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Review of The American West: A Narrative Bibliography and a Study in Regionalism

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The American West: A Narrative Bibliography and a Study in Regionalism. By Charles F. Wilkinson. Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1989. Preface, photographs, notes. xiv + 144 pp. \$19.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper.

Legal scholar Charles Wilkinson reads and recommends books as if the Video Age were not upon us and as if the ideal of an educated, reflective citizenry might be within reach. In the four hundred and eighty-eight items listed in this bibliography, writers have done their part "in defining a geographical region, in giving the West a sense of place, a sense of itself." If Westerners say yes to the invitation these writers offer, then the consequences could be direct and practical: "When a people gains a sense of itself, wise decisions are likely to follow" (p. 90), wise decisions manifested in more appropriate laws and self-governance.

In five bibliographic essays covering the definition of the West, the events, the people, the terrain, and the ideas, Wilkinson briefly describes what he finds to be the essential reading for responsible, thinking Westerners. While readers will note omissions in this admittedly personal selection, there is simply no arguing with Wilkinson's central claim: if more Westerners had read more of these books, the region would all be in better shape.

When one contemplates Wilkinson's list, the difference in readability between western fiction and western nonfiction leaps to the attention. This is by no means a matter of the charm of an imagined story over the gritty reality of fact. It is, instead, a matter of commitment to quality prose, a willingness to devote time to the production of sentences and paragraphs that invite, rather than discourage, readers. While the novelists and short story writers here, from Jack London to Norman Maclean, have made that commitment, the historians, geologists, and legal scholars generally have not. Given the urgency of what they have to say, this willingness to confine their communication to specialists becomes more and more a mystery.

Wilkinson's own commitment to communication with wide audiences is clear throughout this book. He is eager to broaden the public's acquaintance with fresh ways of thinking about the western past, present, and future. Nonetheless, for all of his willingness to recognize the costs and injuries wrought by the conquest of the West and to acknowledge the existence and legitimacy of Indians and Hispanics, Wilkinson has moments when he falls back into the familiar formulae of traditional, congratulatory western history. When, for instance, he refers to pioneer women as "a group of people who made largely anonymous but indispensable contributions to the gigantic task of settling a broad and hostile land" (p. 83), Wilkinson echoes the old notion of a rough wilderness in need of improvement and taming at the hand of civilizers, a notion quite at odds with the environmental concerns evident elsewhere in this volume.

An occasional inconsistency or unexamined premise aside, this is a worthwhile and helpful book. Western readers who take its suggestions to heart will find themselves living in a world where the details of local life open a door to the deepest reflections on our common past and future.

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