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## Review of Wyoming Biographies

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Wyoming Biographies*. By Lawrence M. Woods. Worland, Wyoming: High Plains Publishing Company, 1991. Sources, index. 224 pp. \$23.50.

*Wyoming Biographies* is a biographical dictionary (with a chatty introduction chronicling the settlement of Wyoming) that compiles in alphabetical order life sketches of approximately 265 pioneer citizens. Lawrence M. Woods has collated information from a variety of sources, drawing on contemporary subscription biographies, on more recently written histories, on biographies and memoirs of individuals, on reference works, and on miscellaneous materials (personal conversations and letters, materials in the Wyoming Historical Society collection, etc.). The content of entries varies, but most list the subject's date and place of birth, date of migration to Wyoming, occupation, and government offices.

The work has obvious usefulness: it would save a researcher the tedious job of searching through Woods' sources, and it provides basic identification data for many individuals. It also has a very helpful index, listing the names of businesses and government bodies and the maiden names of subjects' wives.

*Wyoming Biographies*, though, also has several potential drawbacks as a research tool. Woods' selection principle, first, is unclear. The introduction reports that the editor avoided "rigid rules for deciding who should be included"—a choice which makes drawing on the text with any consistency of expectation difficult. It also omits large segments of Wyoming's frontier population: of the approximately 265 entries, only seven chronicle the lives of women

and only two chronicle the lives of Indians. Political correctness aside, the decision to focus the work on the kind of men portrayed here (lawyers, bankers, ranchers, businessmen, with an occasional outlaw thrown in for "character" interest) is disappointing in a practical way. We already have plenty of finding tools for biographical information about such men—the real need is for works that make new information accessible.

One other troublesome aspect of the book is its silence on the crucial questions of truth in biographical reporting—Woods appears simply to have taken his sources' content at face value. Where he cites just dates and titles, this isn't terribly disturbing, for such facts can be verified externally. Still, since some of the sources cited here clearly have agendas (subscription biographies and memoirs, for instance, can tell us a great deal about how the subject would *like* to be perceived, but . . .), one wishes that Woods had been a little more explicit about his methodology—especially in light of the fact that a few entries have no sources cited at all, giving the reader no chance to evaluate their reliability.

Since the sketches in *Wyoming Biographies* are so brief, this probably isn't a book that readers will browse around in for entertainment. If the reader keeps in mind the cautions just described, however, it could be potentially useful as a starting place for research in Wyoming history.

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