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Review of The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920

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of reasons over some four centuries, and each wave of settlers contributed to the burgeoning mythology of the New World its own set of self-fulfilling prophecies. "America" was—and to a significant extent still is—a largely European construct, a cultural matrix whose outlines emerged and evolved often reactively as individuals and groups found their expectations challenged by the stark realities of the American continent and its Native peoples. Hence much of the American experience has historically had to do with questionable attempts by non-native peoples to "civilize" the alien experience by recasting both its physical reality and its underlying ethos within experiential, intellectual, cultural, and mythic paradigms whose origins lay in the Old World.

The impulse among these new Americans to anthropomorphize nature by identifying natural features that suggested the human and therefore reduced the extent of alienation they felt in the strange new land (the "Old Man in the Mountain" in New Hampshire, for instance, or "Chimney Rock" in Nebraska) led eventually to absurd impositions like the faces incised upon Mount Rushmore. These examples suggest the larger pattern: artists in all media—including the most blatantly commercial and materialistic—imposed upon the frequently harsh physical reality of the American continent an overlaying of fiercely determined optimism rooted in a highly idealized vision of "progress." Their dedication to the proposition that America was the promised land produced an almost evangelical fervor for finding that new Eden in the least promising of circumstances or, still more often, simply inventing it. Particularly true for the West, this compulsion led to the production in all areas of nineteenth-century culture of a remarkable mythology of heroic, democratic expansion that celebrated the Manifest Destiny of this new Eden.

The West as America reveals the vastly troubled reality behind this constructed illusion, and it is not a pretty sight: land wars, genocidal wars against indigenous peoples, authoritarian politics, unscrupulous commercialism, and mass disregard equally for the rights of the land and

The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920. Edited by William H. Truettner. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991. Foreword, overview, introduction, illustrations, photographs, references, index. xiv + 387 pp. \$60.00.

This rich collection of essays is intellectually substantial, culturally significant, and much overdue. One of the least appreciated phenomena of American culture is its remarkable history of self-fashioning. The American continent was settled by European immigrants for a variety

of its peoples. A stunning example of the current state of American cultural studies, this collection of essays brilliantly elucidates the ideological underpinnings of the mythology of American expansionism in the West, in the process demythologizing many of our familiar sentimental misconceptions. The variously authored essays range across the intellectual and cultural landscape, taking in along the way detailed examinations of the whole notion of "progress," images of "the Indian" (as opposed to actual Native Americans), portrayals of settlement and development, commercialization and commodification of the West, and early twentieth-century nostalgic re-presentations of the Western experience.

Especially praiseworthy are the lavish illustrations, many of them reproduced dramatically (and accurately) in color. The book is an extraordinary visual archive that draws upon both the famous and the lesser-known among American artists, as well as additional materials from advertising, photography, and other aspects of visual culture. A twenty-seven page appendix contains capsule biographies and catalogue entries on the eighty-six artists whose works appear in the text. This splendidly produced book will certainly prove invaluable to scholars and general readers alike who are concerned with all aspects of the history and culture of the West—and indeed of the phenomenon of the constructed, mythologized America.

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