West," seems particularly querulous—Charlie Russell on a rant. Athearn can muster no sympathy for the local boosters who erected auto camps in the 1920s on the theory "that the outstretched hand of western hospitality would come back filled with money," nor the Eastern "autogypsies" who stayed the night, "Then off again, off to the wild, wild yonder, because

somewhere out there lay another auto camp" (p. 149). This is amusing enough, but it grows wearisome, and it works against Athearn's own understanding that these were simply ordinary Americans filling their need for a little Western romance. Moreover, it does not prepare the reader for Athearn's repudiation of the "scoffers" and their "sniping" at book's end, nor his own declaration of faith in the Western myth: "It is real" (pp. 273-74).

Criticisms aside, *The Mythic West* can be read with profit by anyone interested in the juxtaposition of myth and reality in Western history. Chock-full of unusual information, it would make good supplementary reading for a course on the twentieth-century American West. And Athearn fans should not miss it. *The Mythic West* is his testy love song to the plains.

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